

# TELECOMBROKER

## HEURISTIC EVALUATION

### Objective

This study seeks to identify any site element that would impact a user's ability to flow intuitively through the site and out the purchase path with confidence. This information will be used to optimize the site in preparation for usability tests.

### Methodology

A page-by-page analysis is appropriate where the brand is unknown and target user psychology is loosely defined. Wherever possible, aspects relevant to brand development are outlined. In sum, this audit focuses on:

- design attributes, or where the eye is led and what is conveyed visually
- navigation options, or how options influence ease-of-use and efficiency
- label choices, or how content presents the issues
- intuitive process, or how the site assists the user in decision-making

### Proviso: Limitations to Full Usability Analysis

If the site were functional, the audit would have focused more on feedback loops and other experiential usability principles. In lieu of this, evaluating the layout and of each section of the site determined functional sufficiency. Recommendations that follow would guide the site design upgrade, including placement of text on the page and within the site.

Problem areas preventing thorough analysis include:

- Links leading nowhere, to an error page, or to refresh the same page
- Whole pages missing, including Help and Search Results.
- Buttons that show no response.
- Functionality missing: Search, Best Plan Finder, Receipt of Message.

## **Overview**

*The beta site demonstrates a clean design aesthetic.* Wisely, the site avoids pop-up windows, flashing lights and other unnecessary displays of the latest “cool” technology. Consistent layout across pages also supports the user in finding information faster.

*The user process is not reflected in the site design or copy.* Users anticipate being greeted at a site with an explanation of the features and functionality available to solve particular needs. The home page should be re-designed to lay out the process and immediately funnel users into their customer segment.

*The decision-making process requires useful information.* Information currently found nestled inside the Resource Center under Quick Guides bears the greatest functional value for the user’s experience. This level of information or higher should be presented to the user early in the site. Promotional copy characteristic of the remainder of the site should be waived in favor of instructional or educational information.

*Content and functionality should not be re-used.* If a user encounters the same information or functionality in multiple places within the site, they lose orientation in the process and in the site organization. A fair fraction of links and functionality re-appear over and over, sometimes twice on the same page. “Ask the Experts”, for example, is available in the middle *and* to the right of the “Glossary” page. “Best Plan Finder” shows up everywhere. Resource Center and Support may as well be consolidated for the amount of overlap currently demonstrated.

## **General**

*Change the copy’s voice and content to reflect expertise.* The tone and language used in the text throughout the site gives no sense that TeleComBroker is an authority. The impact lacks any consultative or telecommunications expertise. It feels like promotional copy, not informational. This will alienate people with a technical background.

*Use “customer” terminology – not marketing.* There is no instructional or educational information at this site. Reflect the user’s perspective through informational copy that clarifies the issue, points out options and recommends alternative ways to think about the best solution, given their specific personalized parameters.

*Eliminate circular or repetitive link structures.* In multiple cases, a link will imply that factual information lies behind it. Perhaps because this site is in beta stages of production, many links landed at dead-ends. Errors, loops back to the referring page and repeated text in multiple parts of the site altogether give the impression of a tangled site in an early stage of production.

*Keep titles mutually exclusive.* Payment plans and service plans are mixed together in the primary list organizing the services at TeleComBroker. Seeing “Calling Cards” in the same list as “Long Distance” is disorienting since they are not comparable; they solve different problems. Similarly, the primary navigational bar has buttons for “Business”, “SoHo”, “Consumer” and “Services.” Users want to be as efficient as possible, and segmenting themselves at the home page initiates a narrower, more customized site experience. By its presence, the “Services” button makes a user question the right choice.

*Use tools to solve specific problems.* Your relationships depend on the belief that TeleComBroker is serious about helping a user find the best solution, efficiently and intuitively. In the “Business” and “Home Office” sections of the site, the same “Plan Finder” from the home page is recycled. If this were all a user felt he or she needed to supply by way of customized information, they would have used it at the home page. Recycling the tool implies a lack of attention to specific segment or decision-making needs. Returning a user to the questionnaire they just filled out will infuriate them.

*Keep consistent with Web conventions.* Eliminate the active status on links where one is already in that section of the site: once in “Careers”, I should know that I am in “Careers” and that there is no other link available by the same name. Reference information should be set apart from the prime real estate of the page. Small text is challenging to read, and “small font” is notorious for holding the caveats and clauses of an agreement. Facts come in small type and new opportunities in larger type.

*Account for confusion caused by cross-connecting links.* TeleComBroker makes ample use of cross-connecting pages, but lacks clear indication of where in the site a user is at any given point. If I am at “Contact”, and click on a link about employment opportunities, the page that pulls up is in “Careers”. Am I still in “Contact”? Should I click on the apparently active “Careers” link at the top of the page? Leading the user around in circles is bound to frustrate their attempts to make progress. Make sure the navigation orients the user within the site with the use of subnavs or by deactivating links to the currently open page.

*Use navbars to orient a user in the site.* Currently, right-side navigation in segment sections has the section title listed in green font and the same size as all subsection headers. Visually, the list indicates that the section title, be it “Business” or “Services”, is itself one of the options. Calling attention to it with noticeable font color indicates to the user, “Click Here.”

## **Home**

*Direct the user.* The home page is responsible for directing the user’s experience of the site. This home page scatters attention. The prime real estate in the middle of the page is given to reference information like “FAQ” and “Glossary”. The first page should funnel the user into a particular area of content and services. At that stage, they should find functionality akin to the “Best Plan Finder”.

*Anticipate the need for user efficiency.* On the home page, the single interactive tool immediately snags attention because it helps the user accomplish a task. In this tool, users can identify their needs and their segment. If users can segment themselves here, and narrow their agenda at the same time, there is no incentive to click on the buttons at the top of the page.

*Clarify options.* At the home page, the “Register” link is tucked in the corner, and users are given no reason to believe that their experience would be more fulfilling or efficient if they were registered. Surprising them with the obligation without a caveat at the start of the process may startle some users. There’s an aspect of the one-step-forward, two-steps-back logic in the current process.

## **Log In and Register**

*Identify the specific benefits and features available to members.* Give users a reason to register. Those who dislike logging in to sites appreciate having the option to specify whether they will accept a cookie. It is a sign of respect that the password clue is left to the user’s discretion. Anticipate user concerns for how their information will be used; “Opt Out” offers and privacy disclosures are appropriately added here.

## **My TeleComBroker**

*A page called "MY" must be wholly personalized.* Indeed, the generic resource center is properly placed in a section of the screen that can be referenced at will, intermittently. Regular visits will need RFP and bid status up-front, along with other account-specific information. All that is on this page could be thrown out since none of it qualifies as personalization.

## **First Page of Each Segmentation Section**

*Provide segment-specific tools and information.* In each case, the eye is drawn to the titles and text set apart: New Solutions, Newswire and Resource Center – all tertiary information. This page should indicate that TeleComBroker understands the issues specific to this customer category.

## **Best Plan Finder**

*Redesign this tool to demonstrate attributes of an infomediary.* Currently, this tool captures a very limited range of attributes involved in the user process. From the very first page on this site, and every page following, the user is led to believe that TeleComBroker can solve problems. To do so, an infomediary tool would identify all the variables a user needs to consider in shopping for a telecommunications provider. As the tool stands now, given the page that is returned, a user has little sense of accomplishing much in the way of narrowing options. Ideally, the return page would list the best options fitting their needs, ranked according to how well it matched. It would also help the user by identifying the benefits and disadvantages of choosing one plan over another.

*Ask for all need-based parameters in one place.* For the site to assist in finding the best plan, the tool should capture all the information in one place. Delivering this piece of the tool separate from the total range of parameters gives the impression that the tool does not accomplish complex tasks.

## **New Solutions**

*Revisit the name and purpose.* The title “New Solutions” means little, since any solution is new when a user first visits a site. According to TeleComBroker’s sales pitch, solutions would be front and center, not a special section, at the site. IT managers would be attracted to tools described in technical language connoting a consultative approach, like “diagnostics”. Along the same lines, the text in the Business version of “New Solutions” is appropriate to businesses with fewer than 50 employees, e.g., closer to the SoHo market than large businesses.

## **About Us**

*Sort the information into mutually exclusive categories that make a coherent impression.* The navigation list within each section illustrates the breadth of territory it covers. This list is not mutually exclusive, so the user must investigate each option to find the answer to their question. Also, the impression made by including “Service Providers” in the list is that they are partners in your success, and that you have a vested interest in helping them. This information, being central to the user’s evaluation of a service, may be useful farther up in the sequence of the user’s decision-making process.

## **Support**

*Narrow the focus of the Support section, or cut it out entirely.* Currently, half of the content offered at the Support page can be found elsewhere in the site. The redundancy is particularly noticeable with Resource Center. To a user, recycled content, text and functionality demonstrates an absence of attention to efficiency, user process and categorizing information in mutually exclusive ways for easy site use. Repeating access to sections of a site wastes page space and disturbs user orientation in the site, and how to return to a particular piece of information.

## **Resource Center**

*Eliminate the Resource Center from the body of the text.* That section of the site is already available from the top navigational bar. Being tertiary information to begin with, users will seek out answers in that section as needed. Similarly, linking to “Ask the Experts” from the “Glossary” introductory text, when the link is stationed in the navigational list to the immediate right, is gratuitous and unnecessary.

*Reference materials answer specific, sometimes arcane, questions.* Define the scope of answers the reference materials provided in the Resource Center to encourage users to visit this area. Assume that the user wants to self-serve when at all possible. If the user experience depends on reading particular items in the Resource Center, an explanatory introduction would introduce users to the site.

*Choose meaningful names.* “Quick Guides”, for example, does not prepare users for what they can expect of this section. Context is needed to determine when “Ask the Experts” is the right section of the site to visit. Hyperlinking the word “TeleComBroker” under FAQ is not an intuitive choice, since Frequently Asked Questions involve more than just the brand name. “Simple Tools” like “Simple Saver” and “Simple Mobile” have no meaning to users in the absence of detailed, explanatory copy.

*Put generic tools upfront.* “Search” and “Area Code Finder” qualify as generic tools because they are not TeleComBroker-specific services. As such, they belong on the home page, where they can arrive at the site and get the information in two clicks. Including them in Resource Center confuses the otherwise consistent character of this section: using TeleComBroker better.

## **Quick Guides**

*These pages are the most valuable part of this site.* Substantial information about key services directly assists the user’s decision-making process. Currently this information is virtually hidden from users. This kind of information should be connected to the first page that talks about solutions.

*Reduce the number of clicks wherever possible.* At the bottom of the pages describing each service is a link to finding a plan. The following page shows a single-field entry for users to identify their needs/profile. The remainder of that page is filler, wholly unnecessary to the user’s task resolution process. Combine the “Find a Plan” feature into a robust service that delivers meaningful customized advice in as few clicks as possible.

## **Ask the Experts**

*Feedback opportunities can be consolidated.* This page serves no different purpose than any of the other feedback pages available in the “Support” section. Consolidate all feedback forms with a pull-down menu they can use to identify the purpose of their communications.

*State the boundaries and benefits of this service.* If there is a particularly beneficial purpose to “Ask the Experts”, example questions and answers might set the stage.

## **What Do You Think? (Message Box)**

*Surveys should be purposeful, not redundant.* Toward the bottom of the first page in each segmented section for consumer, business and SoHo, there is a “survey”. The question posed concerns the number of phone lines owned, and three response options are all quantified. This is not an opinion question. Perhaps of greater concern is the view that the business questionnaire would surely already have collected this same information. Users need an incentive to fill a survey out, even if just to find out how their opinion compares with others.

## **Contact Us**

*Use one form for all feedback.* Users may have a concern or complaint that is best put on paper before defining which category of comment it qualifies for. If one form is provided for all feedback, time is saved for the user who does not have to figure out which one best fits the purpose. Similarly, once a person writes their thoughts down, they may be in a better position to figure out which department should respond. A pull-down menu at the top of the page quickly and simply lets the user identify this preference.

## **Search**

*Search is universally recognized and can offer sole access through the top navbar.* Locating search tools within a page, when the link at top already offers this purpose, is redundant and wasteful of page space. Furthermore, "Search" should not fall under "Support". Search tools are sought by users at specific times in the process and to solve specific problems. It is not intuitive to look for search tools in a category named "Support".

*"Search the Site" implies that users don't know what site-specific search engines do.* "Search" by itself is less confrontational to the user, who can proceed to plug in any keyword considered appropriate. Users know that TeleComBroker is not a Web search engine. Telling them what they already know creates confusion.

## **Simple Tools**

*Functionality should be easy to find.* This section is only accessible through links embedded in small font text at various pages in the site. Users will appreciate tools that assist them in making better decisions. However, they need more instruction than what is currently provided in order to use it with confidence.

## **Privacy and Security**

*These pages are excellent.* Showing a logo of a recognized brand-name privacy association creates credibility. Providing direct access to customer service anticipates a user's emotional state and reasoning for visiting the "Privacy" page in the first place: anxiety, concern, frustration, fear. The copy is clear, thorough and anticipates user concerns. The page has wide margins for easy reading. The user does not have to click through multiple pages to get through the document. Bold-faced headers facilitate scanning.

## **FAQ, Glossary, Site Index**

These pages lacked copy, and therefore could not be evaluated for layout or intuitive use.

## **Terms of Use**

*Appropriate language and tone used.* Text is aligned to allow up to ten words a line, increasing the ease of reading. This page fulfills expectations.