Ticket Retailing Website Usability

Qualitative Research

Report of Findings

June 2011

Passenger**focus**
putting passengers first

Foreword

Colin Foxall CBE

This report sets out the findings of Passenger Focus's research into how easy it is for passengers to buy train tickets on the internet – a method of purchase that continues to grow strongly, particularly among passengers travelling longer distances. The report follows on from research Passenger Focus undertook in 2010 into the ease of use of ticket vending machines at railway stations.

Human beings differ widely. There is therefore no website design or approach to online retailing that will be universally liked by passengers. This research was not therefore intended to determine which train company or independent retailer had the best or worst website when it came to buying train tickets. Rather it was intended to highlight the features of ticket retailing websites that worked well and to show where passengers would benefit if improvements are made.

The most significant finding of this research is that some passengers buying online may end up paying more to travel than they need to. This is not because of deliberate overcharging, but because passengers may lack sufficient knowledge to interrogate websites in the best way to find the most appropriate ticket for them. Therefore website operators and train companies should consider carefully what more they can do in two respects:
• Helping passengers to avoid paying more for a journey than is necessary by allowing them to make better-informed choices between times, routes and price.
• Helping passengers gauge whether the ticket they have selected is the lowest price to travel that day, or the highest price (indicating that they may be about to buy more flexibility than they need) or somewhere in the middle.

Specifically, I believe anybody selling tickets on the internet should act immediately to prevent passengers buying train-specific tickets at a higher price than another ticket that is available on the trains they have selected. Conversely, passengers should be warned if they are about to buy a flexible ticket with seat reservations on trains where cheaper train-specific tickets are available. Some passengers will choose to buy flexibility, reserving a seat on the train they are most likely to use, but online retailers must make sure that it is a conscious, informed decision.

On *page ii* we have listed additional areas for train companies and independent online retailers to consider that we believe will help passengers to identify and select the most appropriate ticket for their journey. Passenger Focus will now engage with the rail and ticket retailing industries to encourage them to develop their websites to take account of these findings.

Finally, and separate from this research:
a National Rail Enquiries should to review its criteria for allowing a ticket sales website to use its "accredited" tick. I believe a website that suppresses the trains and fares of another operator to make its own more prominent should not have the right to display the tick.
b Train companies and independent retailers should prevent the sale of tickets on trains that will not run. It is clearly nonsense that ticket sales are not suspended on trains that have been cancelled.

Colin Foxall CBE
Chairman
Passenger Focus

Additional Recommendations

Train companies and independent retailers should consider the following:

Helping passengers make the right choice and preventing them paying more than necessary

• Websites should not allow passengers to select an "open return" or "flexible return" without making the cost-implications clear. Current practice appears to be inconsistent with ensuring passengers do not pay more than they need to. A ticket office clerk has the opportunity to verify that a passenger really needs the flexibility they have asked for, and can help them understand the price differences – websites need to help passengers in the same way.

• Websites should do more to help passengers understand that Advance tickets are for one train and one train only, while other ticket types can be used on any train, subject to time restrictions. It is as important that passengers buying Anytime, Off-Peak and Super Off-Peak tickets understand that they are not tied to a specific train as it is that those buying Advance tickets understand that they are.

• Websites should give passengers easy access to a succinct explanation of when a ticket can and cannot be used – generic explanations of Off-Peak and Super Off-Peak categories is not sufficient.

• Websites should give passengers easy access to the list of permitted routes associated with any 'walk up' ticket type they offer. Being told "route any permitted", but having no means to see what that means is unacceptable.

Giving passengers confidence about what they are buying

• Websites should consider showing the logo of the train operator offering a particular fare to aid the ticket purchase decision and help passengers understand which carrier their journey is with

• Websites should tackle the problem that some additional information drawn from the national fares system is creating confusion rather than providing clarity. For example, some London to Exeter tickets display "valid on journeys via Taunton", causing passengers to question whether the trains they have selected do or don't go via Taunton. Also, the phrase "valid via East Coast and other TOC connecting services" is unhelpful because few passengers would understand the abbreviation "TOC" and it causes doubt about whether the train selected is an East Coast train.

The result is unnecessary uncertainty and, in some cases, passengers navigating away from the page to find the answer before proceeding.

Functionality improvements

• Websites should, as many already do, recognise London stations with or without the prefix "London". For example, typing "Paddington" or "London Paddington"

• Websites should consider if more "all major stations" options should be created, to help passengers who do not know the name of the principal station or stations in the town or city they are visiting.

• Websites primarily offering drop down menus for the selection of dates should ensure that a calendar option is available and clearly visible for passengers who prefer that method

• Websites should make the "arrive before" option more obvious alongside the "leave after", to help passengers who know when they need to be somewhere, but do not know how long the journey takes

• The clarification "5 to 15 years" should be given whenever referring to child fares

• Passengers would prefer the timetable look up and the fares look up to be combined into one step (the first stage of which has recently been implemented by National Rail Enquiries for enquiries more than 48 hours in advance). Neither part is helpful in isolation.

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Prepared for:

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Management Summary

Research was conducted to provide an understanding of the usability of ticket retailing websites among passengers, identifying strengths and weaknesses as well as barriers and how these could be addressed. The research also set out to establish functionality and product requirements and to identify principles that could be used by the industry to help make ticket-retailing websites more user friendly.

34 semi-structured depth interviews (45 minutes each) were conducted among passengers recruited on the basis of having high, medium or low confidence in their ability to buy train tickets online. The research was conducted in January and February 2011 and findings were presented in March 2011.

The key findings that Passenger Focus should note are:

1. The internet is becoming the default channel choice for many of the longer-distance passengers represented in this sample when purchasing train tickets in advance. Many have high navigational confidence from increasing levels of familiarity with the internet and assume that a full range of tickets will be available from a wide range of websites. However, it was interesting to observe that even those who are most confident were sometimes unable to obtain the most appropriate tickets for a range of journey scenarios (which are set out in Appendix B).

2. Many are so comfortable purchasing unfamiliar and high value items online that they expect these experiences to translate easily to the area of train tickets. Some are therefore surprised at their inability to complete what they generally expected would be a straightforward transaction. Others are over-confident about purchasing a ticket online to the point that they select one that does not represent best value or fully-match their travel criteria. Importantly in this respect, although consumers are naturally more cautious when buying tickets for unfamiliar or expensive journeys, this does not appear to represent a significant barrier to purchase.

3. Therefore a key finding from this research was that consumers may have a misplaced sense of confidence about what they are buying, because they lack the knowledge to interrogate ticket retailing websites in the most effective way (e.g. they misunderstand the term 'open return'; do not remember to check if two singles are cheaper than a return or vice versa; or have no knowledge of alternative, potentially-cheaper routes). The result is the potential for some passengers to select an inappropriate ticket for their journey – perhaps one that is more expensive than they really need.

4. Additional obstacles to achieving the correct fare are presented by certain websites at an executional level:
   • Navigation and instructions could be simplified to make the process more intuitive in some cases
   • While relatively straightforward compared with TVMs, there may be potential to simplify the transaction journey in some instances
   • Terminology used is often industry jargon that can be difficult for consumers to decode in order to make informed decisions

5. Most respondents claimed to have sufficient confidence to purchase tickets online. This was because doubts regarding validity issues were often minimal due to the way tickets are offered and selected from retailing websites. Confidence to purchase tended to also be reinforced by a number of mechanisms that are common features of online purchasing to provide users with a sense of reassurance that the best fare is likely to have been achieved (such as lowest price reassurances, especially compared with walk-up fares in a rail context).

6. The key overall finding in this research is that having access to multiple information sources and retailing sites can provide consumers with a misplaced sense of confidence in their ability to make informed and correct choices when buying train tickets online. This suggests that more needs to be done to guide passengers to the most appropriate ticket and help them to avoid buying more expensive tickets than they really need.

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Conclusions

This research indicates that the following suggestions should be considered by the industry as principles that could help consumers to make more accurate and informed decisions when purchasing tickets from retailing websites.

1. Navigation and usability issues

- *Structural consistency of fundamental elements between sites would facilitate navigation and decision making, especially in terms of the uniformity of transaction stages and steps and inputting of journey details*
- *Improved labelling will help to make the ticket selection and purchasing processes more intuitive, for example colour contrasting to indicate an action is possible or required and indicating qualifying ages for child tickets*
- *Greater clarity regarding ticket types (at an early stage in the transaction) would be welcomed, especially for open tickets and season tickets*
- *Clearer instructions or highlighting of the next step of the transaction is often required especially in terms of choosing train time or ticket type and selecting the out or return part of the journey*

2. Enhanced information provision

- *Clearer flagging of information available within sites will prevent potentially useful aides to decision making being overlooked (such as information that may be contained within tool bars)*
- *Greater clarity of route options and journey information is required in some instances*
- *When appropriate, the option and cost benefits of two singles vs. a return needs to be flagged more clearly, although the trade-off with navigational simplicity will need to be observed*
- *Avoid use of industry terminology and jargon to minimise the risk of confusion*
- *Showing validity exclusions within the confirmation summary will act as a useful checking mechanism to increase confidence in ticket selection prior to purchase*
- *Indicate when the best fare has been achieved or a cheaper fare is available*

3. Accessibility issues

- *Further consideration needs to be given to the specific needs of consumers with disabilities that may affect their ability to purchase tickets from online retailing sites*

1. Research Context & Objectives

In 2010 Outlook conducted a major piece of research for Passenger Focus and a number of Train Operating Companies (TOCs) focusing on the 'ease of use' of Ticket Vending Machines (TVMs) provided at stations. The key objectives of that project were to understand functionality and usability of TVMs from a passenger perspective and to identify a list of principles for the industry to ensure that rail users have the best chance of obtaining the correct ticket for their journeys from TVMs.

The findings of that research were wide-ranging and the project highlighted numerous issues for the rail industry and TVM manufacturers to address to enhance the ticket-purchasing process for passengers. The key conclusions to emerge from that research can be summarised as follows:

- Passengers often lacked confidence when using TVMs to buy tickets for unfamiliar journeys
- Many had low confidence in their ability to buy the correct ticket for their journey through a TVM. This was often in contrast to how passengers felt about buying tickets online
- Navigation difficulties emerged as a significant barrier to achieving a successful outcome in many ticket purchasing situations
- Although most were able to select the correct ticket type and cheapest available fare for a range of journey scenarios, many lacked confidence that they had done so.

Following on from the research into TVM usability, Passenger Focus commissioned further work to understand from a passenger point of view the 'ease of use' of websites that sell train tickets.

The overall aim of this research was to highlight "what works well and what does not" when it comes to buying train tickets online, and not to determine that one site was better than another.

The objectives of the research were to:

1. Understand passengers' views about the usability of websites that sell/promote rail tickets to passengers.
2. Identify what potential improvements are needed from a passenger perspective, including any new functionality.
3. Explore the extent to which passengers are able to use current websites to select and purchase the most appropriate ticket for their journey.
4. Explore passengers' views about the content and presentation of information during the booking process, and identify any improvements to be considered.

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Website Usability
Passenger Focus (May 2011)

5. Identify a list of principles which can be used by the rail and ticket-retailing industries to develop a good practice guide that will make websites more user-friendly.

6. Explore whether passengers feel they have sufficient information to make an informed choice about their purchase.

2. Methodology & Sample

Qualitative research comprising semi-structured depth interviews was conducted to meet the research objectives. The sample was constructed to represent a broad cross-section of passengers who were recruited on the basis of their experience and confidence levels of using rail ticket-retailing websites.

Fieldwork was conducted in London in January and February 2011. Full details of the sample structure are outlined below:

34 semi-structured depth interviews, each lasting approximately 45 minutes as follows:

- **12 x High confidence**
- **11 x Medium confidence**
- **11 x Low confidence**

Recruitment criteria:

- A mix of both sexes across the sample
- A representation of lifestages within each category, e.g. mothers with (pre) school age children, students, retired/grandparents etc.
- An appropriate mix of purchase frequencies among confident users to reflect the types of tickets being purchased
- A representation of those travelling for different purposes to include commuting, leisure and business journeys
- All were non-rejectors of using retailing websites to purchase tickets in future
- A representation of four passengers with disabilities (two with vision impairments and two with learning difficulties)

Standard industry exclusions were applied to ensure that the research did not include any respondents who work in market research, marketing, advertising, journalism or anyone who works within the rail industry or public transport.

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3. Main Findings

3.1 Current Website Usage and Barriers

3.1.1 Experiences

Respondents were recruited on the basis of confidence in booking train tickets online, but this did not always correlate with broader internet usage. The majority of respondents had wide experience of using travel-related websites for booking flights, holidays, coach travel and checking train journey details as well as buying tickets online. Consequently, even those with the lowest confidence levels for recruitment purposes were comfortable with the research process and the purchasing scenarios they were confronted with.

"I was brought up with the internet and spend my whole life online. I'm a bit of a shopaholic too and would buy everything online if I could"
[Male, High Confidence]

3.1.2 Online Overview

A number of factors were identified by respondents that made many feel positively disposed towards the internet as a purchasing channel for train tickets. The key benefits in this respect can be summarised as follows:

Strengths

- Inexperienced buyers have sufficient confidence to purchase train tickets online based on positive experiences of other retail situations
- Always able to access preferred / trusted sites for any ticket / TOC
- Easy to get help required or ask questions when online
- Facility to double check all elements of transaction
- The internet is synonymous with getting best deals
- Most aware that best deals available when you buy in advance
- In control of purchase environment (at home, in own time, 24/7 etc)
- No pressure on purchase from queues or imminent train departure
- No spontaneous awareness of having bought wrong tickets online
- No reason to mistrust if no previous bad experiences
- No need to worry about having means of payment on the day
- Ticket delivery options available

"It should be easy to book train tickets online because all the answers you need are
there before you ask any questions"
[Male, Medium Confidence]

However, in spite of these overwhelming advantages, some reservations were expressed regarding this channel option in certain instances:

Disincentives

• Many lack confidence to buy most complex / expensive journeys online
• Some will always prefer reassurance of buying face-to-face
• Some uncertainty about whether cheapest fare has been obtained
• Least confident have concerns about (financial) security

3.2 Transaction Specifics

During the course of the interview, each respondent was asked to 'purchase' a ticket from a wide range of scenarios provided by Passenger Focus. These were intended to reflect a broad range of journey types with varying degrees of difficulty and complexity and, where possible scenarios were matched to the respondents' claimed confidence with retailing websites and types of journeys most often made.

The following websites were represented with equal weighting across the sample: Virgin Trains, East Coast, First Great Western, mytrainticket.co.uk, raileasy.co.uk and quno.co.uk. and National Rail Enquiries (although it is not possible to purchase tickets from this site).

Throughout this report, screen shots from the websites represented in the research have been used to illustrate elements of the transaction process, and not to demonstrate best or worst examples.

3.2.1 First Impressions

Confidence to use

Figure 1 provides a summary of initial perceptions of each of the ticket retailing websites included in this research:

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Figure 1

Although not always the natural first choice for consumers, there was greater confidence to use the TOC sites on the basis of name familiarity and strong brand reassurance from the known provenance of the website. Some were unsure, however, whether TOC sites would sell tickets only for that TOC's routes, but this was offset by a common expectation that these sites would be used to promote best fares and deals on their routes.

National Rail Enquiries (NRE) and Trainline were often familiar on the basis of usage experiences and Google results for ticket purchasing. However the status of both sites was unclear to respondents, with most assuming they played an aggregator role. This caused some concern about who to turn to in the event of any problems.

"I always use NRE because it was the result of a Google search and it's become a habit. I haven't had any problems with it and I have always assumed that it will give me the best deals."
[Male, High Confidence]

"The Trainline has always worked for me. I don't know of any other sites and have never thought about value before but I assume the Trainline is best and I have always been satisfied with the deals I have got from them"
[Male, Medium Confidence]

Respondents had lower confidence about using other sites. This was as a consequence of lower awareness of them and uncertainty over their status, rather than due to any sense of mistrust being expressed during the research. Some were unsure whether all tickets would be available from these sites, while others wondered whether they might be cheaper than the more familiar brands. Importantly, all were prepared to consider using any of these sites for comparison purposes when buying train tickets online and some claimed they would consider purchasing from them in the future.

"I would assume this would be a cheap company so they might do better deals. It would be like buying from a bargain bucket shop or flying with Easyjet or Ryanair rather than BA"
[Female, Low Confidence]

Initial Focus

The initial focus of the sites was often uncertain, especially for those that were less familiar or most 'busy' or those that contained moving images. Some were inclined to look for information relating to offers and promotions, partly to help locate the best fare available and partly since this fits with the mindset of online shopping in a general sense. N.B. It is important to note that the research methodology required respondents to focus on specific journey scenarios and this may have had an impact on the extent to which they interacted with sites and non-relevant deals at this stage.

"I will always check a couple of other sites to see if I can make a significant saving and I am always on the lookout for discount codes"
[Male, High Confidence]

Although the style of promotional activity shown in Figure 2 may often represent an attractive entry point, many expected the offers to be irrelevant since the best fares were felt unlikely to match their specific journey requirements on most occasions.

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Figure 2

"Great Value Fares and 80% would catch my eye but I would expect those savings to apply to trains at 2.00am that you have to book a long way in advance"
[Male, Medium Confidence]

Information Bars

Some of the information options available were often not noticed or considered at the start of the purchase process. The bars shown in Figure 3 were generally assumed to be irrelevant or to contain company-specific information. In the absence of anything to attract attention to them, users tended to ignore site elements that could facilitate ticket selection if help is required.

Figure 3
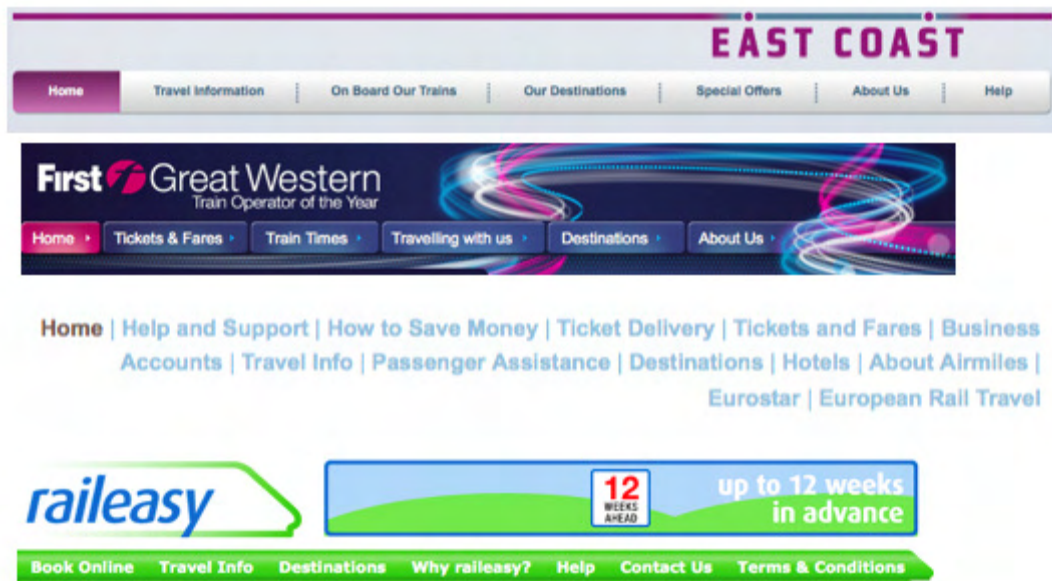
3.2.2 Journey Details

Leaving From

Respondents had no problem locating unfamiliar stations due to the predictive inputting feature that anticipates and suggests options available that was common to all sites. Entering 'London' or the first letters of the station name (Paddington in the following examples) almost always produced the required result. There was one unusual anomaly however in that one of the sites failed to recognise station names which needed to be preceded by 'London'.

Figure 4
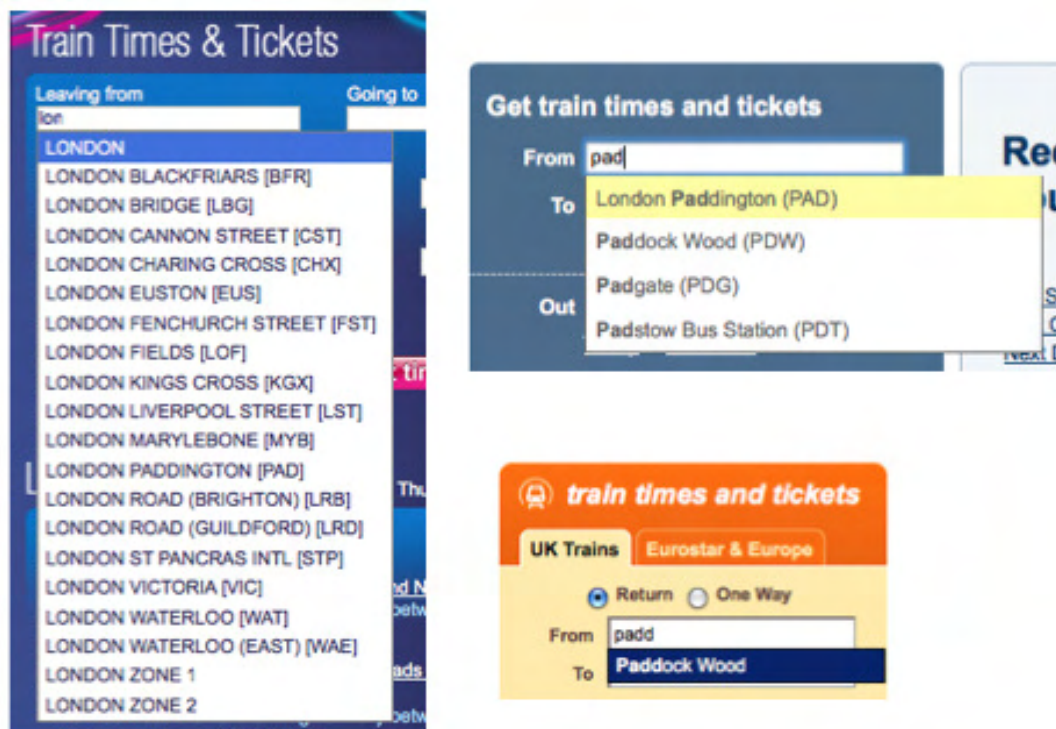
"The only problem is I don't know which London station trains to Exeter leave from. I could easily Google it but that information should be available on the website"
[Female, Low Confidence]

Going To

This was occasionally identified as a minor problem for certain destinations. However, predictive input again meant that respondents did not experience problems with the research scenarios, although some sites were more helpful than others in this respect, especially when multiple station options were offered for certain destinations.

In the first example in Figure 5, 'Exeter' was assumed to cover all stations in Exeter although this was unclear. In the second example, 'All Stations' helps to minimise the risk of confusion and passengers assumed that the option appropriate to the departure station would be selected. The provision of the additional layer of information shown in the third example was universally welcomed as helping to make more informed choices when travelling to an unfamiliar destination.

Figure 5
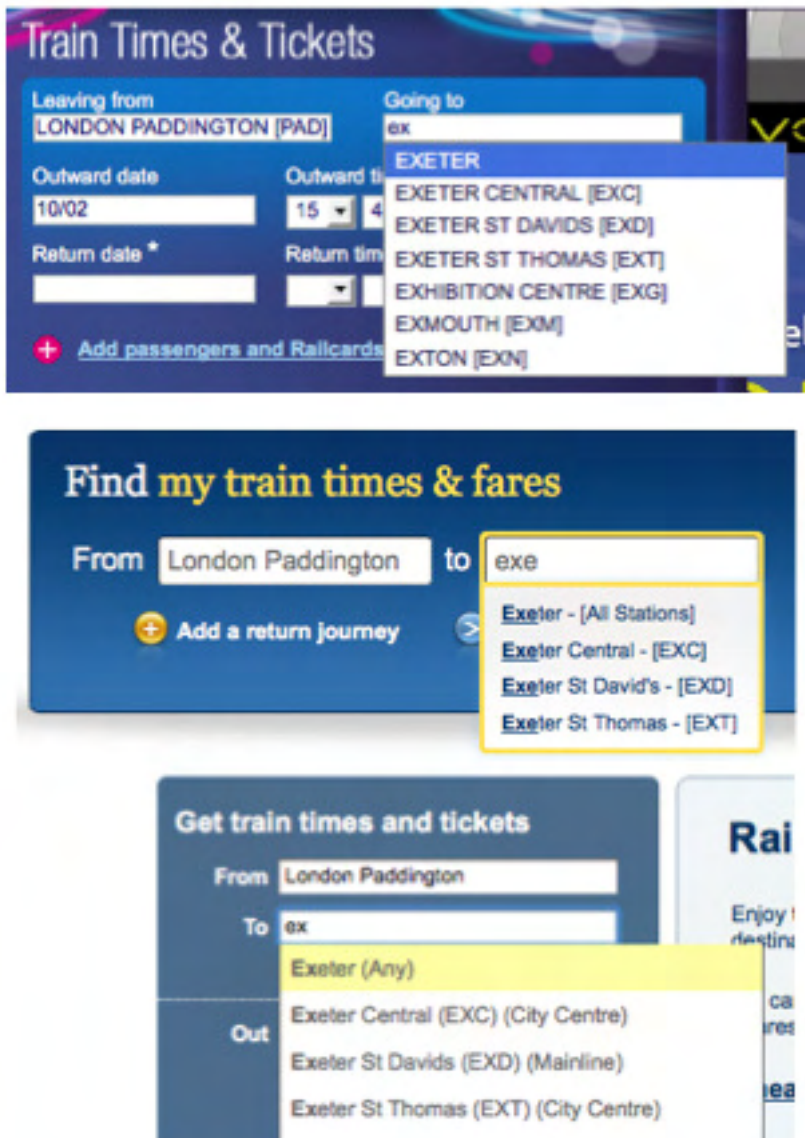
Date of Travel

Providing this as a calendar tended to be preferred, although simplicity benefits could be negated in some instances by confusing navigational features, as explained below:

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Figure 6

The dropdown menu (left) is acceptable and a familiar navigational tool, but can require some thought – especially if today's date is not front of mind. It was not always obvious that a calendar is available as an option in this example because it is not clearly labelled.

A calendar display (centre) was usually felt to be more visually helpful and intuitive, and highlighting 'today' can help users to select the required date of travel. However, in the example shown, the functions of the single and double arrows were not always clear and caused some confusion.

"I'm dyslexic and I struggle a bit with dates so having a calendar is easier for me to work out when I want to travel, rather than having a dropdown"
[Male, High Confidence]

During one of the interviews, the example on the right highlighted tomorrow (Friday 11th) rather than today (Thursday 10th) which was thought to be illogical and caused a problem for the dyslexic respondent who experienced this.

Time of Travel

This emerged as a consistent area of difficulty across the sample and journey scenarios tested. The problem is that journey planning often assumes that the length of the journey will be known in advance, which was not always the case during the research. Inclusion of the 'Arrive Before' function is helpful in this respect but many passengers often don't discover it, causing them to guess journey times and often prolong the transaction as a result.

In the examples in Figure 7, the use of colour contrasting and double arrows are more likely to encourage clicking to reveal this option and navigational shortcuts

(such as 'tomorrow' and 'same day' were welcomed for simplification purposes. Inclusion of first and last train options was also occasionally felt to be helpful.

Figure 7
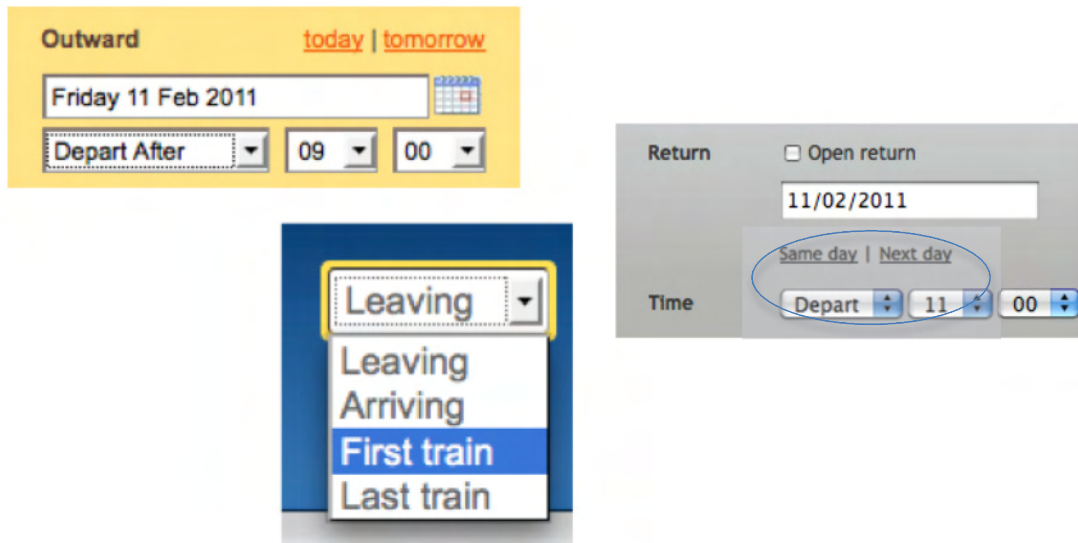
"I don't know how long the train takes from London to Doncaster. They should make it more obvious that 'Arrive Before' is an option"
[Female, Low Confidence]

Journey / Ticket Type

This part of the ticket purchase process highlighted that those sites giving the option to select an Open Return (or leave blank for an Open return) were confusing to some passengers. This was partly because people did not understand the term 'Open', in particular that the flexibility it offered may come at a very high price.

Figure 8

outlook
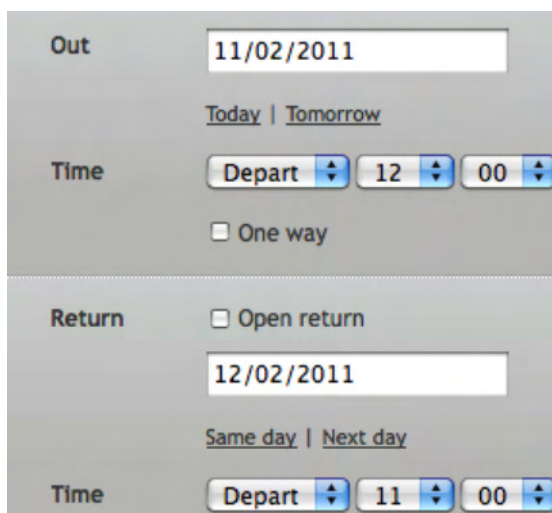
In Figure 9, the invitation to leave the return date blank does not promote an 'open return', but also fails to indicate the associated cost disadvantages if it is selected.

"This is giving me the option to put in details of the return journey but I'm going to choose an open return because I expect that might be cheaper"
[Male, Medium Confidence]

Figure 9

Figure 10 highlights that an open return will not be the cheapest option, for those who are unaware.

Figure 10

The key finding from this stage of the transaction process is that passengers do not always understand references to 'open returns', in particular its potential price implication. The research suggests that some passengers are likely to be paying more than they otherwise would because of how this is communicated.

Adding Passengers and Railcards

Although it was always obvious to respondents how to add passengers and railcards, some sites were felt to provide greater clarity than others in both respects.

Many were unsure about the age at which a child fare applies, so being explicit about this will remove doubt. Having additional information about railcards was felt to be more helpful than when no guidance was provided and helps to avoid the possibility of purchasing an incorrect ticket. The example on the left in Figure 11 was therefore considered to be more helpful in both respects.

Figure 11
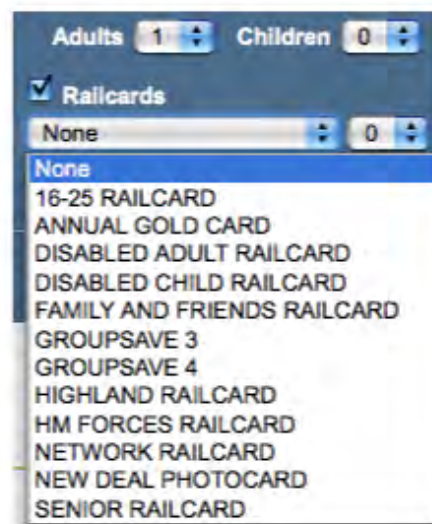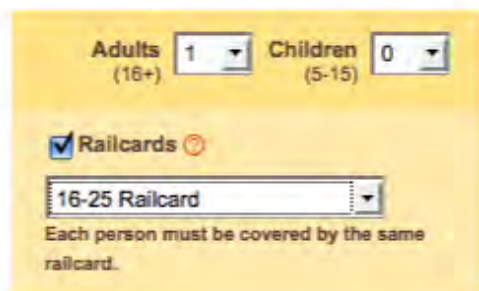
"It doesn't tell me what age an adult or child is so I would either have to Google it or push my luck and assume that a 17 and 15 year old would both be regarded as children"
[Male, High Confidence]

Other Details

Selecting the class of travel was generally felt to be a straightforward choice that was assumed to be likely to make ticket selection simpler at a subsequent stage in the transaction. However, some noticed that doing so may remove the otherwise unconsidered option of First Class tickets at a similar price or cheaper than Standard class.

There were mixed views about including journey route options at this stage. Some considered it to be helpful to highlight alternatives available in order to refine and simplify the ticket selection process. Less confident users were more likely to find this an off-putting additional layer of complexity that was not welcome at this point in the process. On balance, the overall feeling was that selecting the class of travel and route at a later stage may offer greater flexibility and cost benefits when purchasing online.

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There was further evidence to suggest that attempts to add clarity may be more likely to result in confusion for some passengers. The graphic in Figure 13, displayed as the initial result of inputting journey details, was felt to provide an interesting focal point for users of this site.

Figure 13

This was considered to provide visual differentiation from all other sites included in the research and tended to create positive initial impressions on the basis of adopting an innovative approach to the way in which this information was displayed. However, many were less enthusiastic at a considered level since the information was felt to be difficult to interpret. In the example shown, respondents were unclear about what would happen at 11.34 and 12.35 on the 10.01 departure from Derby to Poole.

"I was attracted to this because it's a nice layout and it looked easy to read but I'm not sure that I understand what it is telling me about these trains"

[Male, Medium Confidence]

3.2.3 Train Times and Tickets

This section of the report attempts to pull together some of the themes that were identified as important in the context of facilitating the decision-making and purchasing processes for consumers. Since the research did not set out to rank the ticket retailing sites, any examples used here are for illustrative purposes only. Indeed, respondents' preferences among the sites used in the research were highly subjective and it would therefore not be possible to draw conclusions about best or worst performers in this respect. An incidental finding from this exercise was that what works well for one person will not necessarily be appreciated to the same extent by another and access to choice and variety is therefore welcomed by consumers.

Fares not shown immediately

Most respondents were expecting to see times and fares displayed together at this stage, one without the other, as shown in Figure 14, was not felt to be helpful.

Figure 14

Although details of the journey length and changes required were generally welcomed, the majority expected to see fares and to begin to engage with them at this stage. This was exacerbated by the fact that the hover or click options were not always obvious (especially for the least confident) and an expectation that an action of some kind is required.

"I was expecting to see some prices at this stage so it's not clear what I am supposed to do now. It's unnecessary to repeat all this again but there's no benefit in having just this"
[Female, Low Confidence]

However the example in Figure 15 was felt to be more useful.

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Figure 15

Positioning the information as a timetable helps to manage expectations and additionally offers the facility to change journey details if they are incorrect. The clear explanation and instructions regarding the next stage were welcomed.

Although this was felt to be more visually interesting than the examples in figure 14, the common feeling was that this stage was unnecessary.

It would appear that moving straight to a combined timetable and fares page is preferable.

Clarity of Presentation

On balance, this was an issue that tended to cause difficulties for respondents and was more likely to hinder than facilitate the ticket purchasing process.

The example in Figure 16 was generally regarded as being user-friendly in terms of the way in which information was presented on this screen. The indication of cheapest fares was welcomed as was the clear layout of the alternative fare options. Highlighting of the different fare names invites the user to click for further details if required and it was felt to be obvious from the display which tickets are available or not.

Figure 16

*"I think this layout is much clearer and easier to use when all the options and prices
are together, rather than having to select them as two stages "*
[Female, Low Confidence]

The general level of comfort observed with this information being presented in tabular
format came from latent perceptions among respondents of this being the industry
'standard', probably as a consequence of a high penetration of Trainline users in the
sample and that 'white label' versions of the Trainline site are used by several TOCs.

A widely-used device intended to enhance the clarity of information provided on
many sites was often overlooked by respondents. As a result of hovering or clicking
in certain areas, information boxes would 'pop-up' to provide details about ticket
validity and refunds that respondents found useful in the context of facilitating
decision making (see section 3.2.4.).

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Some felt that the presentation of the information in Figure 17 was less visually attractive, creating a first impression of information overload and lacking an obvious focal point. At a secondary level, the relationship between the timetables and ticket options was not always obvious since the tendency was to read across the screen rather than down. The 'noughts and crosses' presentation style of the fares was felt to be complex and confusing, with no key provided for explanation.

Figure 17

Figure 18 shows an example of a screen that was identified as being visually different to other ticket retailing sites in terms of the way in which this information is presented. Some familiarisation time was therefore occasionally required before respondents engaged with it and the subsequent results were mixed.

Figure 18

Most were able to work out what was required and all details and information was provided to help with the ticket selection process. However, the style of this presentation was not felt to be intuitive and was noticed to be inconsistent with the way in which timetables had been laid out on the preceding screen. Some felt that there was a lot of information to absorb, exacerbated by the fact that the colours were felt to lack strong standout.

"I haven't used this for a while but it's not how I remember it. Everything is a bit small and grey and it looks as if it has been designed to ensure you can't get a good deal"
[Female, Mid Confidence]

Ease of Navigation

Navigation issues tended to be framed in the specific context of the ease with which respondents were able to identify and select appropriate tickets for the journey scenarios they were presented with since this was the primary focus of the accompanied surf interview. This was an area in which even the most confident users experienced some difficulty across all sites represented in the research.

outlook

The screen shown in Figure 19 was often felt to be confusing and difficult to navigate by those who experienced it during the course of this research. The common inclination was to select from the services menu first and then it was not always clear what was required as the next step. The lack of directions or instructions to select from the fares section caused frustration for respondents who were then unable to progress. There was some feeling that a clearer indication that this screen is a two-stage selection process is required, since the current layout can feel counter-intuitive to those who select a service before the fare.

Figure 19

"I've chosen the train I want to travel on but how do I select the return one? I don't understand what I'm supposed to do next so I would be confused at this point"
[Female, Low Confidence]

The fare selection process was often uncomfortable for consumers who were sometimes bemused by the choice available to them. This was felt to be complicated further by offering single and return options and many failed to understand the various price points and therefore felt they had no way of knowing which fare to select.

The site illustrated in Figure 20 was generally considered to be effective overall, but confusing navigation meant that users often failed to appreciate its benefits.

The initial problem is that the clear instruction at the top of the following screen tended to be overlooked. At a secondary level, many were then put off by the visual distraction that resulted from any cursor movement.

outlook

"Even though I read the instruction at the top I'm still not clear what I have to do. I clicked on the train I wanted but didn't realise I needed to choose a price to move on to the next stage"
[Male, Medium Confidence]

Figure 20

Many users were then inclined to select the outward train service as a natural first stage of the process, although then occasionally overlooked the need to select the return leg. In spite of the fact that the instruction panel indicates the need to then choose the fare, this can feel uncomfortable as the second stage of the process.

"This is nowhere near as helpful as the other site because I don't know how to progress now I have chosen the train time and there is no information to help me"
[Male, Medium Confidence]

Even sites that attempted to provide more overt navigational aids did not necessarily perform any better as visual cues tended to be overlooked or misunderstood by respondents.

Although the presentation of information shown in Figure 16 (and others using this format) was felt to be clear, the navigational elements were thought to be less intuitive. There was a frequent tendency to overlook the Out and Return leg columns and there was some uncertainty about whether the facility to book return tickets

rather than two singles was also available. Some also felt that the fare structure was complicated on occasions when a choice of tickets was available within the same category name.

A further illustration of this is shown in Figure 21. Initial impressions were often positive on the basis of this visual display but some passengers had problems with this format, since it was not always obvious that separate pages were required for the out and return journeys. Some respondents were also confused about why semi-flexible fares were cheaper than non-flexible ones and the display of a £0.65 fare created credibility issues with this site.

"I've never heard of Quno and I don't feel comfortable with it because the fare for 65 pence would make me sceptical so I would have quit long before we did in this exercise"
[Male, High Confidence]

Figure 21

Route and TOC Options

In the context of this research, respondents responded positively to a perceptually unique feature of the site represented in Figure 21. Most were surprised to see the different TOC options for the journey requested, which were felt to be clearly presented in a tabular format with slower services indicated and explained.

"I have never seen a site that shows details of the different companies that operate the same route so this would make me think that Quno is a price comparison site"
[Male, High Confidence]

## 3.2.4 Validity and Confidence

Overview

The ability to check the validity of tickets online emerged as a key channel benefit, especially when contrasted against the difficulties experienced in this respect in recent research conducted for Passenger Focus on Ticket Vending Machines.

Validity concerns are allayed online because it is assumed that a particular fare will not show against a train on which it is not valid, and that it is possible to navigate away from the retailing site to check if necessary. Sources of site-specific reassurance can be summarised in the following sections.

Embedded Explanations

Clearly indicating Advance, Off-Peak and Anytime tickets was welcomed but not felt to go far enough to help consumers make informed decisions and ticket choices.

Figure 22
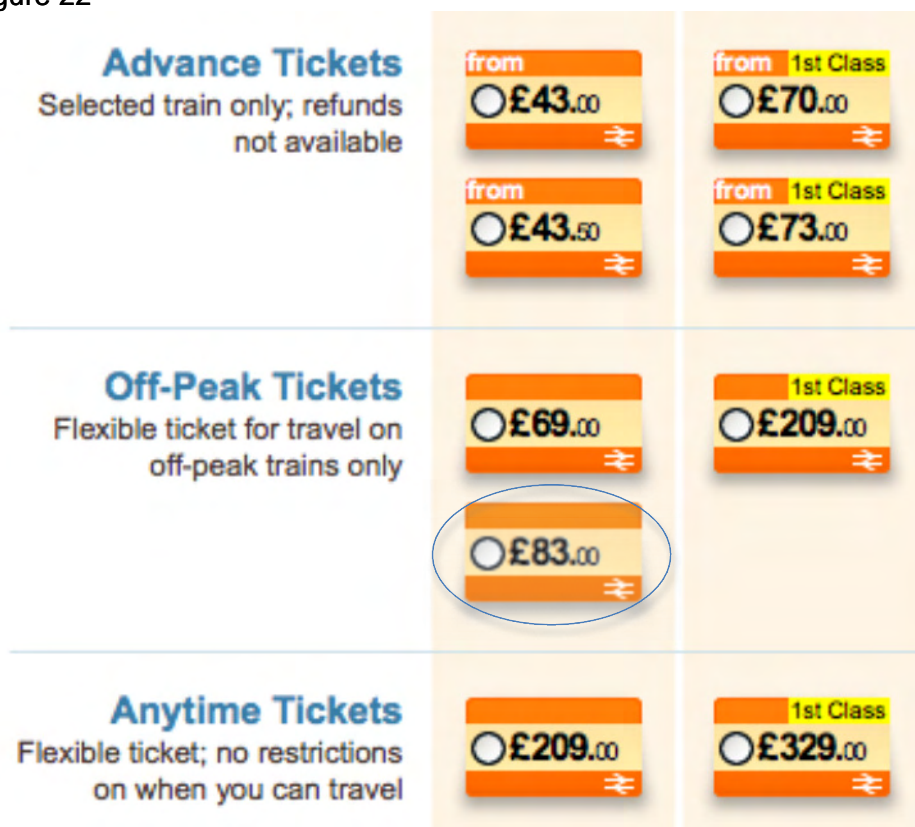
Consumers were receptive to sites that provided details of ticket types and information relating to validity and refund status, as illustrated in Figure 22.

However, some were confused by the lack of differentiation between Off-Peak and Super Off-Peak that would have helped to explain the reason why two Off-Peak tickets at different prices were being offered at this stage.

"I don't really know what Off-Peak Return means so I would need to know more about that before I make a decision"
[Male, Medium Confidence]

Information Boxes

In Figure 23, hovering over the ticket icons brings up an information box (black text) with additional details relevant to that ticket type. While welcomed in principle, some consumers felt that this type of information was not explicit enough. For example, it was not always clear that the highlighted train times (circled) were all Off-Peak or which trains go via Taunton. Providing a link to explain this would be welcomed on the grounds that it would remove the need for the user to have to navigate away from the site to access this important information.

Figure 23
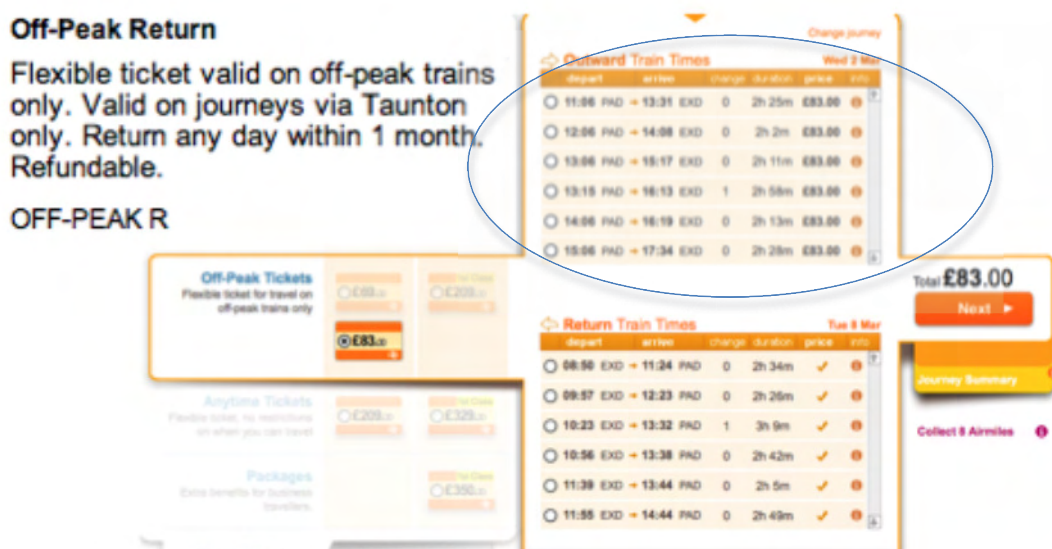
The overall feeling therefore was that information boxes need to provide the site user with (access to) additional information or direct them to the information button located at relevant points within the site

In Figure 24 (from the same site), the Super Off-Peak distinction was not readily apparent, especially since the 'removal' of the 15.06 outward service is not flagged clearly enough for this to be obvious.

Figure 24

Off-Peak Return

Flexible ticket valid on off-peak trains only. Valid on journeys via Taunton only. Return any day within 1 month. Refundable.

SUPER OFFPEAK R

Most felt that it would be beneficial in the context of the ticket purchasing process to make this more apparent. This is achieved in Figure 25 through the clear description of the ticket type and the circles that indicate which tickets are valid on each train.

Figure 25

outlook

Journey Summary Details

The research demonstrated that this screen represents an ideal opportunity to provide reassurances about validity that is not currently being maximised by any of the sites examined.

Figure 26

Since most sites provide a summary of details for users to review prior to purchase, consumers expected the details to be clear about ticket validity, exclusions, permitted routes etc. especially when a page was dedicated to this purpose.

Figure 27

In Figure 27, consumers were unsure why more information was provided by clicking on the ticket type selected but it was not possible to obtain an explanation of the route in the same way.

Figure 28 was generally felt to be a more helpful example although still not clear enough about exclusions. It also illustrates a further problem faced by passengers in this respect regarding the use of industry terminology, for example some were uncertain about the meaning of 'and other TOC connecting services'.

Figure 28

"I like to be given the opportunity to check all the details before I go on to confirm and buy because it's easy to make a mistake, especially if it's a journey you don't usually make"
[Male, Low Confidence]

"I noticed something that said 'any valid train' which sounds good but I would need to look at the Terms and Conditions to find out what it means so at that point I would give up"
[Male, Medium Confidence]

outlook

Confidence to Purchase

One of the key findings of this research is that respondents often claimed to have high levels of confidence to purchase tickets online due to a combination of cost-related reassurances that can be summarised as follows:

1. Site Perceptions

Related to the fact that TOC sites were often expected to provide the best deals for that company's tickets and that other sites may act as aggregators, which are associated with best value in other markets.

2. Ease of Comparison

During the accompanied surf exercises, respondents often spontaneously checked numerous websites to provide a direct comparison of the fare for the journey scenarios they were given.

3. Booking in Advance

Buying online was almost always associated with booking some time in advance which was usually believed to be cheaper than buying a ticket on the day of travel (although there was no accurate awareness of the differential between the most expensive Advance fare and the walk-up fare).

4. Best Fare Finder

The fact that many sites offer this or a similar facility was felt to provide some degree of cost reassurance, even if the ticket types that this applied to were not applicable to the journey scenarios.

5. Cheapest Fare

Respondents were often reassured by sites that indicated the cheapest fare or ticket combination in response to the journey details input.

6. Cost Savings

When displaying the ticket price, some sites indicated the amount that would be saved on the walk-up fare by purchasing the ticket online, which some felt to be reassuring if the cost of the journey was not known.

However, in spite of these reassurances, it was apparent from the research that confidence to purchase online can be undermined at a number of levels. First, price variations across different sites may cause uncertainty about whether a cheaper fare could be obtained elsewhere. Second, passengers who through misunderstanding of the fares system search each site they visit in the same way, will have their misunderstanding confirmed rather than exposed (e.g. if an open return is requested each time, as happened in one of the interviews, one may assume that the Anytime fare always offered is the cheapest available). Finally, sites do not confirm that the best fare has been obtained or indicate whether a cheaper ticket may be available to allay the concerns of less confident users.

"I thought £110.70 seemed expensive at first but I have checked the price of an open
return on three different sites and it was the same price on all of them so that would
make me feel confident that there is not a cheaper way"
[Male, Medium Confidence]

The overall conclusion to draw from this is that the sense of confidence that some
have when buying tickets online may be misplaced since it depends on high levels of
familiarity with the rail industry and retailing sites that many will not have. For
example journeys from London to Exeter, London to Birmingham and London to
Doncaster have more than one route to choose from. Respondents were generally
unaware of the alternative route options available and therefore failed to compare the
costs when attempting to find the cheapest ticket.

Respondents also failed to consider the cost of two singles against a return. For the
London to Newcastle journey scenario respondents were not always aware that a
Return would be valid on any train at the weekend or that this ticket would be
cheaper than Advance singles in each direction.

At a more idiosyncratic level, none were aware of Virgin's online offer where a single
ticket was half the cost of the basic Off-Peak return on Virgin Trains. Whereas if you
were to purchase a single ticket from any other website or retail outlet it would be £1
cheaper than the return ticket. For example, when buying an off-peak ticket from
London to Manchester it will show the traditional prices: £70 return and £69 single.
However, if you were to buy from Virgin's website you would be offered £35 each
way and £70 return tickets. The discounted fare is available only through Virgin or
Trainline's website.

Finally no respondent was able to work out how to purchase monthly season tickets
on any of the sites.

"I would buy my season ticket online if I could to avoid queues when the station is
busy, especially early in the morning"
[Female, High Confidence]

outlook

3.2.5 Transaction Completion

Travel Options

Figure 29

The option to reserve seats was welcomed and often considered to be essential, and passengers wanted this stage in the process to be as clear as possible rather than recessive to avoid the possibility of it being overlooked. Selecting seating preferences was often recognised as an advantage of booking tickets online and maximum choice and flexibility in this respect was universally welcomed, although none expected to have to pay for this facility.

Other travel-related options were felt to be easily accommodated within the online booking process as optional extras. Respondents were often unaware of Travel Insurance being offered from past experience or during the accompanied surfs. Most considered this to be a potentially useful facility although there was minimal active interest expressed among this sample.

Figure 30

Although PlusBus was felt to be a visible part of the online transaction, no respondents claimed to have previous experience of using it. A few recognised the potential value of this facility and suggested that it could also be offered as an option earlier in the process.

Registration

Figure 31

The need to register with a site before making a purchase was acknowledged as standard but the choices offered in Figure 31 were considered to be an interesting alternative. The invitation to create an account was expected and acceptable in the event of needing to return to the site in future, although some expressed reservations

about doing so if the site was unfamiliar. In these instances, the Quick Purchase option was welcomed to allay data storage concerns, rather than to complete the transactions more quickly.

Payment

The payment options offered by the various sites were as expected. A range of payment options was considered to be essential (especially if a fee is charged for some payment methods) and some want the facility to store details for easier future reference. Some symbols can provide additional reassurance, even in cases when users have low knowledge of the actual meaning or purpose.

Figure 32

3.2.6 Additional Information

Respondents felt that there should be no excuse for not providing (access to) comprehensive travel related information when buying tickets online.

Routes

Route information within sites was felt to be inadequate and users often claimed to need to navigate away from site to find this, so felt that the ability to check which routes a particular ticket could be used on as part of the purchase process is required. In some instances this problem was made worse because pre-purchase summary pages would include a routing reference (e.g. valid on journeys via Taunton only), causing passengers to question whether the trains they had selected were or weren't going via a particular route.

Timetables

Timetables were usually not felt to be essential when booking tickets since sites provide times relevant to the search details provided. However, some expected that a link to timetables could be useful, especially if the facility was provided to cross-reference this with validity information.

"You don't really need a timetable because all sites show the times of trains and
that's as much as you need"
[Male, Medium Confidence]

Disruption

There was universal consensus that it would be essential to know about planned service disruption when booking tickets in advance. Respondents expected to be told if selected services would be affected and so provide them with the opportunity to change trains or plans at this stage. Although no examples of this were experienced during the research, respondents assumed that it would be easy to incorporate frequently updated information into the online booking process.

"I think National Rail Enquiries do that which is good. It should be automatic when
you book a ticket online because you would want to know that instantly"
[Male, Medium Confidence]

Fees

The general feeling among consumers was that fees are acceptable only when they are the price to be paid for guaranteeing that the best deal has been achieved and are fully transparent.

Principle

The obvious preference expressed was to not pay booking fees, although a nominal amount was tolerable to achieve the price advantage that booking online was expected to deliver. Those who objected in principle claimed to be unlikely to shop around to avoid a £1 fee, but would not tolerate fees at the level charged by ticket agents or budget airlines.

"I resent paying a booking fee for anything when there is no human intervention and
the ticket isn't being posted so what are you paying for?"
[Male, Medium Confidence]

"It should be clear upfront whether you will be charged a fee for anything because
then you can decide whether to use that site or go to another one"
[Male, High Confidence]

Card Surcharge

Many failed to understand the principle of charging to use a card and others understood and objected to it. However, many could tolerate a credit card surcharge as long as a free debit card option was provided.

Ticket On Departure

There was strong resistance to the idea of paying to collect tickets from a TVM which respondents were generally unable to justify as convenience benefit, especially since no TOC administration is involved. Indeed, most thought that it would be in TOCs' interests to encourage this rather than provide a disincentive.

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Ticket Collection and Delivery

Multiple options are expected in this respect, especially as these are becoming more familiar in other contexts.

TVM

This was a familiar collection option to respondents who favoured it on the basis of positive past experiences. Collection at the outbound station was usually considered to be most convenient and most were unaware of the facility to nominate other stations, although increased flexibility in this respect was considered to be an obvious advantage.

"I assume you can only collect the tickets from the station you are leaving from. It would be better if you could get them from your local station to avoid any problems on the day"
[Female, Medium Confidence]

e-ticket

E-tickets were often spontaneously requested as they are becoming increasingly familiar, especially on airlines. Convenience benefits were widely acknowledged and having a tangible printout was felt to provide reassurance. However, it should be noted that this option was felt not to be suitable for a small minority of respondents.

"I would prefer to have the ticket in my hand to avoid queues and hassle on the day of travel. Ideally I would prefer a ticketless system like some of the airlines have now"
[Male, Medium Confidence]

m-ticket

Some felt that tickets on mobile phones is becoming more acceptable in principle, but many considered this to be less reassuring than having a paper alternative in one format or another. Most claimed to have insufficient trust in what they still considered to be new technology.

"I would prefer to get the ticket as a text on my mobile because I would be less likely to lose it than a printed one"
[Male, High Confidence]

"It would be okay but I wouldn't be as comfortable as I would with a physical ticket. I would be worried that I would delete it by mistake"
[Male, Medium Confidence]

4. Appendix A – Discussion Guide

Website Usability Discussion Guide
(45 minute semi-structured interviews)

Introduction (2 mins)
- Explanation of nature and purpose of research
- Respondent name, age, occupation
- Train journey examples (why / where / when / time of day / who with etc)

Online Confidence (3 mins)
- How much time do you spend online. What for
- Explore general web confidence and experiences
- How often do you make purchases online. If not often, why not
- What bought online (sectors / sites / products)
- Which sites are best / worst to buy from. Why
- Which sites do / don't you trust. Why
- Talk about specific sites related to transport (non-rail)

Online Rail Ticket Purchasing (3 mins)
- Which sites are you aware of. Which do you use / prefer. Why
- What are the strengths and weaknesses of sites used
- How confident are you using these sites. Why
- Why do you trust some sites and not others
- What role does branding play
- Do all sites offer same fares for all journeys
- Do you expect all sites to be impartial (including TOC sites), that is offers you the best deal, irrespective of which train company might get your business. And what do you think they are (impartial or not)?
- Do any sites have special offers / promotions
- How do you know which site is best for specific journeys
- Do you know how far in advance you can buy tickets on-line?   Are there any pitfalls if you buy too far ahead?

Ticket Purchasing Exercise (20 mins)
[All respondents will be given purchasing tasks to complete, relevant to their travel patterns and confidence level. One TOC site and one other site as a minimum to be tested from Virgin, East Coast, First Great Western, NRE, Trainline, Raileasy, Mytrainticket.co.uk, Quno*]*
[Moderator to observe and keep notes throughout process, especially any problems experienced or questions asked and how confident respondent seemed. Also note details of ticket 'purchased' including cost]

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Detailed discussion of purchase journey
- How did it compare to previous experiences / expectations
- In what way was it better / worse
- How easy / difficult was the website to use / navigate
- How intuitive was the experience. Why not
- How clear were the instructions / help available at each stage
- Would you have been confident enough to buy this ticket. Why / not
- How do you know this was the best ticket / price for you
- Compare with target price (if given) and review perceptions

- Check passengers' level of awareness of any restrictions/validity/routing that applies on their chosen ticket.
- Was this information easy to find and provided prompted/unprompted?

[Respondent to repeat purchase journey and explain all aspects in detail. Moderator to refer to observation notes to remind and prompt, as required]

Repeat Ticket Purchasing Exercise for another journey or from a different website, if time available

Transaction details (5mins)
- **Best Fare Finder** – what is this. Why used or not
- **Travel restrictions –** clarity of e.g. time of travel / peak periods
- **Multiple passengers** – whether offered, how coped with
- **Child fares** – awareness of 5-15 and ease of purchase
- **Railcard discounts / concessions** – ease of applying discount
- **Payment** –what wanted / expected. How easy / difficult

Other Issues (5 mins)
- **Length of transaction –** satisfaction especially vs. expectations
- **Information –** What do you want / expect the site to provide. Would you be interested in timetables. Details of (planned) disruption including weather
- **Fees –** What do you expect to pay for. What is reasonable to pay for (and not). Is it acceptable to pay a fee to pay by credit card but not by debit card. Would you pay a TOD fee (TVM collection)
- **Ticket collection / delivery –** What options expected. What preferred and why. Need to nominate TOD station. Would you rather collect anywhere/Print at home/receive text message on their mobile? Experiences of TOD in practice? What's good, what could be improved.
  Live departure/arrivals boards

Future Improvements (5mins)
- How did these purchases compare with past experiences / expectations
- How did the sites visited compare in terms of ease of use (especially vs. other travel sites e.g. EasyJet / Ryan Air)
- What was the best / worst aspect of each site
- What changes can be made to sites to improve the online purchasing experience
- What would make websites easier to use
- What are the benchmarks (especially in the travel sector)
- What would best practice look like (any examples in this sector)
- What information do passengers need from retailing websites (and possibly not need), and how is this best conveyed
- How can less confident users be encouraged to buy online
- How to allay concerns about buying the correct ticket (validity and price)
- Response to additional features
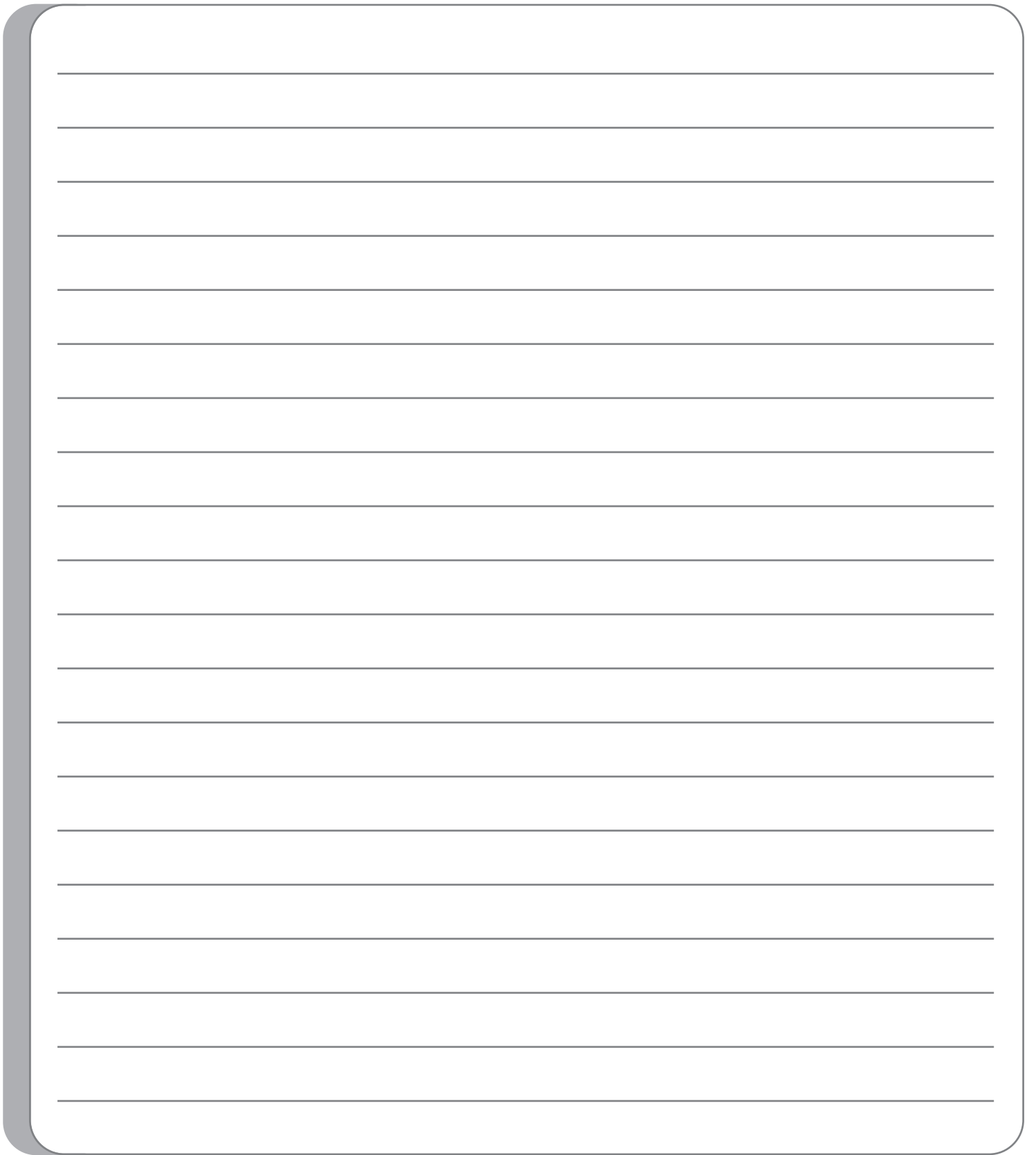
Disabled Respondents
- How easy is it to find what assistance is available online
- Can you locate the information on APRS (Assisted Passenger Reservation System)
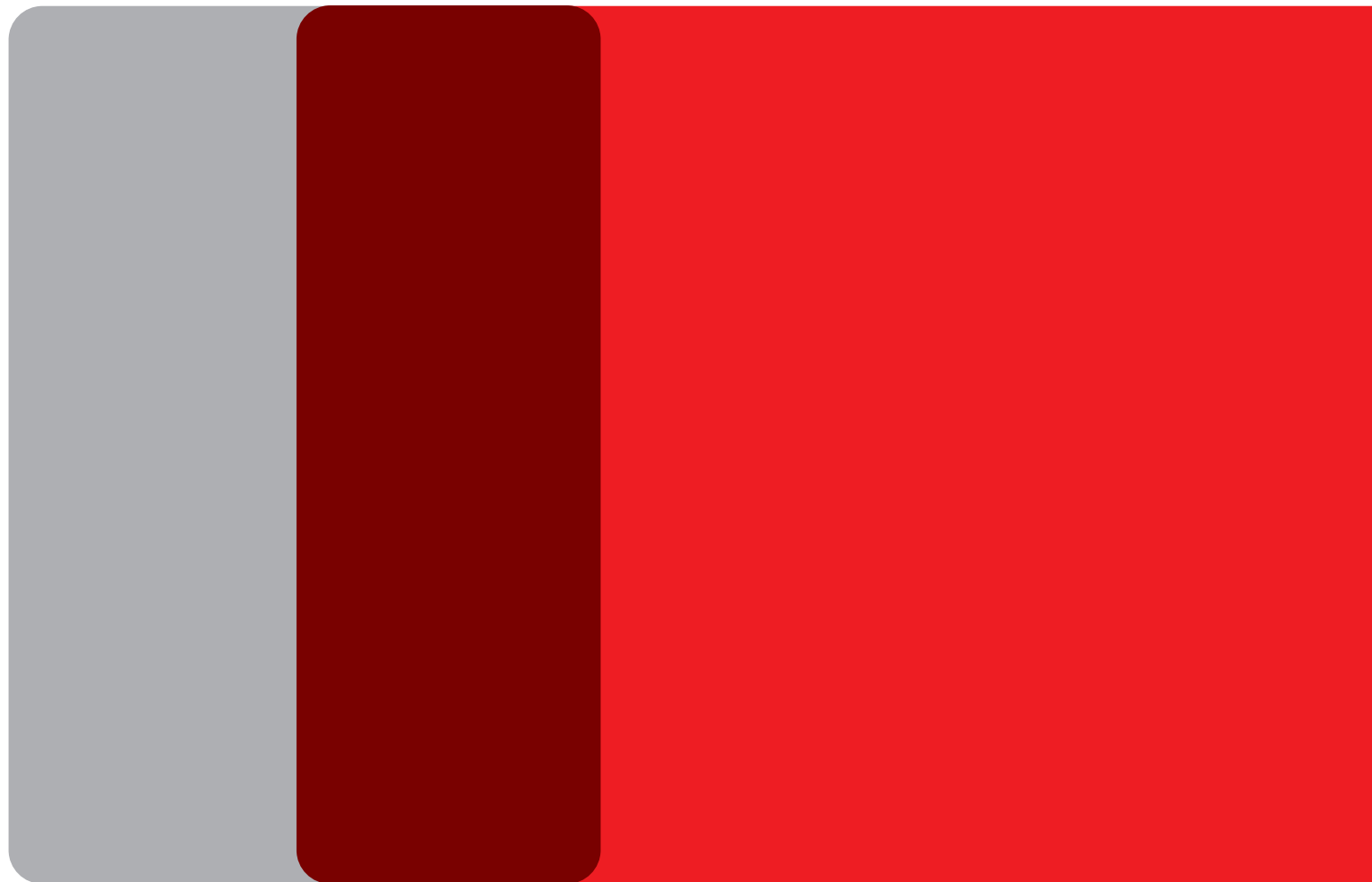
Wrap (5mins)
- Summarise attitudes to websites based on experiences / perceptions
- How have these been affected by research surfs
- What were best and worst elements of the experience
- What improvements need to be made
- Propensity to buy tickets online in future
- How does purchasing online compare with a ticket office or TVM
- What would make you buy online vs. ticket office or TVM in future
- How confident would you be to use a website in future
- Are there any guidelines for the industry to adopt
- What would represent best practice

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5. Appendix B – Journey Scenarios

One person travelling scenarios

You need to go from Derby to Poole on Tuesday 1st March 2011, to arrive before 3pm, returning from Poole the following day leaving between 12 noon and 1pm. You want to go via London in both directions. Buy the cheapest ticket.

You need to go from London to Exeter late-morning on Wednesday 2 March 2011 and return late-morning the following Tuesday, 8 March. You can be flexible about times. Price is more important to you than journey time.

You need to go from London to Exeter on Wednesday 2 March 2011 and return the following Tuesday, 8 March. You wish to leave between 1100 and 1200 (you are not precisely sure) and leave Exeter before 0900. Journey time is more important to you than price, but neither do you wish to spend more money than you need to. Your friend has told you that it might be possible to buy a ticket that - for a little bit more money - lets you use the buses in Exeter while you are there. You have decided that would be useful.

You have a 16-25 Railcard and want to make a day trip from London to Birmingham tomorrow, arriving at birmingham by 10am. You'll be returning that day but are not exactly sure when (maybe later in the afternoon). As a student, you are willing to be flexible to get the best price and you aren't fussed about how long it takes.

You want to travel from Manchester to London tomorrow (pick any weekday), leaving after 10am and returning the same day after 6pm. You can be fairly flexible to get the best price, but do need to be back in Manchester by midnight.

You want to travel from Manchester to London day after tomorrow (pick any weekday), arriving before 10am and returning the same day after 6.45 pm. You can be fairly flexible to get the best price, but do need to be back in Manchester by midnight.

You need to get from London to Doncaster by 12.30pm tomorrow (pick any weekday), returning later in the day, but not leaving before 4.45pm. You wish to travel First Class.

You want to go from London to Newcastle this coming weekend. So long as you get there by 4pm on the Saturday and return on Sunday you don't mind what time you travel.

More than one person travelling scenarios

You, your partner and child need to travel from Derby to Cardiff next Wednesday. You won't be able to leave until 9.30am, but you can't be sure when you'll get to Derby station. You are coming back the same day after 6pm, but you are not exactly sure what time you can get to Cardiff station. You already have a Friends and Family Railcard. You do not want to change trains en route.

You, your partner and children (aged 17 and 4 years) need to travel from Derby to Cardiff on Wednesday 2 March 2011. You'll be ready to leave by 9.30am and ready to return at 6pm. You do not want to change trains en route. Find out what is the best discount option available for you to make this journey.

You are 16 and want to go from Reading to Maidenhead with your 14 year old brother to see a film tomorrow. You'll be going after 9.15am, but your dad will bring you back in the car.

Season ticket scenario

You are a consultant and have just won a month's work with a firm based in Richmond. You want to buy a monthly season ticket to travel from Kettering to Richmond, Surrey.

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