

Introduction:

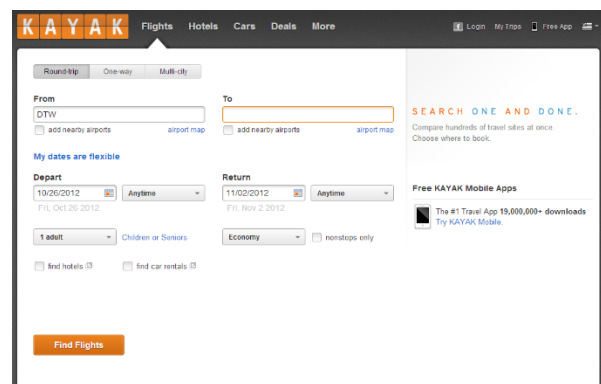
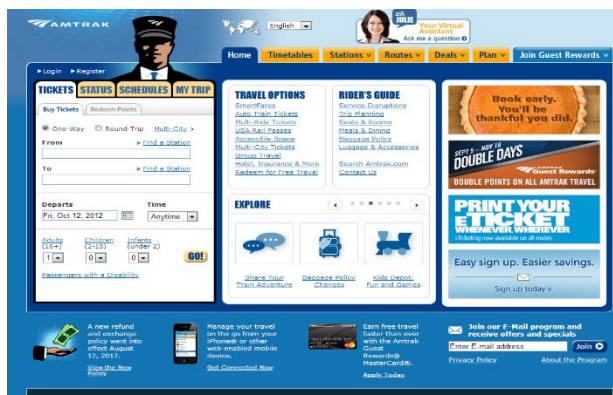
In this reflection paper I am describing a recent experience that I had with the train booking website Amtrak.com. The experience starts with booking of the ticket from Ann Arbor to Detroit and entails a sequence of experiences that happened henceforth and then describes the same experiences on the basis of some principles taught in the Human Behavior class.

Describe the System:

Amtrak.com is the Website of National Railroad Passenger Corporation, Amtrak, which is rail passenger service. Amtrak is famous for its on time and safe journeys. So rather than going to the railway station you can book the tickets online through Amtrak.com. Also once you have booked the tickets, you get a personalized account on Amtrak.com, where you can check the status of your ticket and the train, and also you can cancel or reschedule your journey and can collect points for your journey. It also has an app for the mobile users, hence they can straight away go the app and check the train status etc. They often give discounts and deal offers to attract the new users and also have pretty good point scheme for the existing users. They also have tie-ups with hotels and car rental services, and hence you can plan your complete trip, from the same website. They also provide insurance for your luggage, if you want. In case you are having a longer journey, they have compartments where you can sleep and have food etc. So overall they try to ensure that you have a safe and a comfortable journey.

Describe your experience:

This experience is about, when I used Amtrak.com for the every 1st time for booking my ticket from Ann Arbor to Detroit. I got the suggestion of trying Amtrak.com from one of my close friends. So I decided to visit Amtrak.com and see if it really suits me. As soon as I arrived on the website, I saw so much of the information present on the home page itself, and I being a very Google, or Kayak kind of a person i.e. I am very goal oriented and hence want a neat and clean page with directions and data related only to a particular task, hence, I got confused seeing all this information.



So I tried to relax myself and from my past experience of booking a flight ticket on KAYAK, and my goal directed approach, concentrated on the left hand side of the page, where they asked the information about the booking. I filled out the information and then towards the end of the page there was this option of choosing the preferred time of leaving Ann Arbor, this really made me happy, as I did not want to scroll through the long lists of the search result and then choose one of the options. So I choose my preferred time and this criteria really shortened the search and I got two options to choose from. I choose the option that suited me and clicked the next button.

The next page was asking for the discount and promotion code options and from the dropdown I chose the student discount option, and it reduced the amount of ticket by few dollars and that again made me happy, and I was starting to love this website, hence I clicked on the next button and then it asked me the details of my name etc. and asked for the student advantage card details, which made me confused as I did not have any advantage card, so then I searched the website for this card and came to know that you need to buy this card first and then take advantage of it. This made me angry and disgusted as I need to undo what I selected in the previous page and refill my information, which I did and then proceeded further, without any discounts.

The next page was the payments page and before making the payment, I wanted to see if I had chosen the correct train or not, hence I desperately started looking for the option to show me the chosen train and without much effort, I see it, big in the right, and this really made me feel comfortable, as it was evidently shown along with the timings and the other necessary details. But one thing that was confusing was that they were offering the Amtrak credit card and this was placed above the payment option, which confused me a bit. But after scrolling down, the payment option was visible and I made the payment. After making the payment, I was asked if I wanted to book any cabs or hotel for this trip, which I declined and within seconds I received my ticket on my email. Hence after receiving the ticket, I feel that overall it was a happy experience.

Introduce key concepts for analysis:

Expectations and attention: So according to this concept, when a user perceives something, that experience is based upon his past experiences, present context and future goals. So if the user comes to a website with a particular interest then he becomes goal oriented and the things he perceives on the website are according to his goal. Also the website orientation and layout, if it matches with his past experiences, i.e. if he has visited some similar website or done some similar task in his past, then it makes him comfortable. And the present context are words that help him to find his goals. Hence the design of the website should be clear and non-ambiguous and according to the goals that the user might come to this website with.

Gestalt principles: These principles describe the way in which our eye and brain perceive objects present in front of us. They tend to see the object in entirety and then the individual parts. Hence whatever visual elements we see i.e. be it be a bottle or book on the table or drop boxes in the website etc., we tend to group them together, also in that group if something catches our attention it becomes the foreground for us and rest of the things the background, and we do all this based on the below principles:

- a. Proximity: objects with relatively lesser distance between them are perceived together as a group.
- b. Similarity: objects looking like one another are being perceived as a group
- c. Continuity: even if the most familiar shapes are somewhat broken or incomplete the eye perceives them as the complete shapes or figures.
- d. Closure: our visual system always tries to close the open objects through one means or the other.
- e. Symmetry: the more complex objects are being perceived as combination of more simple objects and a very complex 2d object is being perceived as 3d object.

- f. Figure / Ground: the feature that captures our attention becomes the figure and the rest becomes the ground.
- g. Common area: objects enclosed in an area are being perceived as group.

Short term / Working memory: this is the memory that is the conscious memory and cannot retain a lot of chunks of data. Its capacity is being still debated upon, but mostly it is 4 ± 1 chunk of data or feature. A chunk of the data is being described as the thing which a human can make sense of. That is, it is being perceived as a single chunk and so is the letter 'c'. So this the memory is the residual memory of the senses and the conscious memory of the long term memory. Hence on the design perspective people should not make things that people are forced to remember while using their product or the website.

Analyze your experience:

So starting from the first page of the website, which was the landing page for me, I came to the website specifically for booking of the train ticket between the Ann Arbor and the Detroit. Hence I had a future goal that was being set, even before I came to the website. So, in the present context I just wanted to see the search form to book my ticket [Expectations and attention]. But as soon as I landed on the page, a lot many things caught my attention and became the figure for me. That is the information of the website, the ongoing deals on the website and hence these things distracted me [Gestalt Principle], but I was able to segregate these things into groups because they shared a common area [Gestalt Principle]. Also in this common area there were subgroups and they were arranged according to the proximity [Gestalt Principle]. Then getting accustomed I was able to locate the booking section. In the booking area also things were grouped using common area, similarity and the proximity, and for the go button they used a different color which became an evident figure [Gestalt Principle].

Red Ovals: Figure, Yellow: Proximity, Similarity, Also booking box: Common Area



The booking feature of the website was like any other booking portal and hence my past experience of booking a flight on Kayak.com [Expectations and attention] came handy here and this made me

comfortable. And the “Time” word was the present context [Expectations and attention] that I was looking for, as it was the most important thing I was concerned upon.

As I proceeded into the booking, it distributed the booking feature into a series of five steps and the most active one and completed ones, being blue [Short term / Working memory] and the coming steps were being marked by the grey color, which was really helpful as in the working memory I did not need to keep more things, as I can refer the website and bring the things I want to work upon, back into the working memory by just looking at the website [Short term / Working memory].

Working Memory: Step wise execution, Itinerary

The screenshot shows the Amtrak website interface during a booking process. On the left, a sidebar titled "YOUR ITINERARY" displays details for a trip on Tuesday, October 16, 2012, on the 350 Wolverine train from Albany (ARB) to Detroit (DET). It lists one adult passenger with a reserved coach seat for \$12.00. The total price is \$12.00. The main content area is titled "PASSENGER DISCOUNTS / PROMOTION CODE" and is the second step in a five-step process. It includes instructions for selecting passenger types and entering discount codes. The progress bar at the top of the main content area shows the current step (2) in blue, with the other steps in grey.

Also the results from the search were being arranged in the most common way and hence again my past experience of booking a flight on Kayak.com helped me and made me comfortable [Expectations and attention]. Also the result were arranged in common area and the things with similar context in one common area [Gestalt Principle].

As I proceeded further, the result that I chose started to get displayed in the right handside [Short term/ Working memory], hence again I can check on the choice that I had just made just by looking on the right hand side of the screen and hence less work for the working memory.

The back buttons and the next buttons were placed using consistency, which again helped the present context and was in accordance with the past experience [Expectations and attention], also the details to be filled on the passenger page were all arranged using similarity, and proximity, i.e. first name, last name etc. and the common area being shown using the consistent color [Gestalt Principle].

And finally after the booking was completed the ticket was being mailed, and the process ended on a screen asking if I wanted to book hotels or cabs, which again were such that they became the figure [Gestalt Principle]. And as did not needed these, hence I closed the website.

Generalize the experience:

I visited the website with a predetermined goal in mind, hence the information overload present in the home page of the website made me feel uncomfortable, but if a person who as no predetermined goal

and is coming to browse the website and see if Amtrak suits him or not, then for that person, to find all the necessary information on the home page itself, might make him happy. So I can say that, the website has to work on a few things, concerning what the user is coming to the website for. Also in my experience, as I mentioned that I found the discount feature really bad as it had lesser information for a person, coming to the website for the first time, but if a person is a returning visitor and has some kind of a discount card with him, then this feature might give him pleasure as it presented him the goal without any attention diversion.

But then on the payment page they try to confuse you by forcing you to buy the Amtrak card and place the payment option in the not so prominent area, which I think is annoying for a goal oriented user, as you will have to scroll down to make the payment. Also one thing is good that they don't pester you to make an account first and then do the booking, which kind of a time saver and less annoying for person booking on the website for the first time.

But as soon as the payment is being made you receive the ticket on the email, without delay, also during the booking process they don't expire your session so early, which kind of pleasing, as the session expire issue annoys the user the most.

But overall, this site is equipped to handle all kinds of user and will mostly provide them a smiling experience.

Conclusion:

The site Amtrak.com is maintaining its efficiency in serving the customers and making them happy. They are trying to expand the website in terms of other service, but I think that they need more planning on this, as this might throw the current users off balance, as they might have some negative valence (difficulty in learning the new system as they are already accustomed to the old one) and hence they might have "to unlearn what they have learnt".

Somesh Rahul

76623603