

Websites let down by 'usability'

AN IN-DEPTH STUDY OF 25 LEADING travel websites has found a catalogue of usability problems that experts believe could damage efficiency and impact conversion rates for bookings.

The research project was carried out in June and July this year by consultants Webcredible, and underlines previous studies of the online travel sector that have found a string of websites often failing to provide basic levels of usability and accessibility.

Key weaknesses across the 25 unnamed sites included inconsistencies between advertised prices and the final payment, and a lack of flexibility with booking dates.

Webcredible director Trenton Moss said: "The travel sector experiences one of the highest levels of comparison shopping online, with a massive one in four visits to travel websites coming from another site in the same category.

"Users are unlikely to hang around for long



if they can't find what they're looking for. However, by making a number of easy-to-implement changes online travel companies can significantly improve user satisfaction, ultimately leading to increased bookings."

Other areas of concern included a lack of printer-friendly options for pages and failing to promote competitive prices on homepages.

A free report has since been produced to assist travel websites when trying to tackle the increasingly controversial and difficult area of web operations.

"Given the sector's huge growth, it's more important than ever that its players seize every possible competitive advantage, particularly given the competitive nature of the industry," the report says.

The Webcredible study follows a series of tests this year into usability and accessibility levels by travel websites.

In April, the Royal National Institute for the Blind examined eight leading sites on behalf of *Travolution*.

In a highly critical summary, the RNIB found that only Eurostar, Ebookers and Cheapflights produced scores higher than 50% when tested against a broad range of criteria.

BY KEVIN MAY

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