Heuristic Evaluation Report

for A2 Hosting

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1. Executive Summary

For this report, our team conducted a comprehensive heuristic evaluation on A2 Hosting support areas, following the ten heuristics proposed by Jakob Nielson [1]. We started by focusing our interests mainly in the blog, the community forum, the ticket process, and the Knowledge Base of the support areas. As a group, we gained a common understanding of each heuristic and how to apply them into analysis. Then each group member completed an independent heuristic evaluation of the identified support areas and rated the severity of each violation. In the next step, the group performed a debriefing session together, shared, discussed, and analyzed each observation and violation. Finally, all the observations are complied and prioritized based on what our group analyzed as most important to the effectiveness of A2 Hosting's support areas, resulting in the following 12 findings and recommendations:

Finding 1: The ticket submission page is needlessly multilayered which can create confusion for users.
Recommendation 1: Remove confusion in ticket submission by having one standard form with appropriate drop down menus.

Finding 2: There are inconsistencies in standard navigation protocol.
Recommendation 2: Every page should have a standard banner that functions in an identical way.

Finding 3: The layout and design of the community forum are not intuitive to users.
Recommendation 3: A2Hosting should update the layout of the community forum page.

Finding 4: There are times when the description of a clickable button is not what the action of the button actually is or does.

Recommendation 4: Evaluate all button and link descriptions and rename to proper convention.

Finding 5: The search bar in the A2 Hosting support area requires users to recall and limits users' search area
Recommendation 5: The search bar should be improved to ease users' burden on memorization and to give users more freedom in search

Finding 6: The support area is not customized for users and does not show history of searching and reading
Recommendation 6: The support area should show common functions used by users, and the history of searching and reading to users

Finding 7: The support pages are neither really visually appealing nor designed in a minimalist way
Recommendation 7: The support pages and the content should be presented in a visually appealing and minimalist way

2. Introduction

A2 Hosting is a hosting service company based in Ann Arbor, Michigan. They were established in 2001 and have grown rapidly for a small company ever since. A2 Hosting's reputation revolves around their quality customer service, fast hosting server speed, and excellent server uptime. The company offers a variety of hosting services such as web, reseller, VPS, managed, cloud, and dedicated hosting. In addition to offering these services, A2 Hosting is dedicated to supporting the newest technologies related to the web including Wordpress, Drupal, Joomla, PrestaShop, and MODX. Since A2 Hosting supports so many different types of services, their audience is equally as diverse. They are able to support single users managing personal websites to large companies hosting a large amount of websites.

Our group is primarily interested in evaluating A2 Hosting's support areas. These areas broadly include a blog, community area, tickets area, contact area, and their Knowledge Base. Each of these support areas is comprised of specific information that is meant to better service customers. The blog provides customers with recent information about anything new regarding A2 Hosting. Knowledge Base is A2 Hosting's personal database filled with resources on how to resolve most problems customers may experience. The community area is a forum where customers are able to interact with each other and A2 Hosting staff to help solve a variety of problems or just to discuss new technology. The tickets area is where customers are able to formally submit a ticket with information about their problem and request aid from A2 Hosting staff. The contact area is where

customers can contact A2 Hosting staff through a variety of ways including live chat, email, or phone call.

Prior to this stage in our research, we had conducted a competitive analysis, which provided general information about what A2 Hosting's support areas lack and how they are successful. That research method gave us important information about certain features. Now we want to understand how usable and appealing certain support areas and actions within the support areas are through a heuristic evaluation. A heuristic evaluation is a research method that involves multiple people analyzing an interface based on Nielsen's accredited usability principles, or heuristics [1]. The discovered violations of the heuristics were rated in severity to emphasize which corrections should be prioritized first. The heuristic evaluation is useful because it reveals specific areas and interactions that violate accepted norms and those that follow the norms. The violations generate confusion for users and reduce the overall effectiveness of the support areas. Heuristic evaluations have many benefits over other similar methods. For example, a heuristic evaluation is not very expensive especially compared with usability testing, which is another method used to locate usability errors, and can be completed in a relatively short amount of time. By utilizing this method, we hope to increase the usability of A2 Hosting's support areas so the company can better serve its customers. We are specifically addressing "what parts of the support areas do not follow accepted usability norms", "how can we help A2 Hosting improve them", and "how severe are these violations of the norms". For this research phase, we are primarily interested in focusing on the blog, the community forum, the ticket process, and the Knowledge Base. The full details of how the heuristic evaluation was conducted are located in the "Methods" section and the combined solutions we created can be found in the "Findings and Recommendations" section.

3. Methods

In this phase of our research, we conducted a heuristic evaluation of specific support areas of A2 Hosting's website. A heuristic evaluation has evaluators analyze the interface, make observations of how various parts comply with recognized usability principles or heuristics, and locate violations of the heuristics [1].

Pre-evaluation
Prior to evaluating the support areas, we defined the scope of the evaluation. We are generally still interested in A2 Hosting's support areas but we specifically decided to evaluate the blog, the community forum, the ticket process, and the Knowledge Base. We read over Nielsen's heuristic evaluation chapter in order to understand how to proceed with this research method. As a group, we made sure we had a clear and similar understanding of each heuristic and how to apply them to the aforementioned support areas. Our process follows Nielsen's recommendations.

Heuristics

We evaluated A2 Hosting's support areas with the ten heuristics that were derived from Nielsen [1].

1: Visibility of system status
2: Match between system and the real world
3: User control and freedom
4: Consistency and standards
5: Error prevention
6: Recognition rather than recall
7: Flexibility and efficiency of use
8: Aesthetic and minimalist design
9: Help users recognize, diagnose, and recover from errors
10: Help and documentation

Individual evaluation

According to Nielsen's heuristics, each group member completed an independent heuristic evaluation of the identified support areas. The individual heuristic evaluations were done in multiple passes, from heuristics 1-5, then heuristics 6-10 to ensure all of the heuristics have been considered and covered in depth. We also rated the severity of each observation. We utilized a 0-4 rating scale taken from Nielsen [1], noted below. We took into account the personas and scenarios that we previously created when we were deciding on the severity of the usability issues found. Specifically, we used the personas and scenarios to assess how likely the problem was to be encountered and how problematic it would be for various users.

Severity rating:
0: We don't agree that this is a usability problem at all
1: Cosmetic problem only - does not need to be fixed unless given extra time
2: Minor usability problem - fixing this should be low priority
3: Major usability problem - important to fix, so it is high priority
4: Usability catastrophe - imperative to fix this

Group evaluation and analysis

After conducting the individual heuristic evaluations, the group performed a debriefing together. Firstly, we collected all of the observations from each group member. We went through each of the heuristics and aggregated the related observations. Next, we went down the list starting from the first heuristic and discussed the observations that we discovered. Each group member was given the chance to explain why he or she decided to label a specific interaction as a violation. Finally, we prioritized the observations based on what our group analyzed as most important to the

effectiveness of A2 Hosting's support areas. We have produced findings and recommendations based on our heuristic evaluations and analysis on the aggregated observations.

4. Findings & Recommendations

Finding 1: The ticket submission page is needlessly multilayered which can create confusion for users.
Violation: Visibility of System status.
Severity: 4
Once an A2 Hosting client decides he or she would like to submit a service ticket, they must navigate to a specific page. Once there, they are immediately greeted with a button allowing them to submit a sales ticket. While this may be a good sales or marketing tactic, it is confusing for the user who has an actual service issue. Without easily viewable breadcrumbs there is a likelihood that the user may feel they have reached this page by mistake. Upon returning they will realize that they should scroll to the bottom of the page to find the service ticket section. In yet another confusing setup, the user has the option to submit for a support or billing question in the service issue and other issue section. With so many options the user may click each one to find out the difference. This would be futile since each page is almost identical. After all the confusion, the user may just decide to call or end up submitting a ticket in the wrong location.

Recommendation 1: Remove confusion in ticket submission by having one standard form with appropriate drop down menus.
The actual ticket submission form has an intuitive layout with identifiable headings and clear questions. If the user can navigate to this page quickly and easily they will be less likely to call or submit a ticket in the wrong place. We are recommending that A2Hosting remove the screening page and direct users straight to the ticket submission form. Once there the user can enter his or her problem description. Prior to sending the issue there should be a required answer drop down menu asking the user if the issue is a sales, service, billing, technical, or other issue.

Finding 2: There are inconsistencies in standard navigation.
Violation: Match between system and real world.
Severity: 4
Users are likely to be discouraged from visiting certain A2Hosting pages since there is seemingly no way out. One example of this is the Community Forum. If a user decides he or she would like to visit the forum they will be directed to a page that has a different banner than the rest of the site. Not only is it different, clicking the logo at the top left corner does not navigate the user back to the A2Hosting home page. It instead brings the user back to the forum page. This means that once on the forum, the user has no navigational ability to get back to any other portion of A2Hosting's

website other than using the back button.

Recommendation 2: Every page should have a standard banner that functions in an identical way.
By maintaining a certain level of continuity A2Hosting will create a comfortable environment where users feel free to explore and try to figure out issues on their own. This can be done extending the main banner on to every page, regardless of the section of the website the user is in. The current standard banner is mainly focused at sales and perhaps can implement navigational features as well.

Finding 3: The layout and design of the community forum are not intuitive to users.
Violation: Consistency and standards
Severity: 3
The main page of the community forum page is broken into two portions, "Community Support" and "Communication Center" Within each of these sections are a list of clickable links. These links bring the user to an actual discussion board or link to another page entirely. The two are identified by icons immediately to the left of the active link. Although there is a key at the bottom of the page that describes what the icon does, it is not instantly understandable as to what they mean. There is also a green check mark and an orange "RSS" button that are not identified. When the check mark is clicked it brings the user to another page that does not have an easily identifiable heading. If this was something the user clicked by accident, but would still be interested in, there is no way for him or her to know that because the destination page is unclear. If the user clicks the "RSS" button, they are shown the code for the page without any explanation of what it is. A novice user may feel he or she has reached this page in error.

Recommendation 3: Rearranging the layout makes the community forum more intuitve and user friendly.

There should be clear separation of links that bring the user to another page and links that are actual forum connections. This will allow A2Hosting to maintain the functionality of the current forum page, without confusing its users. In addition, we recommend that any and all links or buttons be clearly identified. Without ambiguity, that users will not feel that there are navigational issues.

Finding 4: There are times when the description of a clickable button is not what the action of the button actually is or does.
Violation: Match between system and real world.
Severity: 5
It is commonly accepted in the computer world that the word "open" allows a user to enter into a

location that will allow him or her to view files or folders from previously saved or submitted items. In the case of A2Hosting, they use the word open to indicate the beginning of the ticket submission process. For users who are new to the site, this may be confusing. Not sure how else to access his or her previously submitted tickets, the user may get frustrated and call customer support.

Recommendation 4: Evaluate all button and link descriptions and rename to proper convention.

Although it may take a long time to comb through the entire A2Hosting customer service pages to find all of the buttons and links, it will be worth it to make sure that each user will not be confused by the actions of the button or link after they are clicked. If this evaluation is expanded to the entire A2Hosting site it will create a level of continuity and fluidity. This will make customers feel more at ease about browsing unguided through the site. It will also allow users to feel empowered to figure out solutions to their problems because they know that they are being directed to the appropriate places.

Finding 5: The search bar in the A2 Hosting support area requires users to recall and limits users' search area
Violation: Recognition rather than recall
Severity: 3
Firstly, the search bar of Knowledge Base does not auto complete users' words when users are typing, which means that no clue of certain key/popular searching phrase is provided to users. It also does not remember what users have searched before, and therefore if a user wants to find an article he read several days ago, he needs to recall exactly what he searched at that time. In addition, ticket and community are not included in the universal search bar, so that users cannot search for information in those two areas.

Recommendation 5: The search bar should be improved to ease users' burden on memorization and to give users more freedom in search
As Nielson says, "Minimize the user's memory load by making objects, actions, and options visible … Instructions for use of the system should be visible or easily retrievable whenever appropriate." People always do a better job on recognition than on recall. Therefore, the search bar of Knowledge Base should support auto complete, and it should remember what users have searched before and move it to the top of the dropdown list of the search bar, just as how Google's search bar does. Also, the universal search bar should include ticket and community, and a filter can be applied for users to choose "Ticket," "Community," or "Knowledge Base" as the search area.

Finding 6: The support area is not customized for users and does not show history of searching and reading.
Violation: Recognition rather than recall
Severity: 3
The landing page is not customized with functionalities users often use and sub-sections (Knowledge Base, Community, etc.) users usually go to. Also, Knowledge Base does not save what users recently looked at, and there is no way to locate what users have previously searched in Knowledge Base. If users encounter problems they have already met before, they need to go over Knowledge Base again and maybe to recall which article they have read and what they have searched before.

Recommendation 6: The support area should show common functions used by users, and the history of searching and reading to users
The landing page of the support area should be customized with functionalities users often use and sub-sections users often go to, so that users can recognize and access to the essential entrances (buttons and links) quickly. Also, Knowledge Base should save and show the searching and reading history for the users. The titles of the articles users have read before may be marked with a different color from other unread articles, and those articles should be moved to the top of the search results.

Finding 7: The support pages are neither really visually appealing nor designed in a minimalist way.
Violation: Aesthetic and minimalist design
Severity: 4
There are issues in terms of visual design of the support pages. On the main support page, the tweets and the blog activity are in long list form while everything else is in blocks. Sometimes a coupon is shown twice on one page. Furthermore, Knowledge Base research results and articles are not visually appealing and well organized. Often articles contain too many colors/ways to express the idea, which makes them hard to read.

Recommendation 7: The support pages and the content should be presented in a visually appealing and minimalist way
According to Nielson, "Dialogues should not contain information which is irrelevant or rarely needed. Every extra unit of information in a dialogue competes with the relevant units of information and diminishes their relative visibility." Therefore, a coupon should only be shown once so as to reduce its distraction in users' reading/operation. The sections (tweets, blog activity, Knowledge Base entrance, etc.) on the main support page, search results, and articles in Knoweldge Base should be presented in a unified and simple way, so that their format would not distract users' attention on their content.

5. Discussion

The heuristic evaluation our group conducted on A2 Hosting's support areas proved to reveal valuable information. However, shortcomings and limitations of the way we performed this method need to be addressed. Firstly, our group is only made up of five members and we individually evaluated the support areas with the heuristics in mind. This is a potential problem because five is a relatively small number. With such a limited amount of evaluators, we are unable to fully extrapolate our findings. However, Nielsen asserts that poor results are achieved with using only one evaluator and using more evaluators combat that problem [1]. We are also not the most homogenous group so people with other perspectives and opinions could have felt differently or found other things that would fit as violations. Our various perspectives may have also impacted the consistency of the severity ratings. Once again, the ratings are our own opinions, but others could potentially disagree on the ratings we gave.

No one in the group is an actual A2 Hosting user, which can result in only locating more superficial violations. Since no one had an extremely in-depth knowledge about the A2 Hosting support areas, it's possible we missed some violations. Lastly, we did not include all of the violations in the findings and recommendations. The reasoning behind this is that as a group, we actually found too many violations to fit into one report. Some violations were minor and not important enough to describe in high detail. Other violations were already discovered through previous research methods so it was redundant to repeat ourselves.

The next step we will take is performing usability testing on certain parts of the support areas in order to discern the exact problems that are causing trouble for users. Heuristic evaluations give important insight into what usability problems exist but usability testing is how we will produce more concrete evidence that something is a real problem. Usability testing is a standard way of discovering actual problems that plague users. We would also be interested in seeing how people more experienced with A2 Hosting's support areas would conduct the heuristic evaluation. For example, a user who also had some knowledge of usability or someone in our class that switched over to use A2 Hosting.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, Heuristic Evaluation throws light on some of the various aspects that the support area of A2 Hosting is lacking in. The Heuristics developed by Nielsen J. helped us understand why the system fails and what an ideal implementation of the same would be. Although these

recommendations are just one of multiple ways to solve a problem, they will help start the process of redesigning the system for the better. Heuristic Evaluation, has been most helpful at this phase of the project and it will help pave way to Usability Testing.

7. References

1. Nielsen, J. (1994b). Heuristic evaluation. In Nielsen, J., and Mack, R.L. (Eds.), Usability Inspection Methods, John Wiley & Sons, New York, NY.

8. Appendices

Please see the next page for appendix 8.1

Heuristic #	Evaluator (DC, AN, SZ, YK, JH)	Brief description of A2 hosting issue as it relates to the heuristic	Recommendation	Severity (1-5)
1	AN	when you click on a link, it underlines so it lets you know it's available to click on	none	
1	AN	when you type in the search bar, the area is highlighted so you know you can type in it	none	
1	SJ	The titles of the four pages users get to from clicking "support", "billing" buttons under the "service issue" and the "other issue" parts are exact the same-submit a ticket. Thus users may be confused about where they are when they get to those pages.	Change the titles of the four pages to be different from each other. Make each title unique and identifiable; or users can fill in one form and pick to what service they want apply	4
1	SJ	After users click "service bulletins," the title of the page shown to them is "Network Status." Users may be confused and wonder where they actually are.	Change either the title of the page or the words "service bulletin."	2
1	YK	Visibility is limited in the system, there is a certain sense of not knowing what is going on unless the users know where to look for.	Users don't have to hunt the website, if something is wrong with the hosting they should be able to see it	4
2	AN	when you are in the forums, and you click the logo "a2 hosting" area on the top left, it takes you to the home of forums, not home of the website, when tht normally does not happen on websites	any time you click the logo area to the top left, bring the user to the front page!	2
2	AN	the icons associated with various portions of the forum section does not match the topics they are associated with, also multiple topics have the same icon	use descriptive icons so users won't be confused	2
2	SJ	"open ticket" actually leads users to the ticket submit page, while this phrase seems literally mean to open ticket history or existing ticket.	Change the "open ticket" phrase to "create ticket"	1
5,10	JH	In ticket page, there's no explanation about the Upload File(s). Users may have no idea about this section.	Add a line of explanation of what users should do here. What files should be uploaded? Why it's useful to upload files for tickets?	3
2	YK	A2 hosting uses a lot of real world terminology but at the same time, uses a lot of technical terms like WEB hosting, reseller hosting, VPS hosting which are the same to normal users	Combine all the "hosting" togather as much as possible to reduce confusion.	3
3	AN	when you type in a new post for the forum, you cannot leave the page or else your information gets erased	allow users to leave and come back but still have their draft saved	3
3	AN	very difficult to find your way out of the forums once you enter, how are users supposed to get away from the area??	have a home button that takes the user back to the main a2 hosting page	3
3	SJ	On the page of knowledgebase or community, there is no link helping users get to the support area main page. So if a user accidentally gets to the knowledgebase or the community from the support area main page, he will be confused about how to get back.	Add a link or the black nav bar on these two pages that can help users get back to the support main page or even other support services.	3
3	YK	User freedom is limited as the site does not save the text entered into ticket information or search history. IT looses all the text if the user visits some other page on the same website.	The site should be able to auto save like google drive.	4
4	AN	error messages come in different varieties, sometimes a pop-up window, sometimes within the screen itself	standardize the error messages that users receive	1
4,2	AN	"myA2hosting" vs "A2hosting": confusing to sometimes be in one and other times be in the other without letting users know the difference	choose one and stick with it or make the differences more obvious. make the two areas more distinct	3
4	AN	billing and hosting tickets look exactly the same except for one more drop down menu "affected domain" no headings to differentiate	this can confuse users submitting tickets so highlight the differences between the two more saliently, headers	4
4	AN	inconsistency of certain names "community forum" vs. "client community"	standardize what things are called to minimize confusion	2
4,2	JH	The icon on the left of "Logout" button is "lock" shape, which is not standard usage on website.	Change the icon to https://cdn2.iconfinder. com/data/icons/picons-essentials/57/logout-512.png	1
4	SJ	"service bulletins" and "network status" mean the same thing. "submit a support request" and "submit a ticket" mean the same thing.	Change the different words indicating the same thing to the same words.	3
4	SJ	In the ticket, contact sales and knowledgebase area, users often cannot get to the main page of each area by clicking the area logo picture/title, which is already a website platform standard.	link the area logo picture/title to that area's main page.	2
4	JH	In Knowledge Base, some articles' title are different in search results page and the article page	Make the article title consistent	3
4	JH	The ticket area are sometimes called "Support Request" and sometimes called "Ticket"	Make consistent area name to avoid confusion	4
4	JH	User may have no idea what is "Service Bulletins"	Change it to "Service Status" or "Network Status"	3
4	YK	Consistency is limited in the site, there are articles whose title says something different and the content talks about a different topic.	The content needs to be cleaned ot have proper titles	5
4	YK	The title nomenclature is also variable, some titles start with a verb and some start with a noun.	The titles can be made standard but starting all the titles with a verb.	5
5	AN	when you do not enter a search term in KB, nothing comes up but also does not indicate what just happened	include an error message that says enter a search term or do not allow user to continue without entering search term	1
5	AN	allows users to preview post before submitting	none	
5	JH	If an user accidentally made a typo in the keywords of search query, the system will not suggest any relevant keywords or detect the typo and explain to the user. Instead, it just shows a blank search result page.	Detect search query typo and redirect users to use correct keywords	1
6	AN	when trying to submit a ticket, they require the form fields to be filled out but they don't tell the user, or mark it in any way	place an asterisk next to the required fields (common design pattern)	1
6	AN	they save information for you when submitting a ticket like name, email, domain, package	none	
6	SJ	The knowledgebase search bar does not autocomplete users' typing or give a dropdown list during users' typing.	Autocomplete users' typing in the knowledgebase search bar or give a dropdown list.	3
6	SJ	Then knowledgebase page content would be blank if a user search without typing anything into the search bar. The user may do so with the view to see the whole content/categorization of the KB first.	Provide the knowledgebase main page to the user when he/she searches with leaving the search bar blank.	3
6	YK	Most of the support area in A2 Hosting is dependent upon recall, where users need to remember how they went about it the last time becase the site is not self explanatory	The support page has to be redisigned to be self exmplanatory to prevent users from jumping through a bunch of hoops.	5
7	AN	no way to locate what you previously searched on the KB	show history of past searches or save it in some form	2

7	SJ	The "open ticket" option is in the black nav bar after user's login, so that users can directly click it and submit a ticket instead of searching for it in the droplist under "support."	none	
7	YK			
8	AN	when see results of the search from KB, they provide you with a very long description of the article and the link, but you can just get the link from the title itself (it's hyperlinked)	shorten the description and remove the extraneous link	2
8	AN	when I went to live chat, I saw two areas that said save 17% (coupon), why put two of the same info in a similar area?	don't be redundant, if you state something like a coupon once, that should be good enough, it wastes valuable white space	1
8	SJ	The knowledgebase search result and articles are not visually appealing and well-organized. Often the articles contain too many colors/ways to express the ideas, which makes the articles seemingly complex.	Minimalize the colors and the ways expressing the ideas in the Knowledgebase articles.	2
8	JH	The knowledge base search results page are not visually appealing.	User interface could be improved by better the spacing and the text rendering	3
8	JH	In the support center homepage, the action button in each page block are not aligned properly.	Align the button properly	1
9	AN	when you try to submit a ticket without filling out the forms, they give an error saying: "Please enter a descriptive subject." "Please entered a detailed description of your concern in the message field."	none	
9	AN	when you do not enter a title or content when submitting a post, a pop-up message comes up and tells you exactly what you missed	none	
10	AN	getting started guide for KB	none	
6 / 7	AN	no indication for frequent users the areas that they like to go to, no quick links	have a customized dashboard to allow users to retrieve areas they frequently visit as quickly and as easily as possible	3
	JH	The service status area is sometimes called "Service Bulletins" but sometimes called "Network Status"		