



Syntagm Ltd
Design for Usability



User Experience Benchmarking US & UK Clothing e-Commerce 2010 Summary Report

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Introduction

The benefits of benchmarking

Benchmarking allows an organisation to compare the performance of its e-commerce solutions with:

- Best practice and established principles
- Other organisations
- Its own solutions, over time

Benchmarking allows organizations to gauge performance against a theoretical ideal and relative to their peers.

The advantages that benchmarking offers over more conventional usability or user experience evaluations, is that each category receives a numerical score in addition to screenshots and written observations. The numerical scores make it possible to see clearly where strengths and weaknesses lie. Improved scores can be used as targets for future development.

While there is not a direct relationship between benchmarking scores and increased sales, we would expect that significant improvements in user experience – especially during the selection and checkout processes – would result in higher conversion ratios, reduced shopping basket abandonment rates and higher sales.

About the benchmarking process

Our user experience benchmarking for e-commerce includes 67 measures split between 13 groups.

Benchmarking is based on a set of criteria that is applied consistently across a number of evaluations. Our user-experience benchmarking splits these criteria into two groups: design and usability. These encompass 67 separate measures. The design group focuses on the presentation of information, navigation and features. Usability examines how easy or difficult it is for users to achieve certain goals.

The individual measures in each group are described in the body of the report. However, this summary report does not provide site-specific scores for all measures. (See Site-Specific Reports, below, on how to obtain more detailed breakdowns.)

Design (Presentation Based)

- Content
- Visual Design
- Navigation
- Engagement
- Accessibility
- Trust
- Persuasion
- Shopping Basket
- Search

Usability (Task Based)

- Selection
- Checkout
- Order Management
- Online Support

Site-Specific Reports

Site-specific reports are available – additional sites can be benchmarked on request.

Detailed site-specific reports are available. These provide raw (percentage) and comparative scores across all 67 metrics and commentary on specific areas of strength and weakness. Site-specific reports are not limited to just the sites listed in this summary – we can benchmark other sites as required. Contact us for further details (see the final page of the report).

About Syntagm

We are a small consultancy, established in 1985, specializing in design for usability (user-centred design and user experience) as well as people development. We have worked with a wide range of clients across Europe and North America, many of whom are listed below.

Clients

Design for Usability Talks, Courses and Workshops: Alliance and Leicester, British Telecom, CADUI 2008 (Spain), CHI Conferences (USA), European Patent Office, Glaxo Smith Klyne, HCI Conferences (UK), Hewlett Packard, HM Revenue and Customs, Lockheed Martin ACC (USA), Marks and Spencers, Microsoft, Namahn (Belgium), National Archive (UK), Nations Bank (USA), Nominet, OOPSLA Conference (USA), Orange, Oxford University Press, Quba New Media, Royal Bank of Scotland, Scottish UPA, Sony Computer Entertainment Europe, Tessella Support Services, The IR Group, The Usability Lab, UK Patent Office, UK UPA, User Vision, Yell Group.

User-Centred Design, Usability and User Experience: 2d3, 3M, Alliance and Leicester, ASDA, AstraZeneca, Aviva, Axa, B & Q, Bank of England, Barclays Bank, BBC, BDO Stoy Hayward, British Energy, British Red Cross, BT, BUPA, Cadbury Schweppes, CIPD, Corus, Credit Suisse, DEFRA, DSTL, DTI, Depart of Work and Pensions, Environment Agency, ExxonMobil, GE Insurance Solutions, Hammonds, Highways Agency, HM Revenue and Customs, Inland Revenue, Invesco, Jato Dynamics, Jewsons, Kelloggs, Legal and General, Lloyd's Register, Maersk, MOD, Nationwide, Nielsen Norman Group, Network Rail, Nokia, Norwich Union, npower, O2, Office of National Statistics (UK), Open University, Orange, Ordnance Survey, Oxford Metrics Group, Prudential, Rational Software, Reuters, Rolls-Royce, Royal Mail, Scottish Enterprise, Scottish Executive, Scottish Widows, Shell, Standard Life, Symantec, Swiss Re, Tate & Lyle, The Usability Company, Transport for London, Unilever, Vodafone, Workshare.

People Development: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, Buckinghamshire County Council, East Berkshire Community Health NHS Trust, Elsevier Ltd, Environment Agency, Harcourt Education Ltd, KCI Medical, Library Association, Macmillan Education Ltd, National Association of Citizens' Advice Bureaux, Open University CDT Department, Oxford, Swindon and Gloucester Co-operative Society Ltd, Oxford Psychologists Press, Oxford Radcliffe NHS Trust, Oxford University Press, Perkin Elmer, Publishing Training Centre, Salisbury Healthcare NHS Trust, Shropshire County Council, South Oxfordshire District Council, SSAFA Forces Help, Sweet & Maxwell Group, Thames Valley Police, University of Oxford

Syntagm has worked with more than 100 organisations in over a dozen countries.

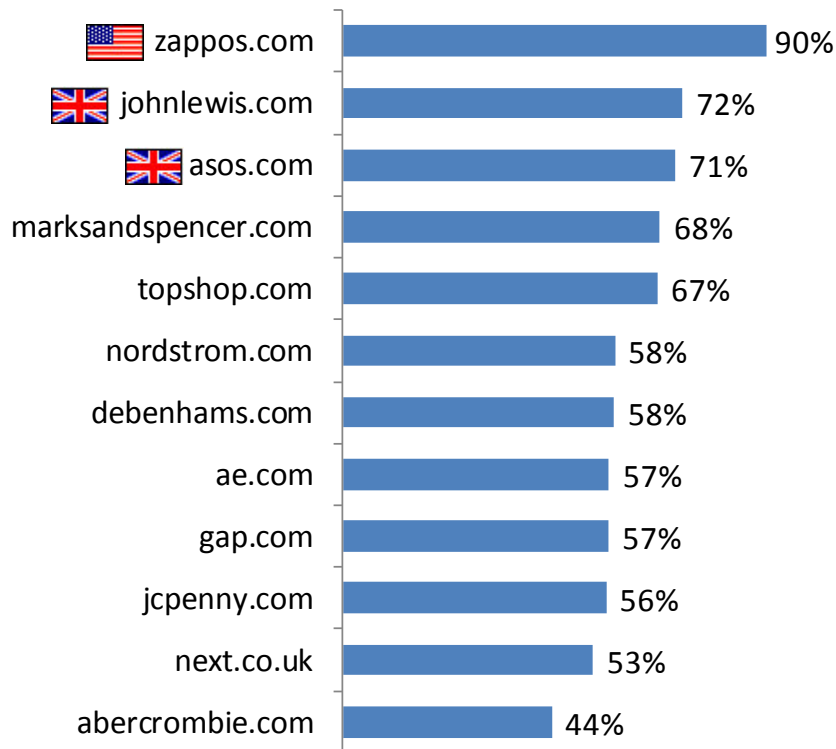
Learning Institute, Vale of White Horse District Council, Vodafone Group Services.

Disclaimer

We acknowledge that some of the words and images used in this report are registered trademarks. They remain the property of their respective owners and are used here only for descriptive purposes.

Syntagm and its staff have no financial interests in any of the organisations benchmarked.

Overall User Experience



Zappos excelled by showing a clear commitment to user experience and customer satisfaction. The site was the highest scoring in most benchmarking categories.

Overall User Experience Results

BACKGROUND

The benchmarking described in this summary report took place in late May and early June 2010. It focused on clothing e-commerce sites with high visitor traffic in the US & UK:

US

- Abercrombie & Fitch
- American Eagle
- Gap
- J C Penny
- Nordstrom
- Zappos

UK

- Asos
- Debenhams
- John Lewis
- Marks & Spencer
- Next
- Top Shop

Other sites can be added on request (contact us for details).

RESULTS

The overall scores for the clothing sector are generally good, but with considerable room for improvement for many e-tailers. Issues that are described in the pages that follow include

- little or poorly-realized **persuasion** (recently viewed, up-selling and cross-selling),
- very limited **order-management**¹ facilities,
- virtually no **online support** for dealing with problems

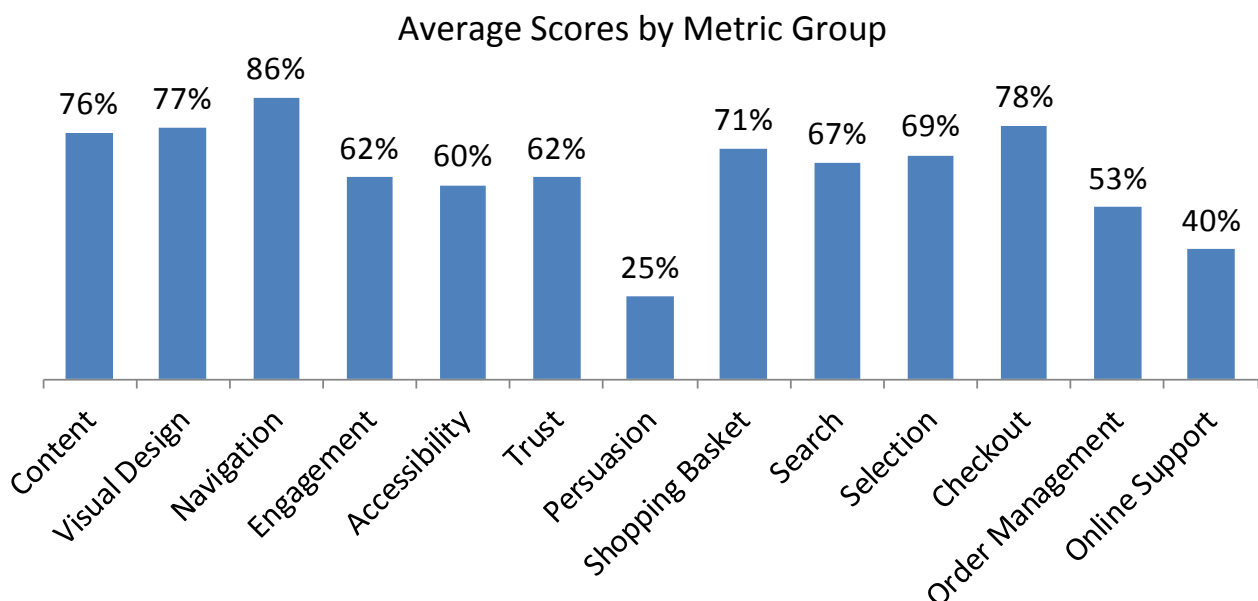
(The words **in bold** are metric groups in the body of the report. Refer to the chart below for average scores by metric group.)

US and UK sites were not substantially different in their UX performance. Both the best and worst performing sites were American (zappos.com and abercrombie.com, respectively), while second and third positions were occupied by British companies. The overall averages are US 60% and UK 65%.

Clothing sites have performed better than those benchmarked in our previous report on the UK mobile phone sector with an overall average of 63% (versus 44% for UK mobile phone sites). However, there is still plenty of room for improvement.

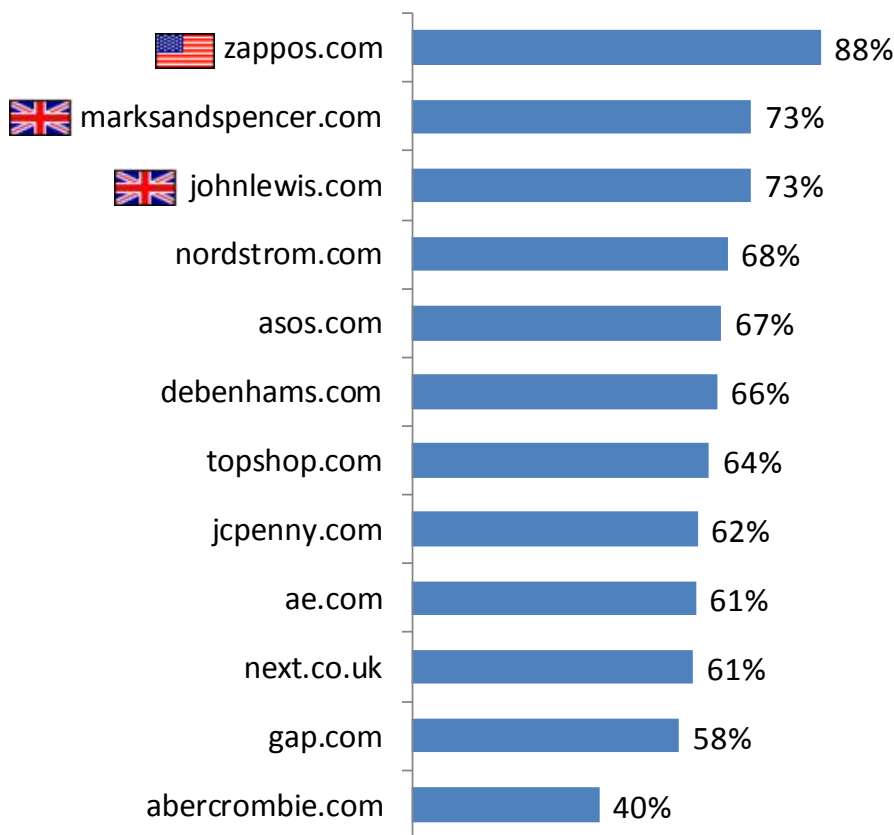
CALCULATIONS

The user experience results are obtained by taking the average of the overall design and usability scores, giving each equal importance.



¹ Referred to as 'account management' in our previous report, but calculated in the same way.

Overall Design



Zappos was the best performer in all but two areas of design – Navigation and Accessibility. Abercrombie & Fitch had the dubious honour of being at the bottom of many results lists.

Overall Design Results

The design benchmarking groups are primarily concerned with how information and navigation are presented (rather than the user journey, for example).

It consists of nine groups:

- Content
- Visual design
- Navigation
- Engagement
- Accessibility
- Trust
- Persuasion
- Shopping basket
- Search

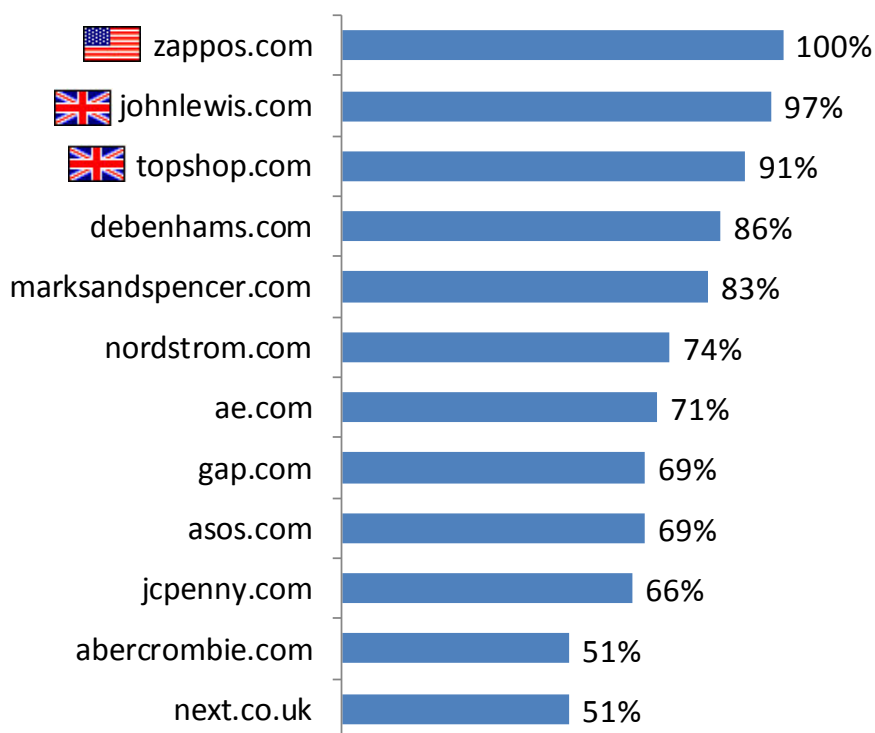
The overall design score is obtained by taking an unweighted average across the nine groups.

Design Benchmark

Content



Some sites provided very little description for products while others used terminology that only a tailor or dressmaker would understand. Zappos scored a perfect 100% by providing useful detail and a glossary of terms. In contrast, the content on the Abercrombie & Fitch and Next sites was very limited.



Content Design Results

Good quality content, well-structured and well-presented, is essential for confident purchasing decisions on e-commerce web sites. For clothing, the written content can be as important as the product images – particularly if prospective customers want a specific fabric or feature. Written content is also important to search engine optimization; if a product is going to appear in search engine results, it needs to be adequately described.

The overall score for content was 76%. The content metric consists of seven components:

- Structure
- Detail
- Meaning
- Price
- Availability
- Delivery
- Consistency

For online reading (which is *skimming* in practice), text must have a good visual **structure** – not just paragraphs of prose. Product

descriptions need to provide both adequate **detail** and also **meaning** – jargon and abbreviations must be explained.

Three sites – Zappos, Top Shop and John Lewis – received top marks for detail while Next had the lowest score (40%).

This is the full description of a shirt from the Next site. While content should be concise, it also needs to be suitable for its purpose.

Black Check Shirt

Slim fit with stitching trim detail.
100% cotton.
709-879-G86

Content for a similar item from Zappos describes the item more thoroughly (including washing instructions and tips on sizing). For any confusing terms, a glossary is provided.

PRODUCT INFORMATION:

- **HUGO Hugo Boss** tends to run small. The brand suggests ordering one size up from your normal size.
- This understated shirt is comfortably cut to ensure you look your best.
- Prominent dividing seams.
- Single button cuffs.
- Split shoulder yoke in the back.
- 95% cotton/5% elastane for a soft feel with a slight amount of stretch.
- Machine wash warm, line dry.
- Product measurements were taken using size MD. Please note that measurements may vary by size.

[VIEW ZAPPOS.COM GLOSSARY OF TERMS](#)

Find something wrong in this description?
Help us fix it! [Report An Error](#)

Many sites also received a low score for lacking meaningful content. Unexplained abbreviations were commonplace. While some sites included a glossary of terms (see the Zappos screenshot above) these were often incomplete and difficult to find. Zappos and J C Penny were the only sites to receive top scores for being informative.

This description from Nordstrom refers to plackets and variegated stripes without explanation. In our survey we found that only 21% of respondents knew what a placket was – most who did were women (this is a man's shirt.)

Tommy Bahama 'Tropic Shooter' Silk Campshirt (Nordstrom Exclusive)

★★★★★ Be the first to [write a review](#)

- Coconut-shell buttons secure the placket of a yarn-dyed silk shirt textured by variegated stripes.
- Double back pleats.
 - Chest pocket.
 - Straight hem with side slits.
 - Approx. length from shoulder: 29".
 - Silk; machine wash.
 - By Tommy Bahama; imported.
 - Men's Sportswear.
 - Exclusively ours.

Price, availability and delivery all have important contributions to make to a confident purchasing decision. While most sites scored well on price - by presenting it prominently on the first screen of a product description, near the Add to Basket button – availability and delivery were much more varied. Three of the sites benchmarked made no mention of availability at all (J C Penny, Abercrombie & Fitch and Asos) while most of those that did stated simply that a particular size was in or out of stock. However, as many web shoppers know, products with low stock can suddenly become out-of-stock during processing – as did happen during benchmarking. Some sites used a helpful approach of indicating approximate stock levels, such as the John Lewis example, below.



Fat Face Carnival Short Sleeve Shirt, Red £40

Product code: 18254700

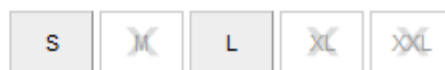
Select colour:



Select size:

☐ In Stock ☐ Low Stock ☒ Out Of Stock

John Lewis helpfully shows three stock states for each size.



Customers had to mouse-over the images to see names and prices on this abercrombie.com page. Elsewhere names and prices were always shown.

Finally, in the content metrics group, **consistency** was the high point for most sites. (Note that consistency of content, visual design and navigation are all measured separately under their respective headings.) This high performance results from a fairly uniform presentation of information across all products. The only exception was Abercrombie & Fitch, where product names and prices did not always appear in selection screens (they appeared only on mouse-over in the example below).

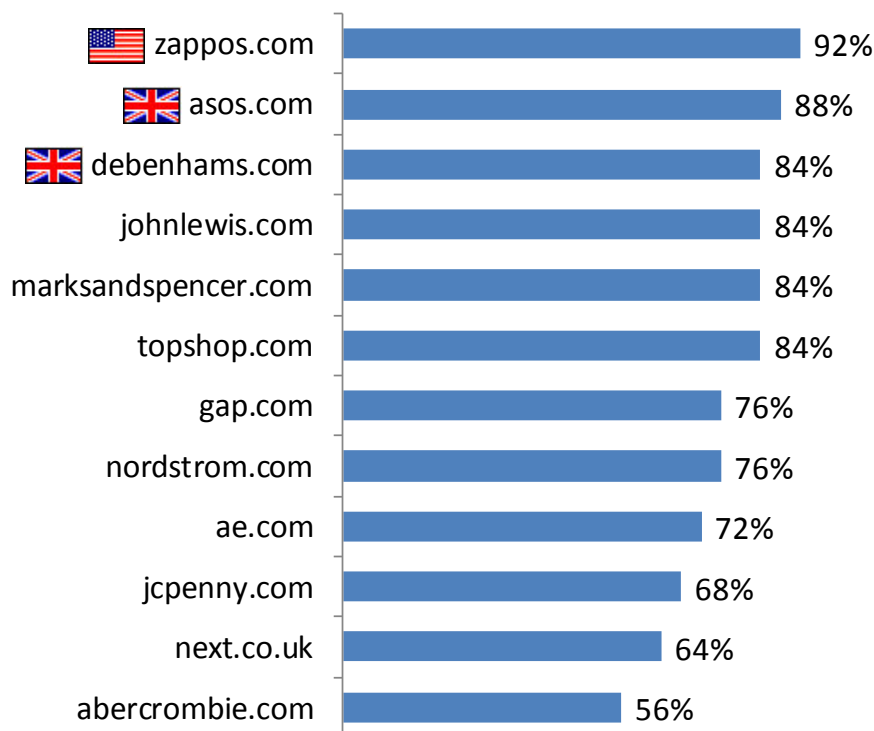


Design Benchmark

Visual Design



Visual design scores were higher than content for most sites. Abercrombie & Fitch received particularly low scores due to poor legibility.



Visual Design Results

Visual design should not only be attractive, it needs also to be functional. Poor use of screen space, product images that fail to show adequate detail, distracting animations and poor use of colour can all conspire to frustrate potential customers.

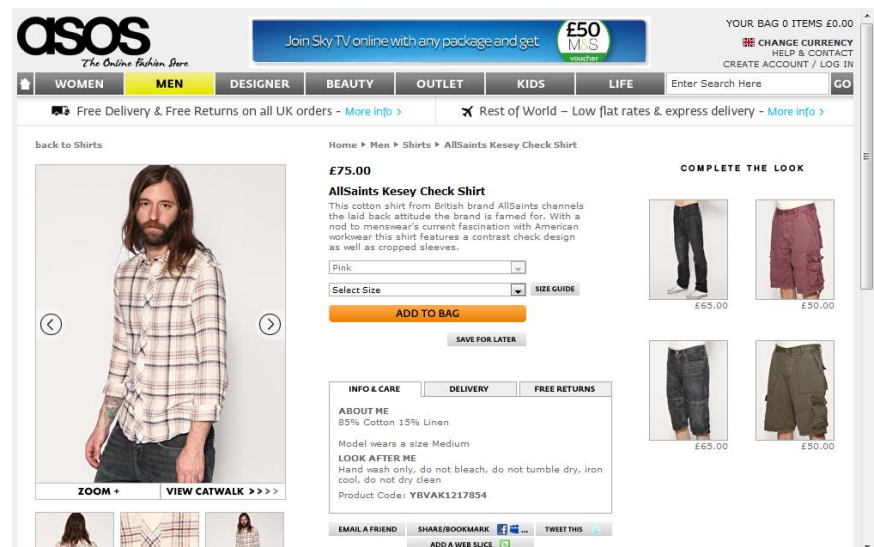
Our visual design group is made up of five measures:

- Layout
- Legibility
- Colour
- Graphics, images and animations
- Consistency

Only two sites, Zappos and Asos, received the top score for **layout** since the poor use of screen space – resulting in unnecessary scrolling – was a common problem. It is not that users cannot or will not scroll; it is that they must realize scrolling is necessary and then take the necessary actions. It is frustrating for users to have to scroll just to reach the last few lines of description, or the important Buy Now button – while still displaying large amounts of white space.

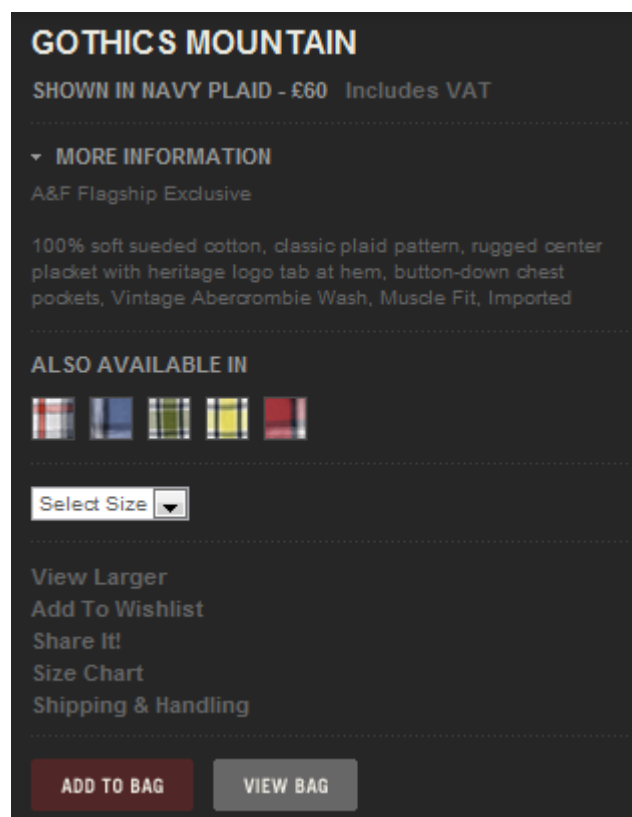
(Note that in our evaluations we use a standard screen size of 1024 x 768 pixels.)

Asos was one of only two sites to receive top marks for layout (Zappos is the other). The product price, description and ordering fields are shown on the first 1024 x 768 pixel screen.



No site received 100% for **legibility**. While this might be understandable (but not justifiable) for sites targeting younger users, more generalist e-tailers such as J C Penny, Debenhams and John Lewis all made text more difficult to read than it should be. Abercrombie & Fitch were again the worst performers with small medium-grey text on a dark-grey background, as shown in the example below.

Much of the text on abercrombie.com is hard to read, but the additional text displayed after clicking MORE INFORMATION is even smaller.



Colour needs to be used effectively. Apart from the legibility issues mentioned above, colour should be used in a meaningful way to assist

users. Common applications are in identifying headings, links or important features such as the Buy or Checkout button. No site received 100% for this metric, but around half of the sites benchmarked scored 80%.

JEAN PAUL GAULTIER A0201 6238 508 SKU: #7473815



Jean Paul GAULTIER

~~\$484.00~~
SALE!
\$244.00

Only 1 left in this size/color combination!

AVAILABLE COLOR:
GRAY

ADD TO SHOPPING CART 

In Stock and Ready to Ship!
Sold by Zappos Retail, Inc.
Shipping Options

AVAILABLE MEN'S SIZE:
41

ADD TO MY FAVORITES

AVAILABLE WIDTH:
Apparel

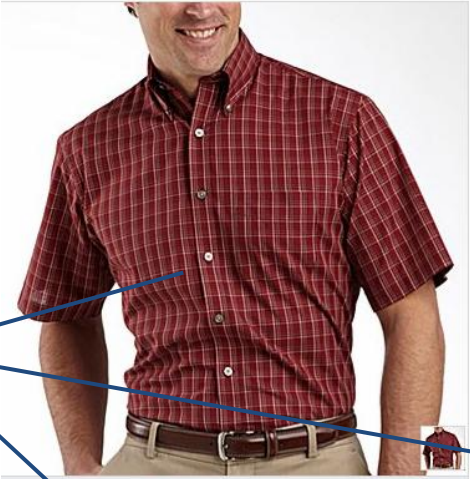
WOW! Free Overnight Shipping on Clothing!
Free Shipping Both Ways • 24/7 Customer Service [Learn More](#)

Although the orange is a little overused on this Zappos page, it is very effective at drawing attention to important elements.

Graphics, images and animations also serve multiple purposes. They aid visual engagement, but perhaps more importantly in an e-commerce site, they let users see what they are going to buy. For this purpose, the images need to provide enough detail while animations should not distract or annoy users in the purchasing process. Most sites score well on this metric, with the exception of jcpenny.com which achieved only 20% (see the screenshot below).

★ > men > casual shirts > button-front

Van Heusen® Grid Pattern Shirt



Sale \$17.99
Original \$36.00

VAN HEUSEN

When you're after classic looks and comfort, our Van Heusen grid pattern woven shirt won't let you down.






- button collar
- button front
- left pocket
- rounded bottom hem
- cotton/polyester
- washable
- imported

Medium

Black Grid

1 quantity

add to bag

While the product images on the J C Penny site offered adequate detail, the relationship between the image shown and the colours for purchase or viewing was very confusing. (In this example, red grid is shown, green grid is selected and black grid is going to be purchased.)

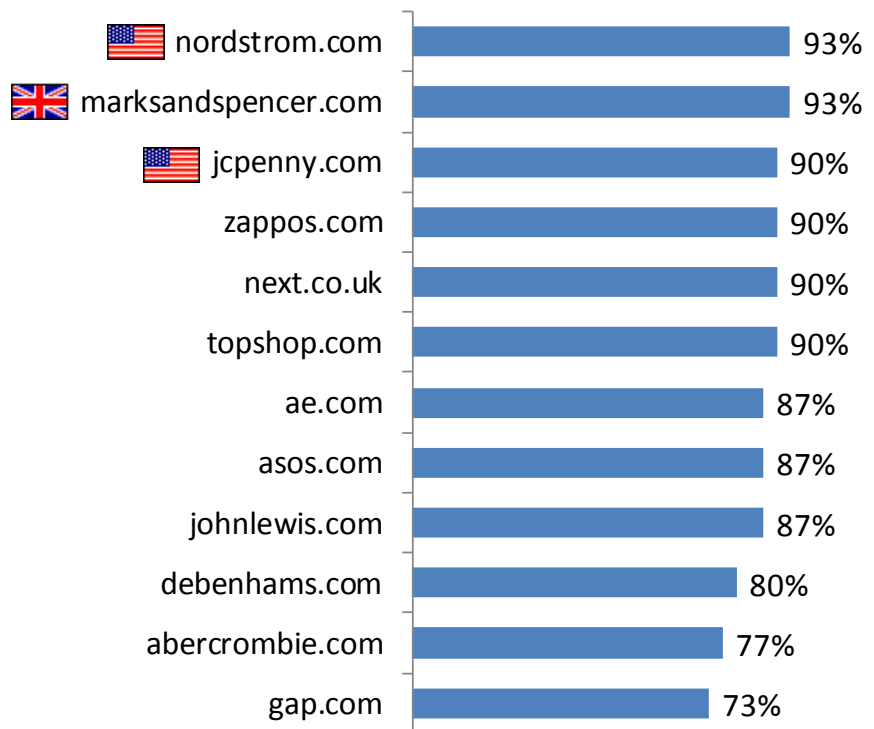
As with Content, **consistency** was also the highest scoring measure in the visual design group, with all sites scoring 100%.

Design Benchmark

Navigation

NORDSTROM

Zappos lost its top ranking in this category due to an absence of navigational feedback (breadcrumb navigation lines or similar). At the bottom of the chart, gap.com suffered from a few confusing design issues and inconsistent operation of the browser back button in some cases.



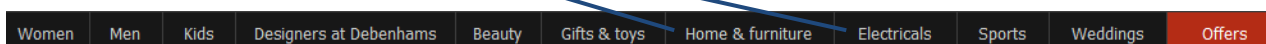
Navigation Results

Clear navigation and good navigational feedback are essential to the success of most web sites, with the possible exception of those having advanced search facilities (such as Amazon). In the Navigation group, we consider the following measures:

- Terminology
- Menus
- Page titles
- Navigational feedback
- Back button
- Consistency

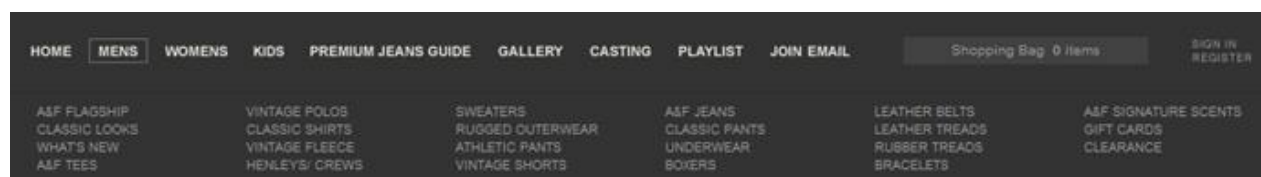
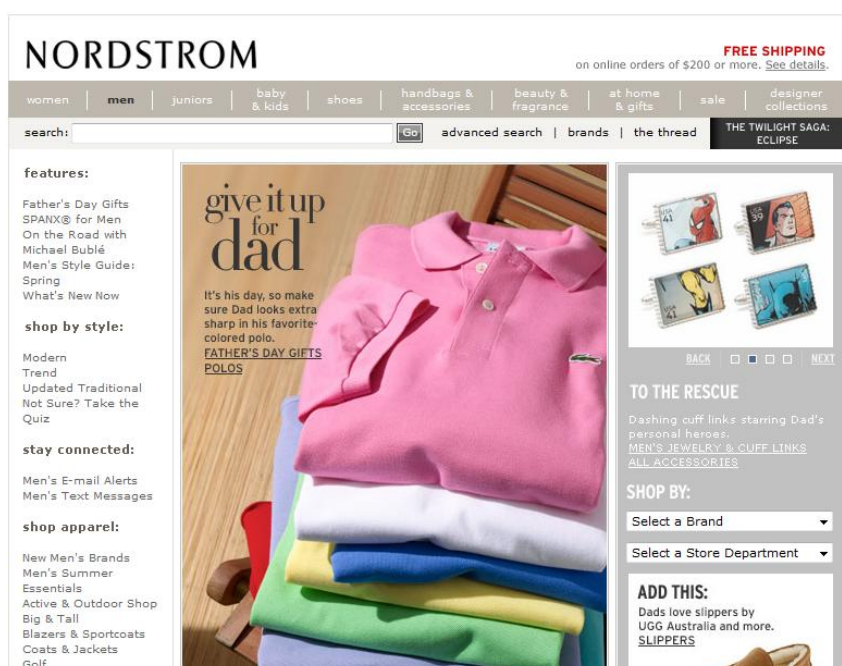
The Debenhams site placed Home & Furniture before Electricals in their top-level navigation. Unfortunately, the term Home often includes Electricals. Placing the more specific category first might help to prevent confusion.

Terminology should meet users' expectations and be self-explanatory. Most sites scored fairly well on this measure, with an overall average of 88%. Some sites did have overlapping categories, though – preventing them from receiving a perfect score (see the Debenhams example, below).



The **menus** that display navigation terms must be effective: well laid-out and easy to use. This was not the case for a small number of sites, such as Nordstrom's – shown below.

nordstrom.com was one of the few sites not to use dynamic drop-down menus. Unfortunately, its left-hand navigation panel ran to three screens in a 1024 x 768 pixel browser window.

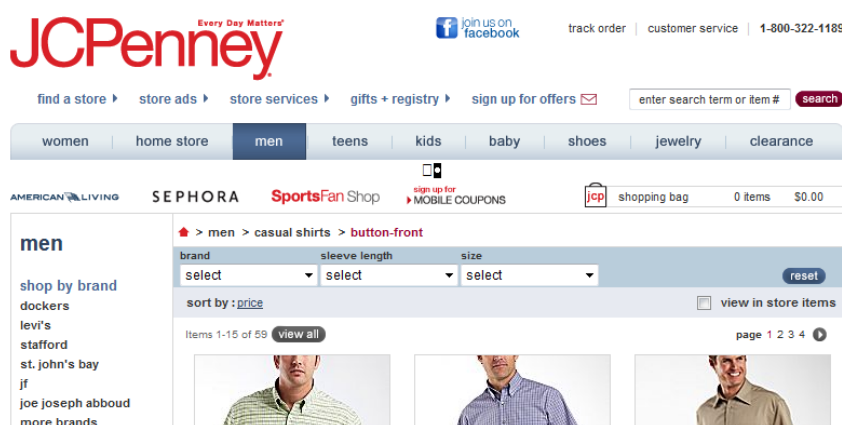


abercrombie.com makes the secondary navigation for an item available at the top of each page, although low contrast and small fonts make it hard to read.

In contrast, abercrombie.com (shown above) makes the secondary navigation for an item available at the top of each page, although low contrast and small fonts make it hard to read.

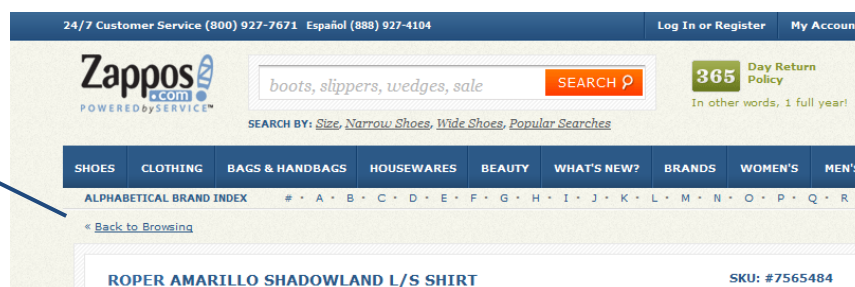
Page titles are important for giving users confidence and supporting the 'scent of information' – providing clues that users are getting closer to their goal. jcpenny.com was the only site not to provide page titles consistently (see below).

Although a breadcrumb navigation line is present, it does not provide the same reassurance as a prominent title (in this case Men's Button-Front Shirts).



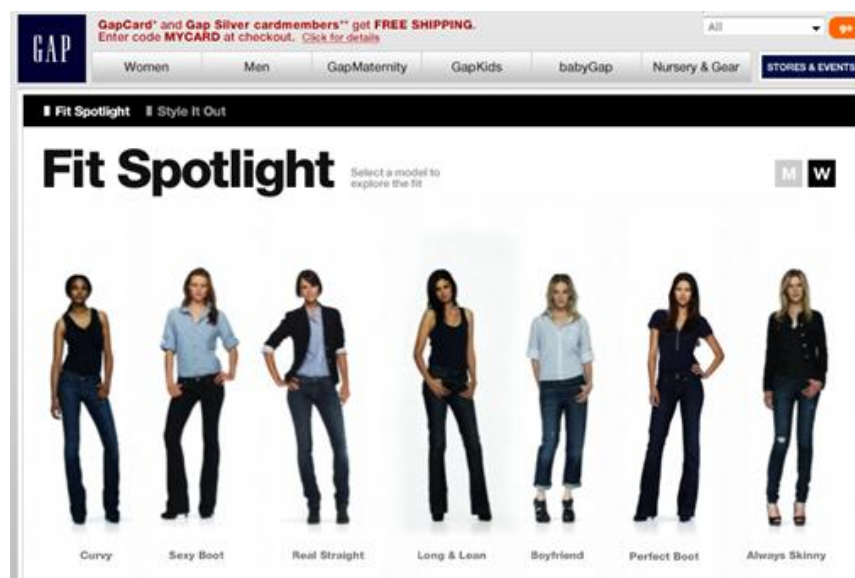
Navigational feedback is also important. However, in this case, letting users know where they are in the site is of secondary significance to allowing them to easily navigate to related content. This requirement comes about because many pages are reached through a search facility (either site-specific or web-wide). Using a breadcrumb navigation line (or similar) addresses both of these issues. This was one of the few areas where the Zappos site scored below average (with only 40%) since it did not provide navigational feedback on product pages – see below.

Arriving at this page through Google is a confusing experience since there is no navigational feedback. The Back to Browsing link simply returns users to the previous page.



The correct operation of the browser **back button** is essential to a good user experience. In simple sites using primarily static HTML pages, the back button should work as expected with little or no interference on the part of developers. However, the situation is not as straightforward for dynamic web pages (using Ajax, for example). So while most sites achieved top marks for this metric, debenhams.com and gap.com did have some back button issues. This example is from Gap:

In the GAP jean selector, the browser back button returned users to the previous product regardless of how much time they had spent setting up comparisons (this feature has been removed from the site since our evaluation).



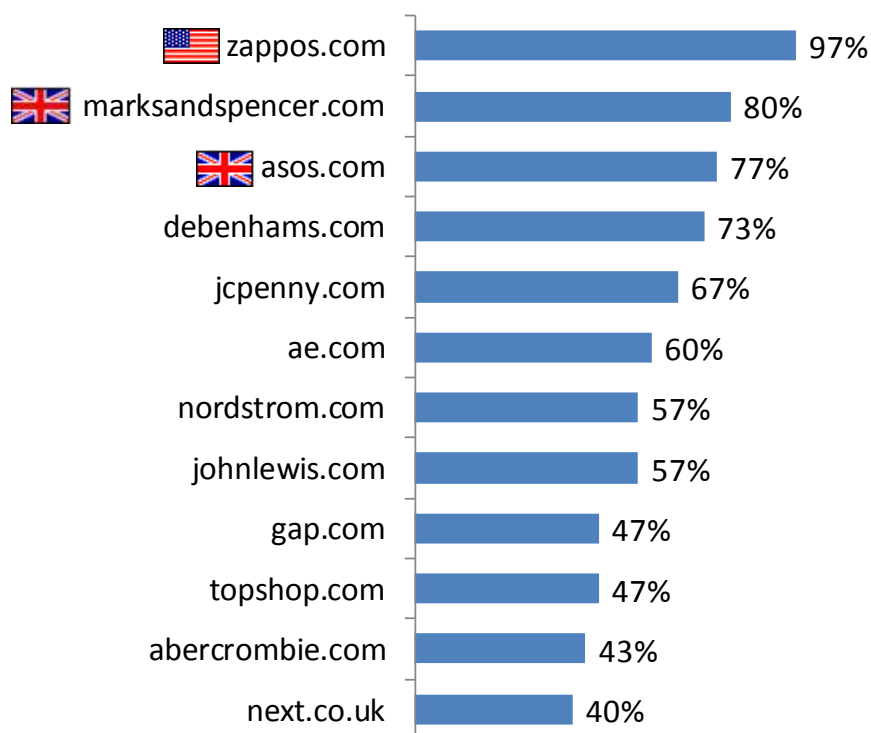
Navigational **consistency** was another high-scoring metric for most sites. However, Abercrombie & Fitch received a slightly reduced score for their Next and Previous buttons on product pages. These displayed unrelated product groups when the end or beginning of the current group was reached (respectively).

Design Benchmark

Engagement



Engagement measures how rewarding a site is to use, particularly in the areas of interactivity and social content. Again, Zappos is showing other sites how it should be done, although M & S – a traditional UK retailer – is not too far behind, leaving some of the trendier brands in its wake.



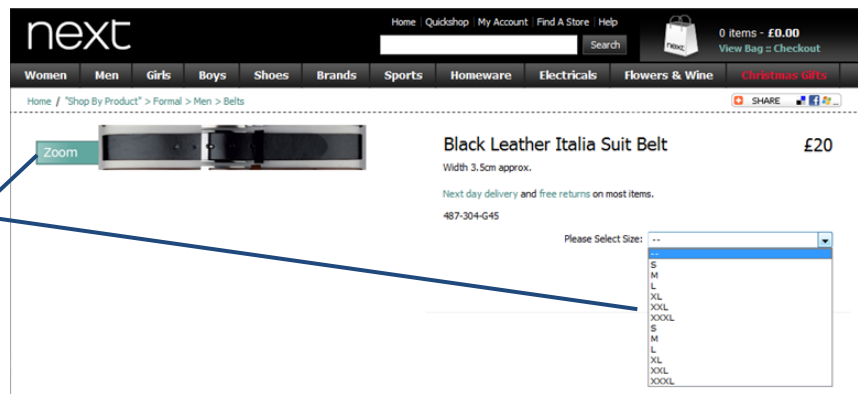
Engagement Results

E-commerce sites started as a form of 'electronic mail order' with a simple on-screen catalogue and checkout process. Now, with increasingly sophisticated products and a potentially very broad audience, most e-commerce sectors need to be more effective at engaging users. In the engagement benchmark we consider:

- Rewarding to use
- Interactive features
- Empowering features
- On-page interaction
- Sense of community
- Breadth of content

E-commerce sites need to be more **rewarding to use** than a paper catalogue. In theory this should not be difficult, but in practice, rewarding user experiences are not as common as they could be. No site received top marks in all of the engagement measures, but Zappos managed 100% in five of the six categories listed above (the site's only weak point was on-page interaction). Marks & Spencer was the second-best performer but trailed some way behind Zappos.

The dearth of descriptive text and various broken features at the time of the evaluation made the site substantially less rewarding to use than most of its competitors. (In this example the zoom feature does not work, lengths of the belt are not given. Sizes are listed twice in the drop-down selector.)



Interactive features were slightly disappointing, especially given the highly connected social networking world that many younger users are accustomed to. Many sites offered a guided or faceted search but only Zappos offered a number of engaging interactions.

Although a simple concept, Zappos empowers customers with speciality size requirements by addressing them directly.

Zappos also received top marks for **empowering features**. For this metric we expected to see online reviews, self-service and the kind of control over purchasing and support that users are accustomed to on highly engaging sites such as Amazon. Two sites (abercrombie.com and next.co.uk) scored only 20% in this area through the absence of these or similar features.



On-page interaction typically allows users to see more information or different views of a product, without navigating to a new page. This kind of interaction used to require Flash Player plug-ins or similar, but is now becoming more popular through the growth of technologies such as Dynamic HTML and Ajax. No site scored top marks for this metric, but several sites (Zappos, American Eagle, Asos and Debenhams) did receive 80%, typically for good image and 'add to basket' interaction (see Asos example below).

The product images on asos.com include previous and next buttons so that users do not have to look for image controls elsewhere.



Relative to the other engagement metrics, many sites benchmarked scored very badly on the **sense of community** measure. Seven of the twelve sites scored 0%. However, the sites that did include community features did so fairly well. Zappos and Marks & Spencer both scored 100%, although of the two, the Zappos site had more customer-generated content.

Both Zappos and Marks & Spencer scored 100% on sense of community. However, Zappos (shown here) had noticeably more customer-generated content at the time of the evaluation.

Recent Customer Reviews - 467 Reviews Total

POSTED: Jun 7, 2010
REVIEWER: Laura T from
OVERALL: ★★★★★ COMFORT: ★★★★★ STYLE: ★★★★★

SHOE SIZE: Felt true to size
SHOE ARCH: Moderate arch support
SHOE WIDTH: Felt true to width

I bought this shoe for my 16 year old son. He absolutely loves it. Zappos is a great site. Love the free shipping and it was quick also. Great shopping experience.

POSTED: Jun 7, 2010
REVIEWER: Ryan from
OVERALL: ★★★★★ COMFORT: ★★★★★ STYLE: ★★★★★

SHOE SIZE: Felt a full size larger than marked
SHOE ARCH: Excellent arch support
SHOE WIDTH: Felt wider than marked

This product is good!

POSTED: Jun 6, 2010
REVIEWER: WillRevenge from Columbus, OH
OVERALL: ★★★★★ COMFORT: ★★★★★ STYLE: ★★★★★

SHOE SIZE: Felt true to size
SHOE ARCH: Moderate arch support
SHOE WIDTH: Felt true to width

Great pair of shoes, built for loafing around in a reasonably classy manner. Arch support isn't fantastic, but boat shoes tend not to have that quality in excess. Only quibble would be that I wish Sperry would start offering the wood-toned version in places other than J.Crew.

POSTED: Jun 3, 2010
REVIEWER: Don from CT
OVERALL: ★★★★★ COMFORT: ★★★★★ STYLE: ★★★★★

SHOE SIZE: Felt true to size
SHOE ARCH: Excellent arch support
SHOE WIDTH: Felt true to width

Very happy with the shoes. I have never had any problems with Zappos merchandise or service. I will always buy from Zappos.

POSTED: Jun 2, 2010
REVIEWER: Dawn S from Cutchogue, New York
OVERALL: ★★★★★ COMFORT: ★★★★★ STYLE: ★★★★★

SHOE SIZE: Felt true to size
SHOE ARCH: Moderate arch support
SHOE WIDTH: Felt true to width

I purchased Sperry Top Siders for my husband who had worn out his last pair I had bought about 10 years ago. They were one of his favorite pair to wear. For his Birthday he received a new pair.

Another low-scoring measure for many sites was **breadth of content**. At the risk of sounding repetitious, zappos.com was the only site that scored 100%. debenhams.com came in as a runner-up at 80% but all other sites scored 67% or lower (although none scored 0%).

Browse ...

The Debenhams site had over 30 buying guides, but they were not easy to find. (They were linked from the fine print in the page footers and also from individual product pages – but not from selection pages or the main navigation).

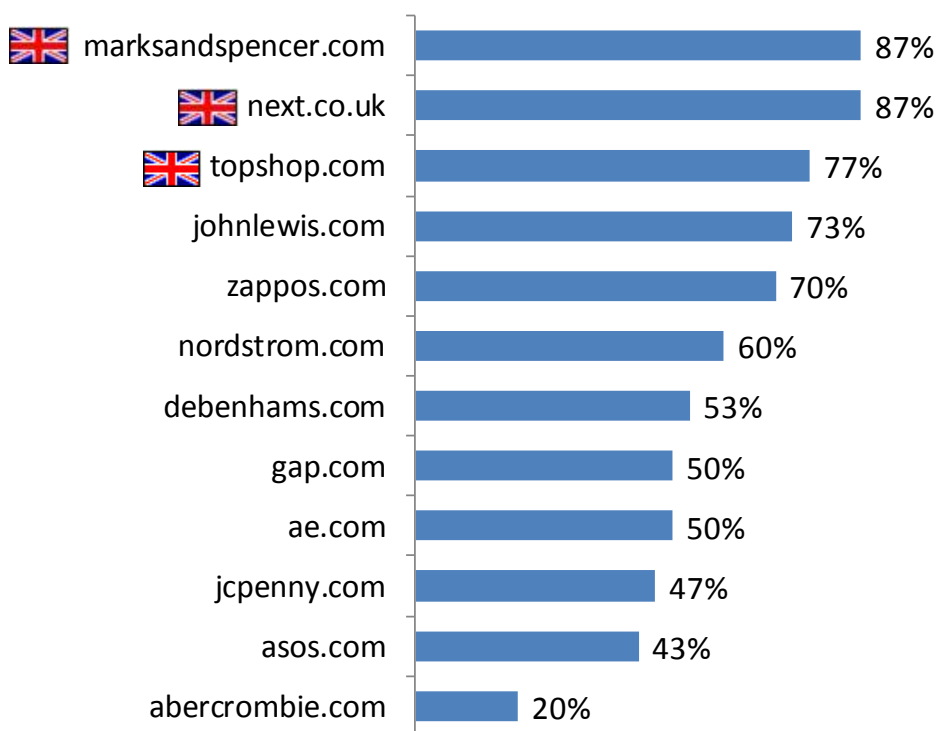
- Beauty Buying Guides
- Home Buying Guide
- Electricals Buying Guide
- Mens Buying Guide
- Womens Buying Guides
- Sports Buying Guides
- Gifts Buying Guides
- Kids Buying Guides
- Accessories buying guide
- Furniture Buying Guides
- Guide to buying a bed
- BBQ buying guide
- Buying bedlinen
- Guide to buying coffee makers

Design Benchmark

Accessibility



Accessibility was the only benchmark dominated by UK sites, with Marks & Spencer and Next tied for first place. The best US site for accessibility was Zappos, coming in at position five. Abercrombie & Fitch had the lowest score in this area – not too surprising since a large proportion of the population would find the site hard to use.



Accessibility Results

In most countries it is unlawful to discriminate against disabled people in the provision of goods and services. While web site accessibility is a complex area, there are several key issues which serve as a useful indicator of compliance:

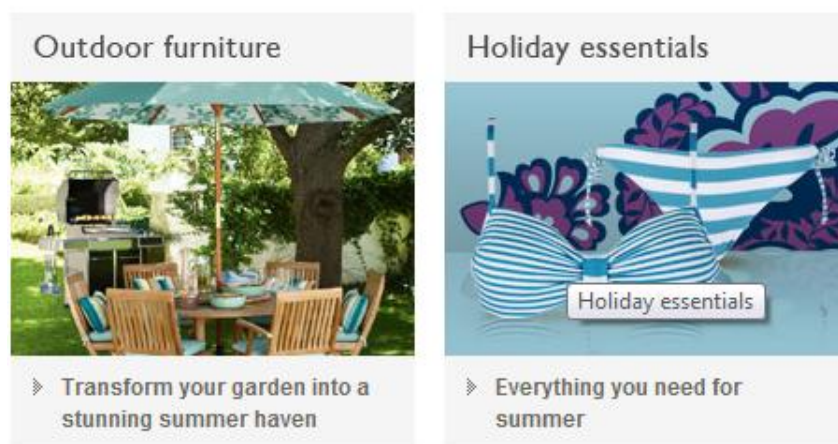
- Appropriate descriptive text
- Content structured for assistive technology
- Menus suitable for assistive technology
- Links suitable for assistive technology
- Effective access keys/access links
- Appropriate use of animation

In most cases, these issues address how usable a site is by someone relying on assistive technology such as screen reading software, screen magnifiers, speech recognition software and similar.

Appropriate descriptive text is required for all *meaningful* non-text content – typically images, animations and audio/video clips. The word ‘meaningful’ is key – it is just as unhelpful to provide descriptive text for all decorative images and spacers as it is to omit it on significant non-text content. Equally important is describing the *meaning* that an image (or other non-text content) conveys rather than its appearance.

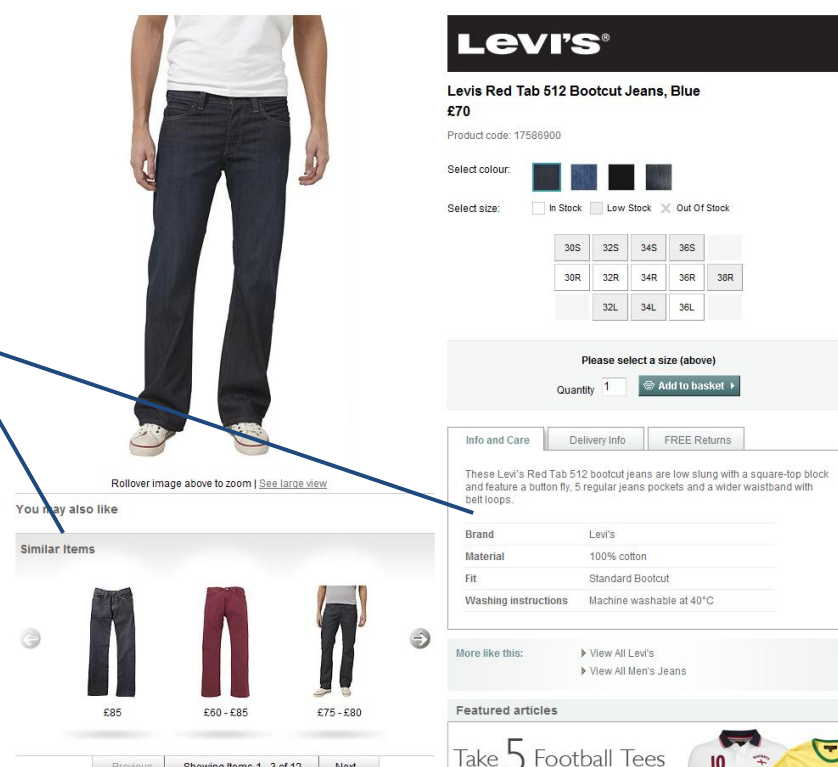
This is especially true when an image is being used as a link. The descriptive text should indicate what the link leads to rather than its content.

Both the heading text and photos from the John Lewis home page are images so it is essential that they have appropriate descriptive text. However, in this case a screen reader user will hear the descriptive text twice – the picture should have an empty descriptive string to prevent this.



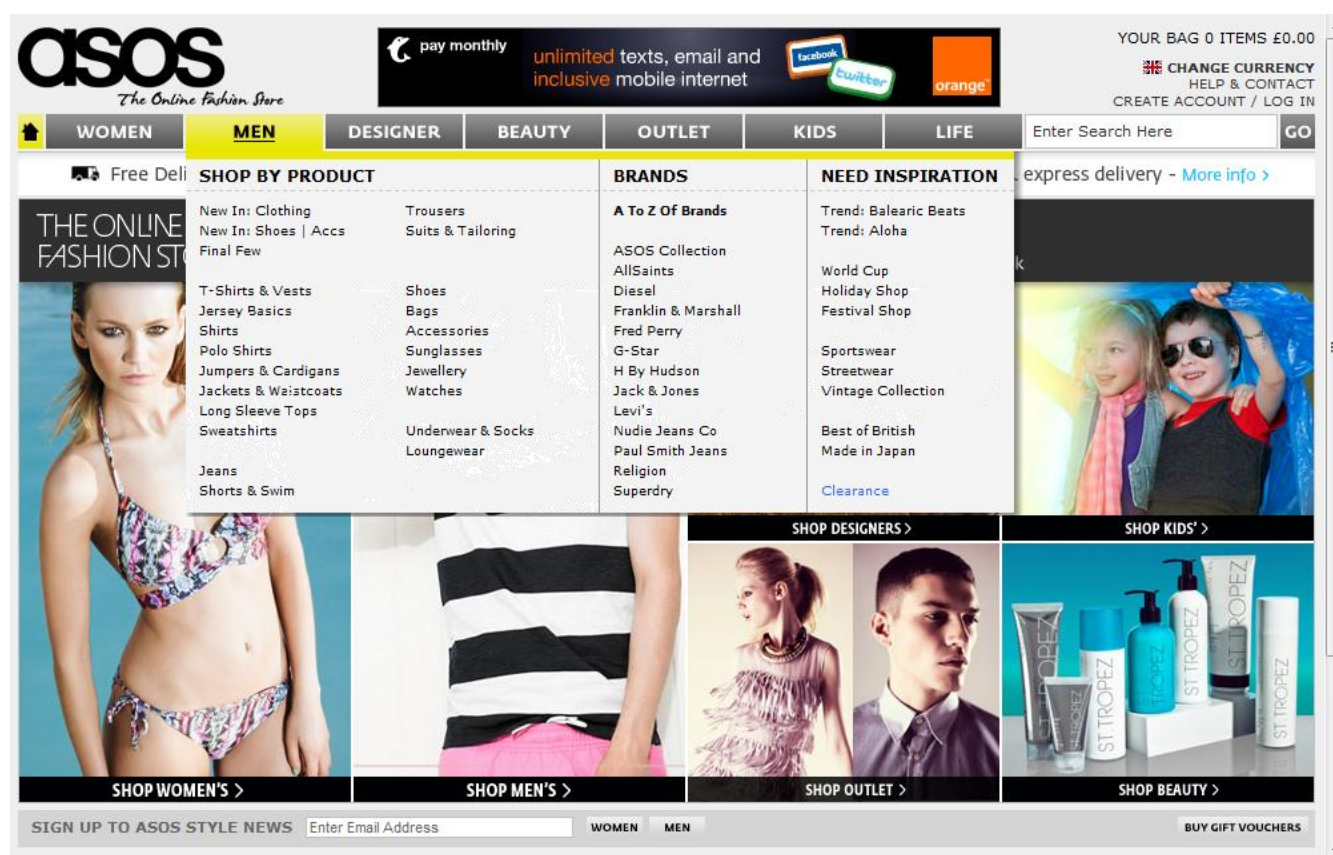
Content structured for assistive technology: Content often relies on visual scanning to allow users to find the information they require. If users are relying on assistive technology because of visual impairments, scanning becomes very difficult. Under these circumstances, it is desirable that content is well-structured and that it is easy to jump to the required section. It is also important that the content appears in a sensible order in the HTML page (do not rely on style sheets since they may be ignored by assistive technology).

This product page layout from John Lewis is similar on several sites. Unfortunately it means that screen reader users hear about similar items (bottom left) before they are given details of the current product (bottom right).



Of similar importance to content is the **structure of menus**. If large menus rely too heavily on visual scanning, they will thwart all but the most determined users with visual impairments (and many unimpaired users as well). Menus need to be of a reasonable size and, ideally,

organized so that users of assistive technology do not have to work too hard to skip global menus on each page to get to local menus and content.

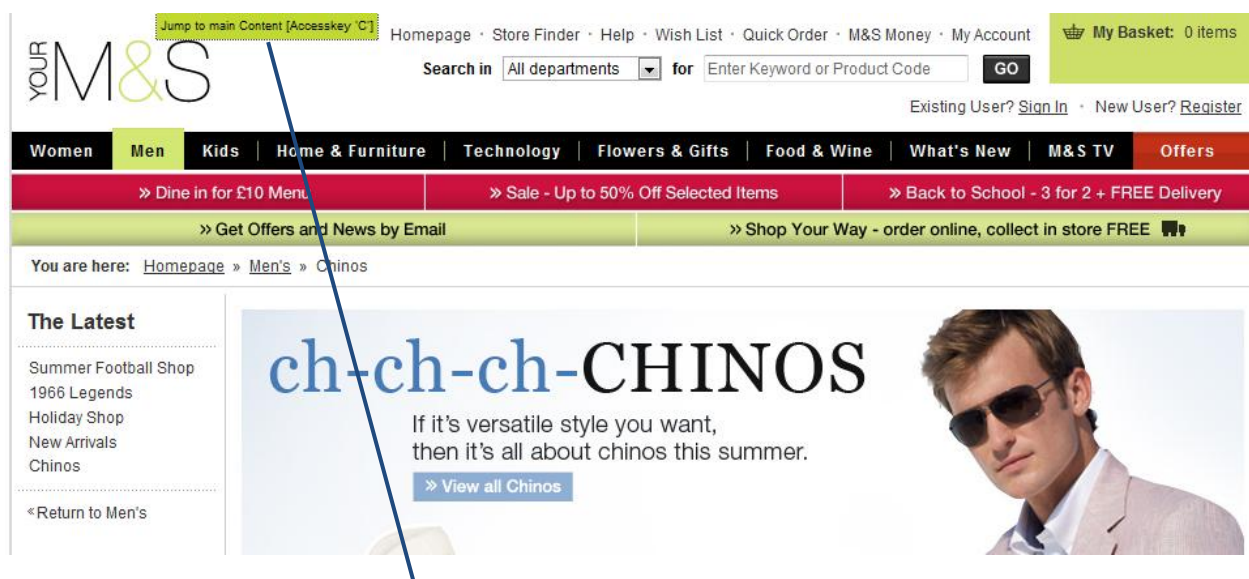


Drop-down menus like these rely heavily on mouse events and fully-featured browsers. This will present challenges to both assistive technology and mobile devices.

Links suitable for assistive technology: Some assistive technology – many screen readers, for example – can list all of the links on a page. Consequently, links must be self-explanatory even out of context. So while ‘read more’ would be a suitable link if the one immediately preceding it were ‘Special spring offers’, it would be completely meaningless without it. This means that links themselves must be used to provide context or that they must be fully self-descriptive (that is, not requiring a context). Happily, this was one of the high points of all of the benchmarking measures - most sites did this extremely well.

Effective access keys/access links: Access keys are similar to the shortcut keys used in desktop applications. They typically allow users of assistive technology (such as screen readers) to skip over material that is repeated on each page – global navigation, for example. Unfortunately, there are no consistent definitions of what access keys should do. So while Alt+S in Internet Explorer might skip the top navigation on some sites, it may have a different use (or no use at all) on others. In a similar vein, some sites use ‘hidden’ links (not visually displayed but available to assistive technology) that perform the same purpose.

In our benchmarking, we found that very few sites made use of either access keys or hidden access links. However, two UK sites did achieve 100% – Marks & Spencer and Next.

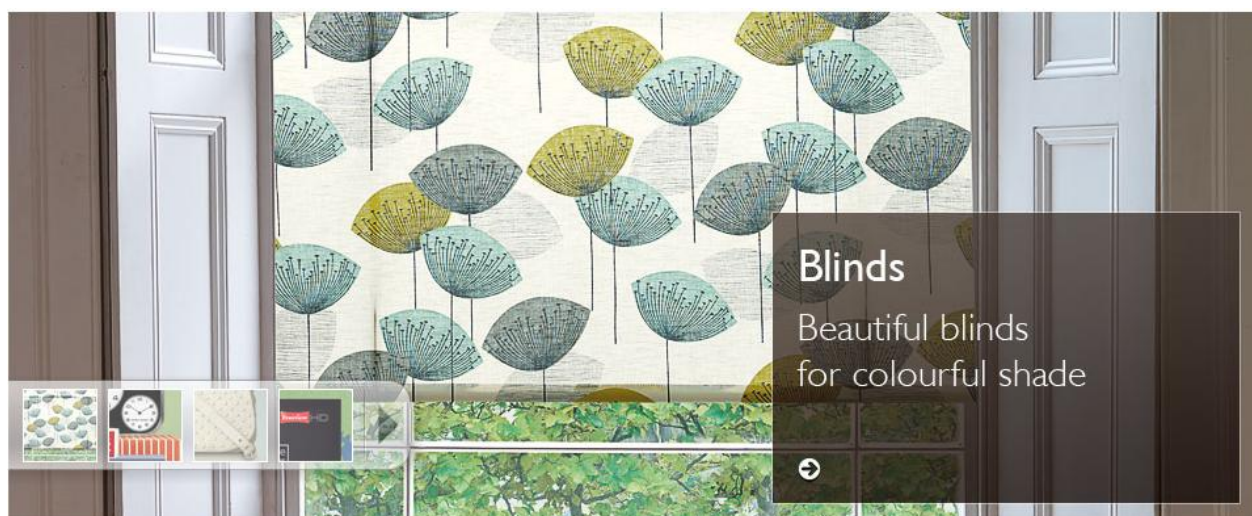


Marks & Spencer uses Alt+C to jump to main content (the help text shown here appears only after the Alt key is pressed) and Alt+B to skip to the basket.

Appropriate use of animation: Animation can present both usability and accessibility issues for a wide range of users. For animation to be used appropriately, it must:

- Include text descriptions
- Provide user control
- Avoid flashing

Half of sites benchmarked receive top marks for this metric through the simple expedient of not having animations. The sites that did use animation scored poorly as most did not provide the required user control.



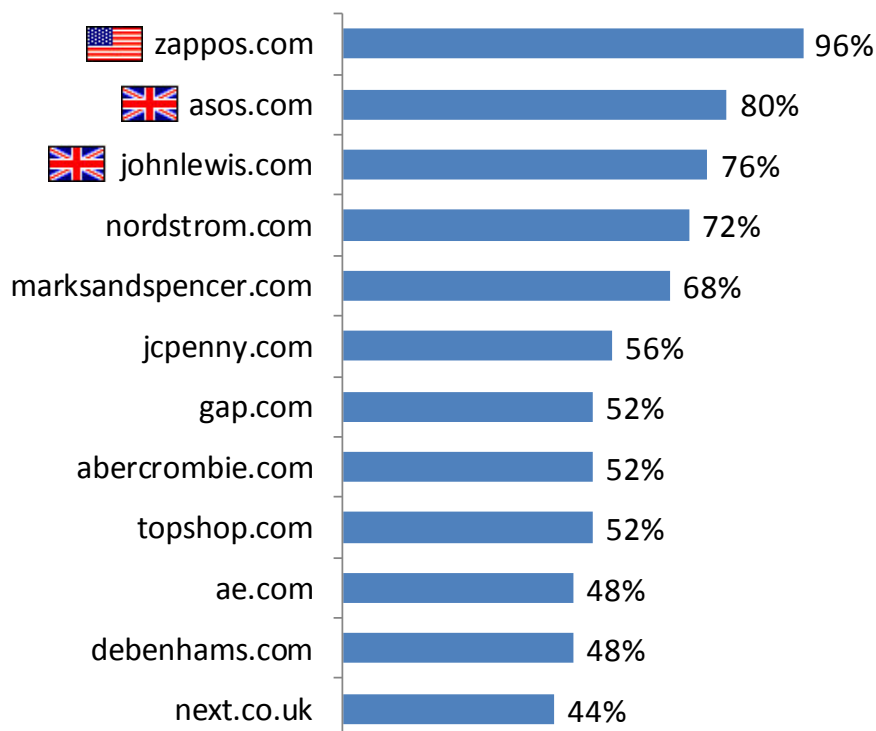
The large graphic on the John Lewis home page is animated using Flash. Unfortunately, the popup control panel shown in the bottom left would be difficult for someone with low vision to access.

Design Benchmark

Trust



Zappos was one of the few sites to address online security as a prominent issue. Those sites with the poorest scores made it difficult for customers to find company details and provided no information about online security or safe shopping.



Trust Results

With current levels of spam, phishing attacks and credit card fraud, consumers have every right to be suspicious of e-commerce sites. Yet, very few sites in our benchmark provided adequate levels of reassurance.

The five components that make up our trust metric are:

- Credibility
- Confidence in design
- Customer-focused policies
- Security
- Online assistance

Credibility is based on easy access to an organisation's credentials, particularly information required by the UK's E-Commerce Act: name of the service provider (and trading name if different), geographic address, registered address (if different), registration number, place of registration, trade body membership and VAT number. Although all organisations supplied some of this information, it was often difficult to locate (naturally, this will not be very reassuring to potential customers). Debenhams scored only 20% for this metric as its company

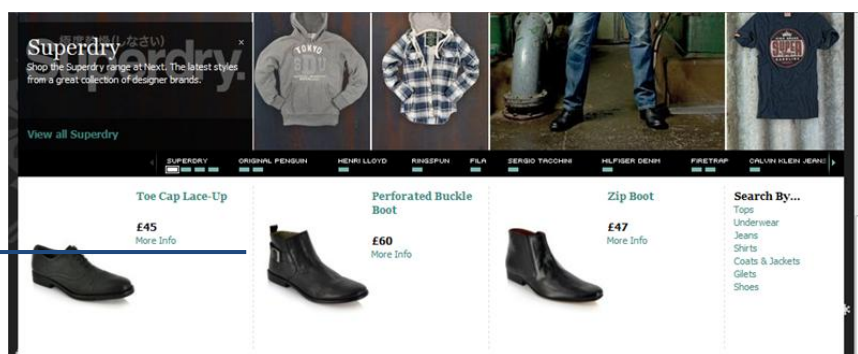
details were impossible to find. American Eagle and Top Shop managed only 40% while J C Penny and John Lewis achieved top marks.

This information is required by law in the UK but John Lewis was the only company to include it in the footer of each page.

Copyright © John Lewis Partnership 2001-2010
John Lewis plc Registered office: 171 Victoria Street, London SW1E 5NN. Registered in England.
Company registration number: 233462. VAT no: GB232457280

Our second measure in this group is **confidence in design**. Users will not feel encouraged to make purchases (or browse a site) if it has broken links, missing images or other failed functionality. Seven of the twelve sites benchmarked received top marks in this area with Next scoring only 40% because of missing images and broken links at the time of the evaluation.

This page was meant to show Superdry products on the Next site. Instead it displayed an assortment of shoes – some of which linked to Superdry products (but not shoes).



The **customer-focused policies** measure considers terms and conditions, returns information, delivery instructions and similar information describing the relationship between the customer and the organisation. Language, tone of voice and readability of the information presented are taken into account. The measure also includes any policies which affect the purchasing process (such as automatically opening a credit account without properly advising customers, as is the case of Next).

New To Next?

Next customers are actually agreeing to open a credit account and to pay for directories to be delivered annually. However, this is only mentioned in the fine print.

Register

Style you'll love, quality and service you'll adore...

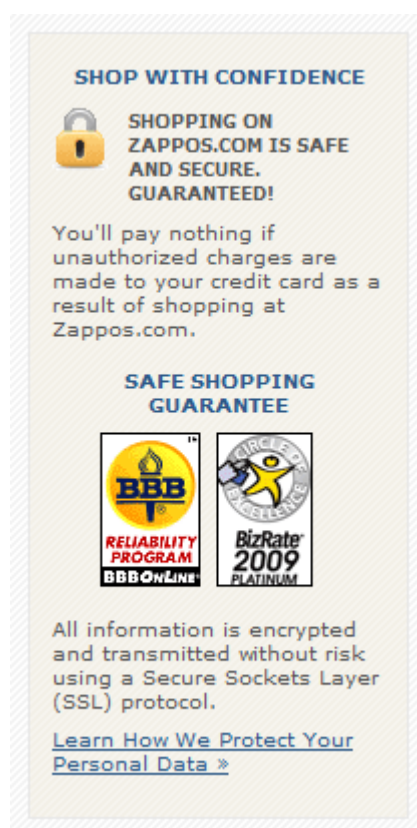
Discover the latest selection of stylish ideas for you, your family and your home. With next day delivery as standard, enjoy the store and more, direct to your door.



Zappos, Marks & Spencer and John Lewis received 100% for this measure. American Eagle and Next scored only 40%.

Security is a measure of how much reassurance is provided to users during the checkout process. Top marks are awarded to clear information, in prominent view, that the checkout is secure –with confirmation provided by third parties such as VeriSign or Comodo and trade associations such as the IMRG. This was a low-scoring area for many sites. Zappos was the only site to score 100% while Gap, J C Penny and Abercrombie & Fitch achieved only 20%.

Zappos was the only site to promote security effectively during the checkout process.



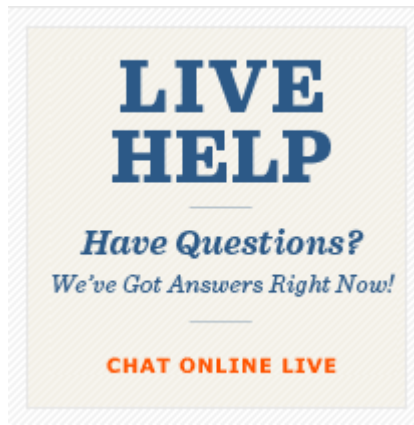
Some sites did display IMRG and certificate provider logos, but lost the opportunity of reassuring customers by failing to link them to useful information. Top Shop showed small VeriSign Secured and credit card security logos, but none was linked to the relevant site:

Top Shop showed the VeriSign Secured icon at the bottom of the checkout, but it was not linked to the VeriSign site.



Online assistance is helpful to customers when they cannot find what they are looking for or have questions. Surprisingly, half of the sites benchmarked (three in the US and three in the UK) offered no form of assistance at all (other than an FAQ or general help pages). On the plus side, Zappos offered telephone support in English and Spanish as well as online chat (see the screenshot below).

*Zappos was the only e-tailer
to offer an easy-to-find
online chat service.*

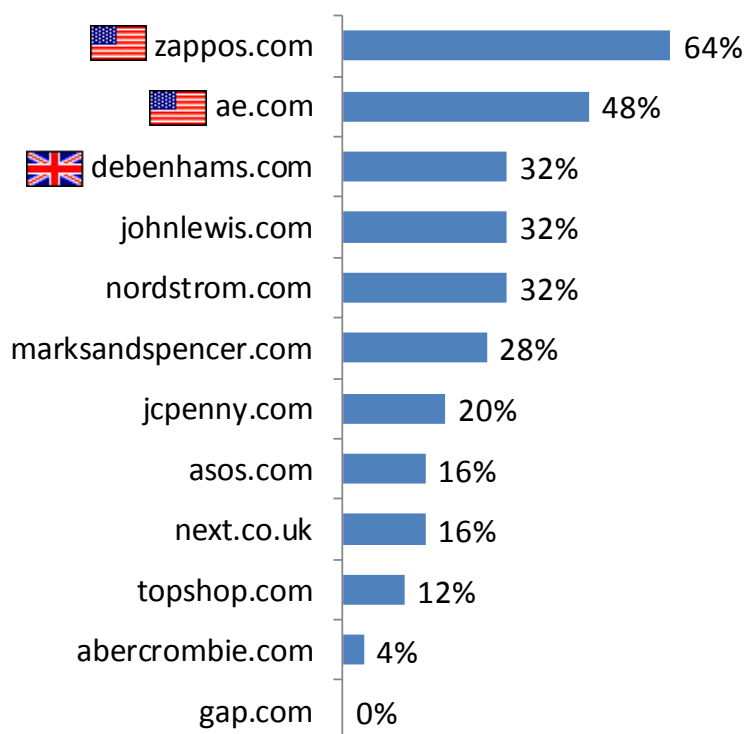


Design Benchmark

Persuasion



This was a very low-scoring measure for most sites, with only Zappos achieving more than 50%. Many of the sites benchmarked lacked a recently-viewed list while most made no attempt to make suggestions based on the current product or shopping basket contents. gap.com – with a score of 0% – had no features to help customers find recently-viewed or related products.



Persuasion Results

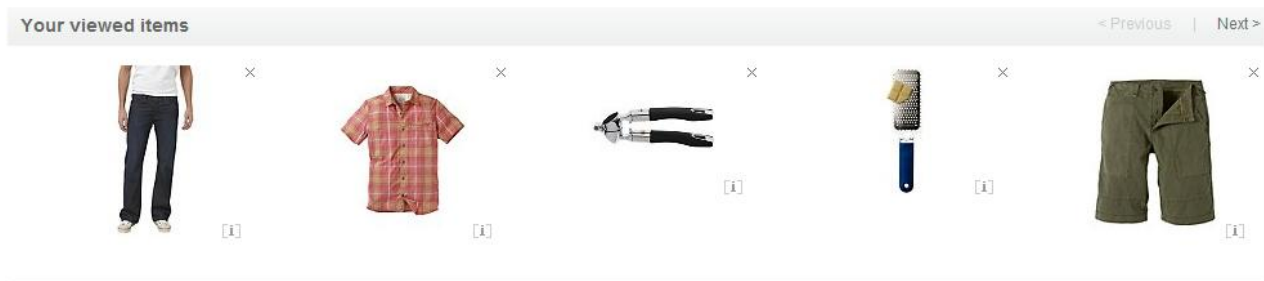
Although persuasive computing has its own very specific meaning for 'persuasion', we are using it here in a more general sense: persuading customers to spend more. For this to be effective, it must be done appropriately – suggested products or accessories should be relevant to the currently-selected item or based on product pages that customers have viewed. Amazon is best known for this and while it may not be effective for many other sites to devote so much effort to persuasion, it was very disappointing to see how little of this was being done on the sites we benchmarked.

The measures making up this group are:

- Personalized recommendations
- Recently viewed
- Pre-basket persuasion
- Post-basket persuasion
- Checkout persuasion

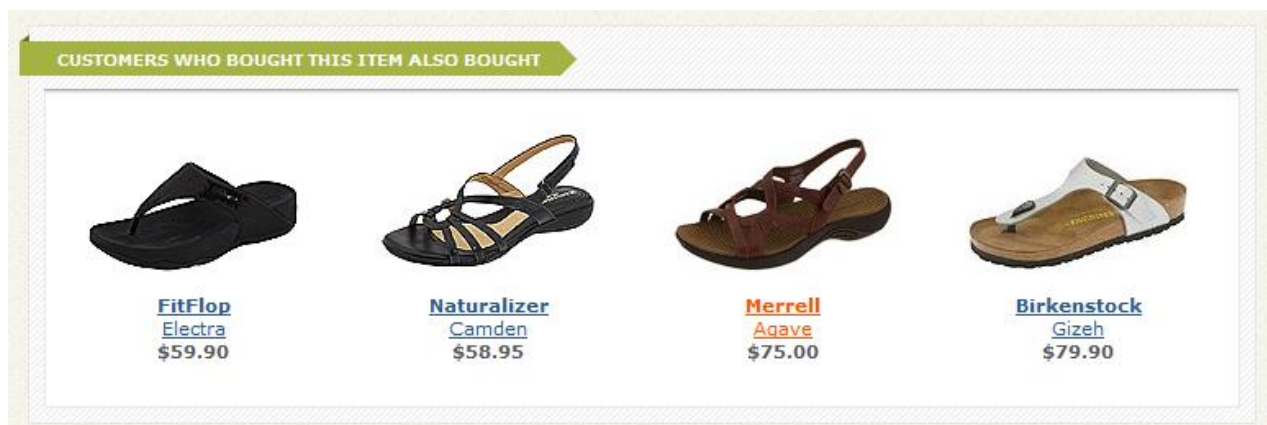
Personalized recommendations are normally made on the home page, based on previous visits to the site (or past purchases). No sites in our benchmark did this. Given the amount of 'site hopping' that some users will perform when selecting a product, this is potentially an

important lost opportunity. In fact, most sites also did not attempt to show users the products they most **recently viewed**. This would also be helpful in return visits (or in a single session if different products are being considered). Marks & Spencer and John Lewis both showed recently viewed items, but neither made these very prominent (see the John Lewis example below).



John Lewis did show recently viewed items on the home page, but only at the very bottom – the third screen in a 1024 x 768 pixel browser window.

Pre-basket persuasion is a term we have used to describe the offer of products or accessories during product selection. Zappos did best in this area, with two separate persuasive approaches – a vertical ‘customers who viewed this item also viewed’ panel to the right and a ‘customers who bought this item also bought’ panel below the main product area. The latter is shown below but they are very similar except for their orientation:







Zappos had both a ‘customers also bought’ (shown here) and a ‘customers also viewed’ panel for each product page.

Post-basket persuasion is similar to the pre-basket variety, except that it occurs once an item has been added to the shopping basket. A very real concern here is that users should not be made to feel overwhelmed by choice or be subject to ‘hard selling’ – otherwise they may simply leave the site.

Zappos, Nordstrom and American Eagle offered additional products based on shopping cart contents.

Zappos, Nordstrom and American Eagle offered additional products based on shopping cart contents (American Eagle shown here).

The Artist Crop Jean you picked is great! You might also like these:

			
AE Boyfriend Racer Tank \$15.50	Artist Crop Jean \$39.50	Artist Crop Jean \$39.50	Skinny Crop Jean \$29.50

Finally, **checkout persuasion** takes place during the checkout process itself. Again, it is important not to frustrate or confuse customers, but many would welcome a display of relevant accessories or contract options. American Eagle was the only site to use checkout persuasion to offer products, but no attempt was made to entice shoppers to add them to the current order:

Order Placed




Thank you for shopping at ae.com today, Mark. Your order has been placed.

Your Order Number is: H2790575

American Eagle was the only site to use checkout persuasion to offer products, but no attempt was made to entice shoppers to add them to the current order.

- You will receive an e-mail confirming your order shortly.
- When your order ships, we will e-mail you a tracking number.
- You may return to ae.com at anytime to check the status of your order.

Here are a few items to try next:

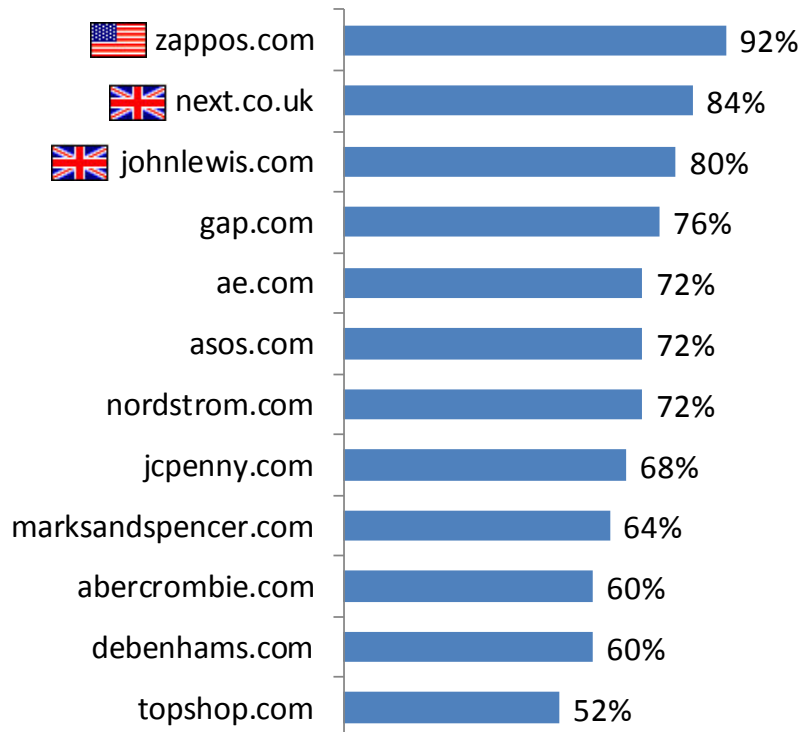
			
AE Seneca Plaid Boxer \$12.50	AE Low-Cut Sock 3-Pack \$12.50	AE Plaid Boxer \$12.50	Eagle Vintage Pique Polo \$24.50

Design Benchmark

Shopping Basket



The shopping basket needs to be easy to find, view and edit. All sites scored higher than 50% in this metric, but topshop.com only barely scraped past the midway point with 52%. Zappos had the highest score at 92% but still with some room for improvement.



Shopping Basket Results

The shopping basket is central to most e-commerce sites, but it can be surprisingly difficult to access on some sites. It is often poorly designed for providing customers with the information they need to complete a purchase. (Poor shopping basket design can have a big impact on successful completion of a transaction.)

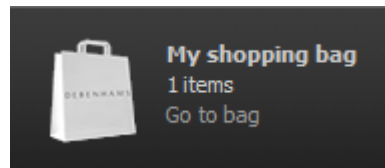
In this group we consider:

- Availability from every page
- Detail
- Layout
- Product availability
- Delivery

If users add a product to their basket and then navigate to another part of the site (to check on delivery information, for example), they may find it difficult to return to their basket. Ideally, the shopping basket should be **available from every page**. For this metric, we provide the top score for a summary of the basket contents displayed in the same location throughout the site. Lower marks are given for just a link to the shopping basket on some pages.

No site received top marks for shopping basket availability, usually because either the shopping basket information was not very obvious, or as in the Debenhams example below, insufficient detail was shown:

Debenhams had the most visible shopping basket in the top right corner of all pages. However, it could have been more informative.



Ideally, users should have already seen the relevant purchasing information they need before adding an item to their shopping basket. However, as the shopping basket is the focal point of the checkout process, it is essential that adequate **detail** is present. To receive top marks, a shopping basket should display clear descriptions of the products, accurate product images and prices (with VAT or sales tax clearly stated). Most sites did this well, but J C Penny lost points for not including product images on the shopping basket pages displayed during checkout.

The design of the J C Penny site discourages customers from viewing the shopping basket window (a popup summary with a 'checkout' button is provided). Consequently, most users will only see this checkout summary without product images.

Your order contains the following items

Product Description	Can I Gift Wrap?	*Status	Price	Qty	You Save	Total	Remove
GoldToe® Fluffies® Cushioned Acrylic/Nylon -3 Pack Item# FC503-6019D Color: Brown	yes	In Stock	\$16.00	1	Savings (\$1.60)	\$14.40	
Sale \$14.40 Original \$16.00							

Not only should the required detail be present, but the shopping basket should also have a **layout** that makes information easy to find and does not require excess scrolling. Ideally, for a shopping basket with just one or two items, the layout should require only a single 1024 x 768 pixel screen (this was often not the case).

Gap, American Eagle, Asos and Next all received top marks for shopping basket layout. Because of the over-generous use of space at the top of the page, Zappos could show only one cart in full (see below):

Zappos shopping basket can show only one full item in a 1024 x 768 pixel browser window.

24/7 Customer Service (800) 927-7671 Español (888) 927-4104 Hello, Mark Logout My Account My Favorites Help Live Help

Zappos POWERED BY SERVICE™ **365** Day Return Policy **FREE** Shipping Both Ways **My Cart**

SEARCH BY: [Size](#) [Narrow Shoes](#) [Wide Shoes](#) [Popular Searches](#)

SHOES CLOTHING BAGS & HANDBAGS HOUSEWARES BEAUTY WHAT'S NEW? BRANDS WOMEN'S MEN'S KIDS' ALL DEPARTMENTS

ALPHABETICAL BRAND INDEX # A B C D E F G H I J K L M N O P Q R S T U V W X Y Z

Thank you for choosing Zappos.com!

You have 2 items in your shopping cart.
Buying from Zappos.com is safe. Your order will be processed on our secure servers.

Not Your Shopping Cart? Remove Items and Logout

CURRENTLY IN YOUR SHOPPING CART

YOUR ITEMS	ITEM PRICE	QUANTITY	PRICE
<p>Rugged Shark Hatteras SKU: #7541262 COLOR: OAK SIZE: 9 WIDTH: D - MEDIUM <small>Sold by Zappos Retail, Inc.</small></p>	<p>\$84.00 ONLY 2 LEFT! <small>This item may become unavailable if someone else purchases it.</small></p>	<input type="text" value="1"/> <input type="button" value="UPDATE"/> <input type="button" value="Remove"/>	\$84.00
<p>Marmot Trinity Short SKU: #7600091</p>	<p>\$57.00 ONLY 2 LEFT! <small>This item may become</small></p>	<input type="text" value="1"/> <input type="button" value="UPDATE"/>	\$57.00

LIVE HELP
Have Questions?
We've Got Answers Right Now!
[CHAT ONLINE LIVE](#)

SHOP WITH CONFIDENCE

SHOPPING ON ZAPPOS.COM IS SAFE AND SECURE. GUARANTEED!
You'll pay nothing if unauthorized charges are made to your credit card as a result of shopping at Zappos.com.
SAFE SHOPPING GUARANTEE

Ideally, **product availability** will be prominently displayed on the product information page and should come as no surprise to a customer. But again, as the shopping basket is the culmination of the shopping process, product availability should be repeated here.

Zappos was the only site to display detailed availability information in the shopping basket. Several other sites (J C Penny, Next and John Lewis) included some availability information – typically a confirmation that a product was in stock – but more than half of sites benchmarked did not mention product availability in the shopping basket at all.

Zappos reassured customers that their purchases were in stock, unless stock levels were quite low, as shown here.

Rugged Shark Hatteras
SKU: #7541262
COLOR: OAK
SIZE: 9
WIDTH: D - MEDIUM
\$84.00
ONLY 2 LEFT!
This item may become unavailable if someone else purchases it.
Sold by Zappos Retail, Inc.

Delivery is our last measure in the shopping basket group. To receive 100%, a site must mention both delivery time and cost prominently on the page (not via a link). At the time of our evaluation, only two sites did this; Gap and Zappos. Top Shop was the only site to receive a zero score for delivery – it simply was not mentioned in the shopping basket.

Gap shows delivery time and cost clearly in its shopping basket (the benchmark does not insist that customers are offered a delivery choice).

Subtotal: \$12.00 1 item in your bag

Shipping: ☒ Standard 5-9 Bus Days - \$7.00
☐ Express 2 Bus Days - \$17.00
☐ Next Bus Day - \$22.00
[Learn more](#) about shipping options.

Subtotal before tax: \$19.00

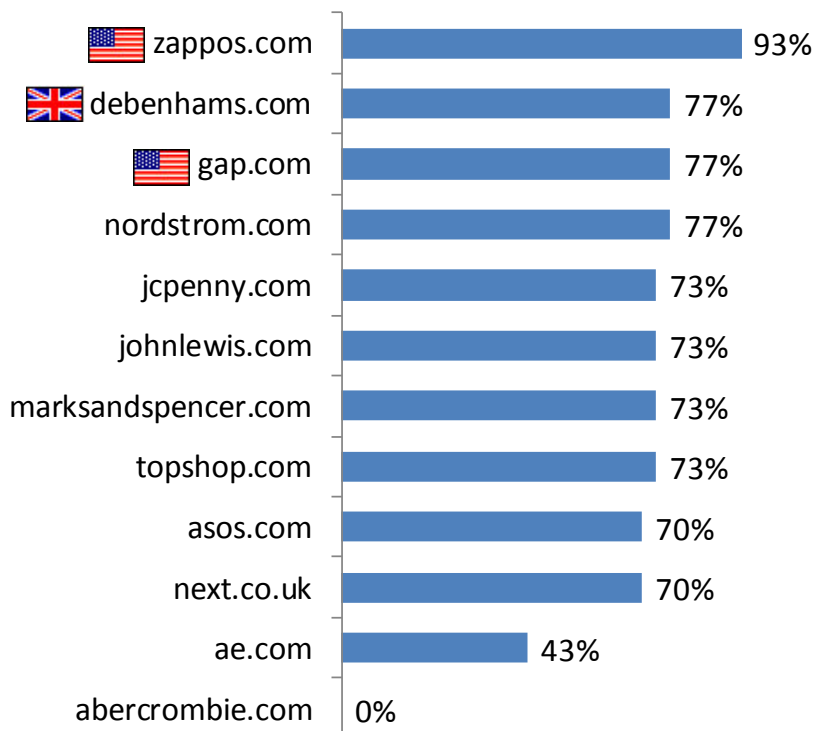
[Print this page](#) [Checkout](#)

Design Benchmark

Search



To be effective, Search must be easy to find and use. As it is often a last resort, a poor user experience with Search may well mean the loss of potential customers. Of the sites tested in this benchmark, only Abercrombie & Fitch failed to provide a search facility.



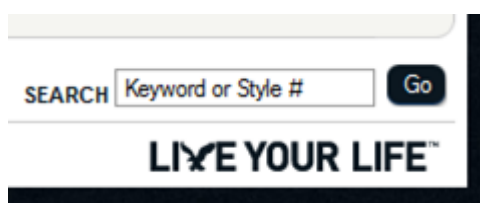
Search Results

In this section we consider the design of Search – how easy it is to perform a search, revise it and to make informed decisions from the results. The group of measures are:

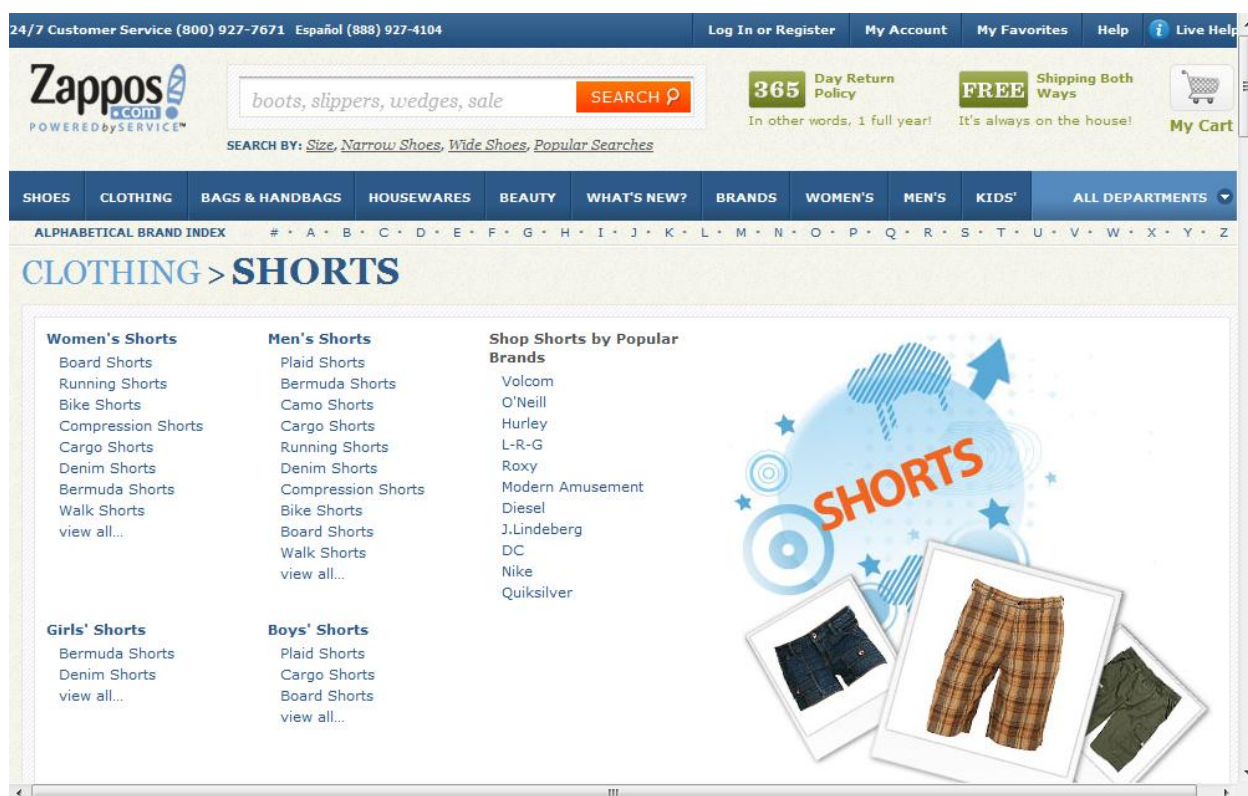
- Available from every page
- Revise/refine from results page
- Details
- Layout
- Organisation
- Quality

Search is easiest to find and use when it is readily **available from every page**. The majority of sites did this, but two made searching a little more challenging for users. Abercrombie & Fitch offered no search at all, while American Eagle sited their search facility in the bottom right corner (it is usually in the top right):

Unusually, American Eagle's search was in the bottom right corner of each page.



Revise/refine from results page: In order for users to adjust or refine their search, a search field – populated with the search text used – needs to be present on the results page. (To receive the top mark, it needs to appear at both the top and bottom of the results page when it is more than a single screen long.) The sites benchmarked were less consistent in providing this feature; around half provided a populated search field at the top of the results page. Of the remainder, American Eagle and Asos did not allow search results to be refined. Zappos did not allow the text search to be edited, but did provide a guided search equivalent that users could adjust.



Zappos did not allow its text search to be refined, but offered similar facilities via its guided search.

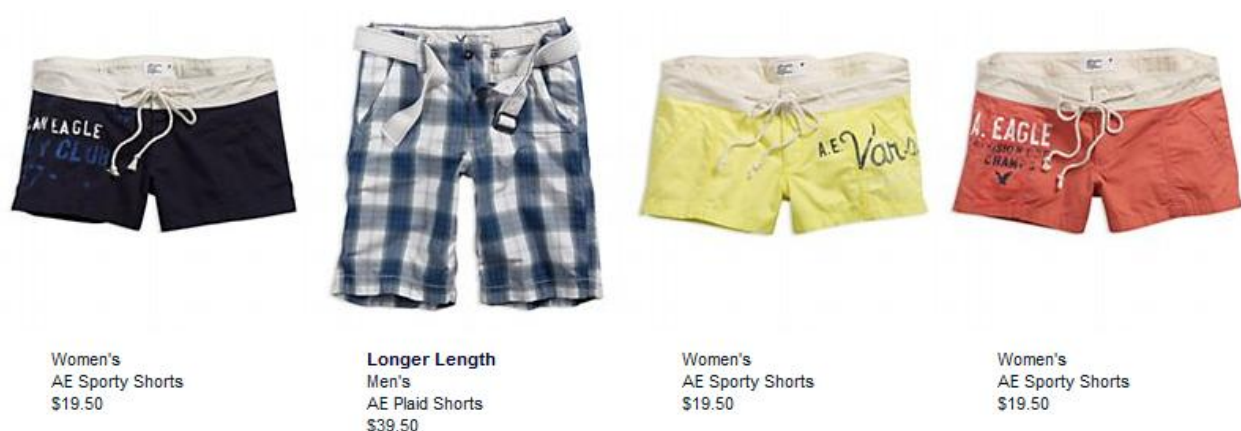
Search result **details** help users to make informed decisions about which items are most relevant. The type of result – product information or buying advice – as well as price (for products) are typical examples. Half of sites received 100% for this metric. Abercrombie & Fitch scored zero for not having a search, while Gap, J C Penny, American Eagle, Asos and John Lewis received 80%. Several of these lower scores resulted from a failure to show available colours (see the John Lewis example below):

The swatches in the John Lewis search results were too small to see the pattern in some cases.



Where many results are returned on a page, their **layout** determines how easy it will be to scan them for required information. The best layout is usually tabular form (particularly with more complex products), but for clothing, a multi-column approach such as that shown in the John Lewis example above was prevalent. A second consideration for layout is how many results are shown on the first screen. It is helpful for users to be able to see a reasonable number of results on the first screen without scrolling, so they can quickly select the appropriate result. John Lewis and Debenhams received only 40% for showing relatively few results on the first screen (three for John Lewis). No sites received 100% for this metric.

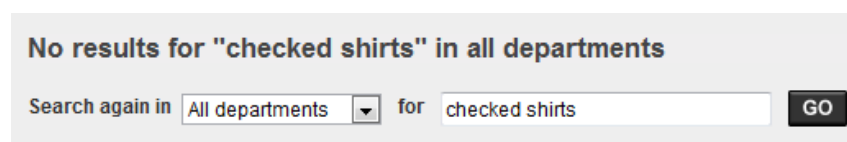
The **organisation** of results was a similarly poor-performing area across the sites benchmarked (the average score for layout and organisation was 56% each). American Eagle achieved only 20% since it happily mixed men's and women's clothes in the search results without providing any easy means of separating them (see below):



A search for 'shorts' on ae.com produced men's and women's results intermixed without any easy way of separating them (except searching again from scratch).

Last, but certainly not least in our search measures, is the **quality** of results. There is a fine balance to be struck between providing too few results (perhaps because the search text is not exactly correct) and too many, where users must waste considerable time scanning to find relevant information. The average score across all sites was a little higher than the preceding metrics (at 64%) but there were some surprising issues. For example, Marks & Spencer showed many relevant results for 'check shirt' but insisted that there was no such thing as a 'checked shirt'. Clearly, this distinction is not helpful to users.

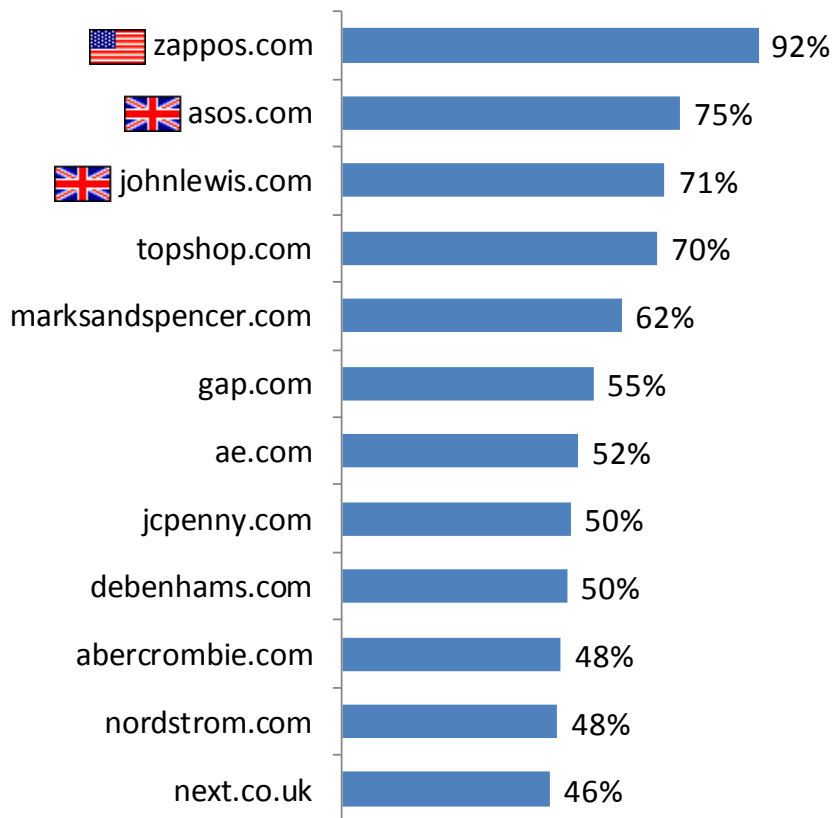
Marks & Spencer carried only 'check shirts' not 'checked shirts' as shown here. Most sites were more flexible on this point.



Search Tips

- Check for typos or misspellings.
- Broaden your search by using fewer keywords.
- Take out any spaces or special characters from product code entries.

Overall Usability



Continuing the established pattern, Zappos tops the overall usability results, with a substantial margin between it and the other high-performing sites. Asos has achieved a slightly better score in usability than it did in design, while johnlewis.com narrowly beat Top Shop to take third place.

Overall Usability Results

In the usability-focused metrics, we consider how easy it is to perform common tasks. Users are not directly involved. Instead we consider best practice and established design principles while taking a user-centred perspective.

The metric groups in this section are:

- Selection
- Checkout
- Order Management
- Support

They represent the four main phases of buying and receiving a product (selecting it, paying for it, checking the site for delivery details and getting support when things go wrong).

Overall usability scores in our survey were somewhat lower than in design. This was largely due to poor online services for customers beyond the purchasing process (our account and support groups). For some sites, though, even selection and checkout provided disappointing user experiences.

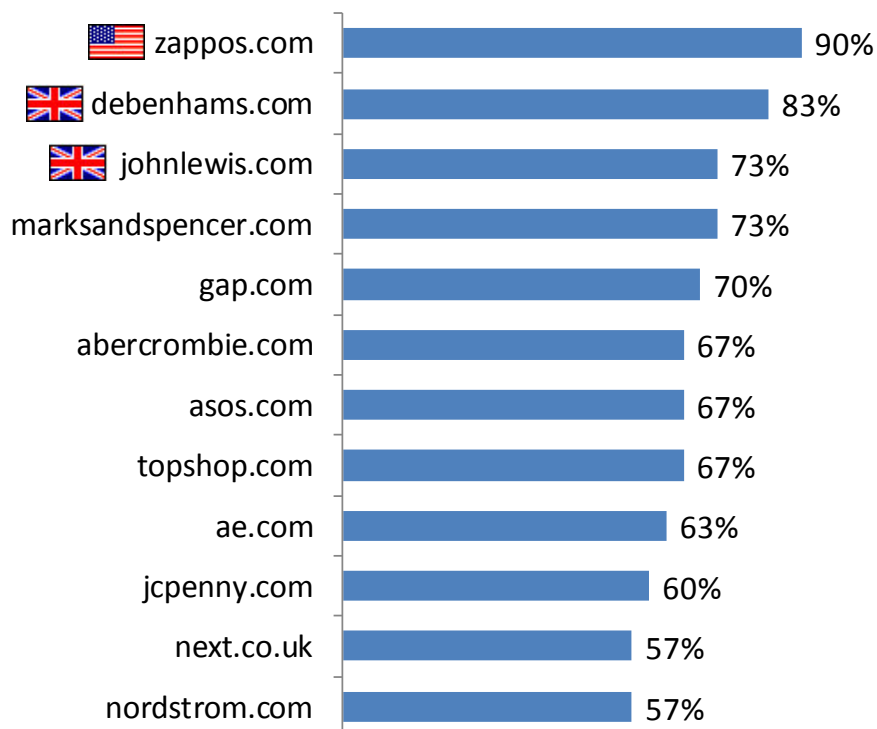
The overall score is an unweighted average across the groups.

Usability Benchmark

Selection



Selection measures how easy it is for customers to start shopping and to buy the products they're looking for. Zappos heads the results for this metric while Next and Nordstrom make selection more difficult than it should be for successful e-commerce sites.



Selection Results

The selection tasks represent the natural sequence of locating a product and placing it in the shopping basket. (Checkout is dealt with separately in the next benchmarking group.)

The tasks and their corresponding measures are:

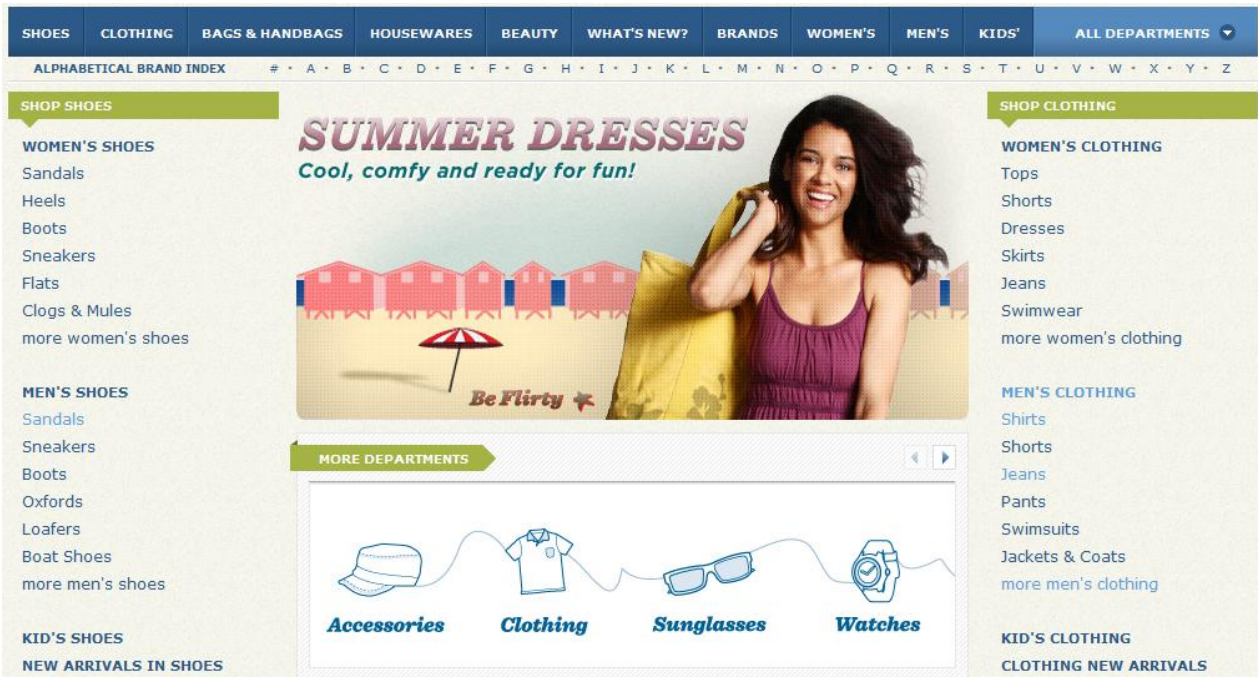
- Start shopping
- Select by type/brand/model, features or price
- Product availability
- Add to basket
- View/edit basket
- Start checkout

While tasks like 'start shopping' may sound a little basic, some sites make this much more difficult to perform than others, as discussed below.

Other tasks, which consumers take for granted in a physical (bricks and mortar) shop, are surprisingly absent in virtual shopping – checking product availability is handled poorly or not at all by some sites. The task that was easiest to perform in this group was 'start checkout' (although we assumed that users could find the shopping basket,

which was not always as easy as it should be – see ‘shopping basket’ in the design metrics on page 32).

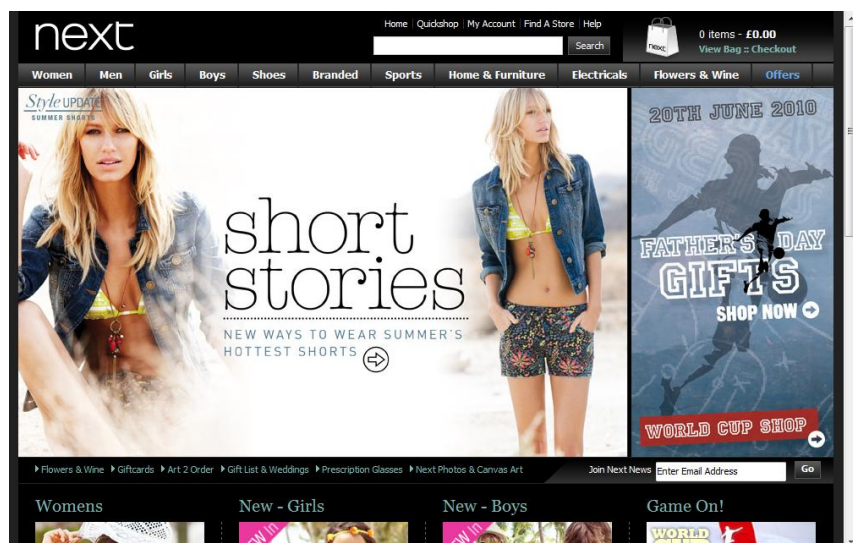
Start shopping: How easy is it for potential customers to see that this is an e-commerce (rather than a catalogue) site and to start selecting a product? The ideal solution would be to make the shopping basket icon or the word ‘shop’ prominent and provide a number of links into the product pages themselves. Zappos received the top mark for their approach, as shown in this screenshot:



Zappos received 100% for not only providing a comprehensive dropdown menu (not shown), but also direct links to many categories on the home page itself. It also included an alphabetical brand index just below the menu bar.

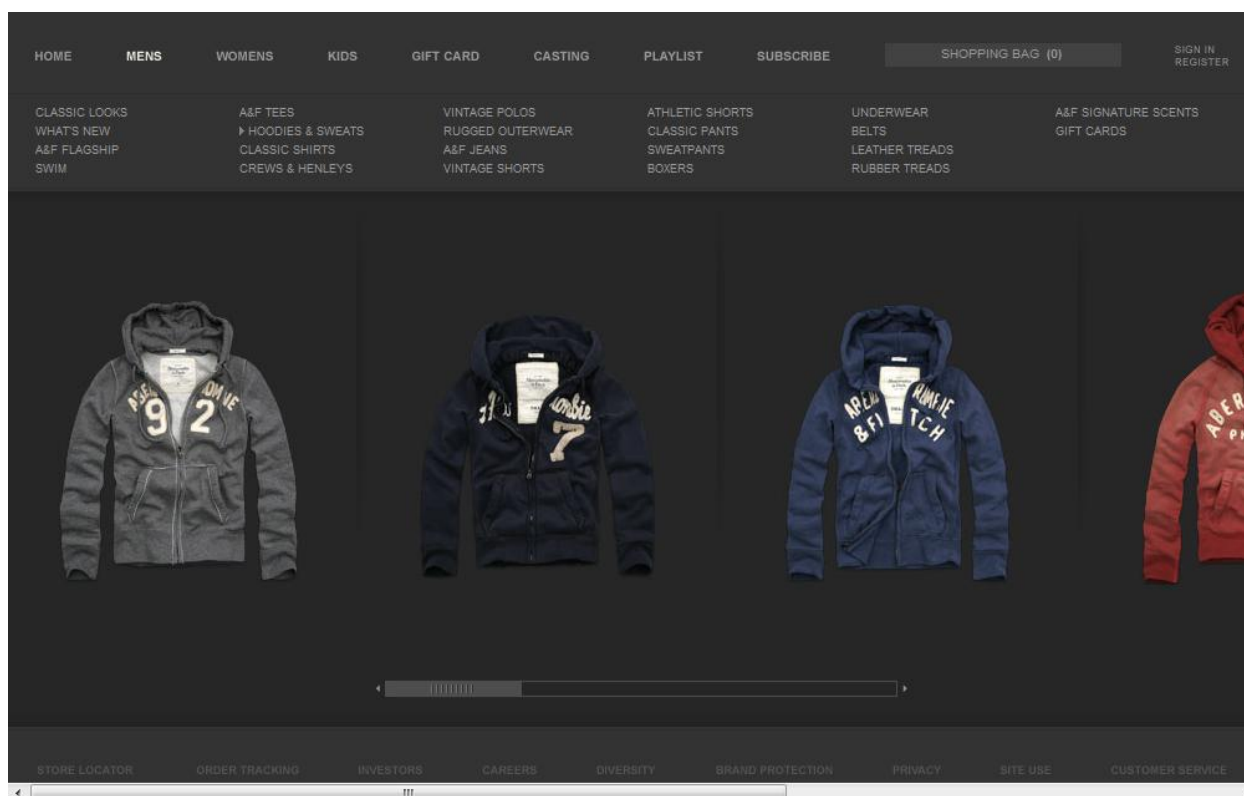
By comparison, Next scored only 60% for poor use of the home page in getting potential customers to their products:

In a 1024 x 768 pixel browser window, the Next home page is almost completely taken up by only two images.



Potential customers may know exactly what they are looking for, but in many cases being able to **select products by type/brand/style, features or price** greatly improves the user experience.

Of the twelve sites we benchmarked, only two scored 100% for product selection – Asos and Debenhams. The average across all sites was only 54% with UK sites doing better overall (UK 60% versus US 46%). American Eagle, Abercrombie and Top Shop provided very limited product selection and so achieved only 20%.



Abercrombie & Fitch limited product selection to just their main categories. Customers had to visually scan the results lists while scrolling horizontally (Hoodies and Sweats shown here).

Clothing purchased as gifts or for special occasions needs to arrive on time. For this reason, potential customers need to be reassured about **product availability**. It is not enough to assume that 'no news is good news' (that users should take for granted that items are in stock). This was another low-scoring area for the majority of sites, with an average result of just 56%. Two sites, Abercrombie & Fitch and Asos, did not mention product availability at all and so scored zero. Next received 10% for a fairly confusing implementation – product availability was not shown until a size was selected, but this was done by replacing the contents of the droplist. (This feature has been removed from the site since our evaluation).

Cream Multi Spot Robe

£25



[Read Customer Review \(5\)](#)

100% polyester. Length 47"/119.5cm.

Sizes XS - XL

Next day delivery and free returns on most items.

452-192-X44

On the Next site, the initial size droplist was replaced once a selection was made, so that availability could be shown. Unfortunately, this was both confusing and frustrating and has since been removed.



Zappos, Marks & Spencer and John Lewis all scored 100% for showing product availability very clearly (including low stock indication).

Assuming that the right product can be found at the right price and availability (see the content design section starting on page 9 regarding prices), users will want to place the product in their shopping basket. To make this as easy as possible, the 'Add to basket' (or similar) button or link should be large, in an eye-catching colour and easily seen without scrolling. Zappos and Abercrombie & Fitch did this well, achieving top marks, although in the latter case the button colour was somewhat muted.

Abercrombie & Fitch received top marks for showing the Add to Bag button above the fold and in a distinctive colour.

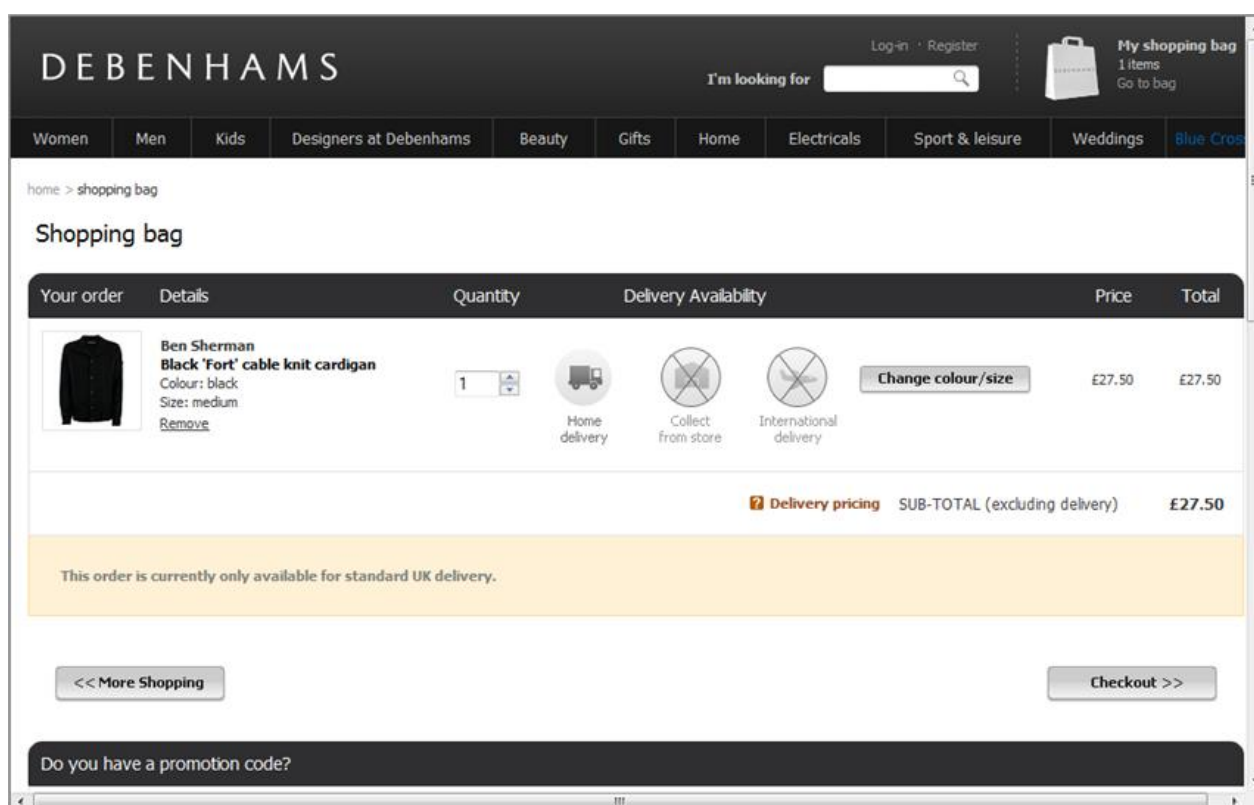
View/Edit basket: It should be easy for users to see the contents of their shopping basket and to edit them if necessary. Most sites did this fairly well but Gap and Abercrombie & Fitch stood out for allowing

colour and size of items to be edited (all sites allowed quantity to be changed or for items to be removed).

Item	Details	Cost	Actions
  <p>Best crewneck</p> <p>Color: heather gray</p> <p>\$18.00 \$9.99</p> <p>Size: XXXL</p> <p> <input type="button" value="XS"/> <input type="button" value="S"/> <input type="button" value="M"/> <input type="button" value="L"/> <input type="button" value="XL"/> <input type="button" value="XXL"/> <input type="button" value="XXXL"/> </p>	<p>Color: heather gray</p> <p>Size: XXXL</p> <p>Unit price: \$18.00 \$9.99</p> <p>Qty: <input type="text" value="1"/></p>	<p>Update item Cancel</p>	<p>Add another</p>

Gap (illustrated here) and Abercrombie and Fitch allowed all aspects of a product to be changed in the checkout – colour, size and quantity.

The final step in the selection process is to **start checkout**. Again, most sites did this well, but the top score – for a large and obvious ‘Checkout’ button above the fold – was achieved by only three sites (Zappos, Nordstrom and Abercrombie & Fitch). Most other sites received an 80% score, primarily by not making the checkout button very obvious, as in the Debenhams example below.



The screenshot shows the Debenhams website's shopping bag interface. At the top, there's a navigation bar with the Debenhams logo, a search bar, and links for 'Log in' and 'Register'. Below this is a category menu with links like 'Women', 'Men', 'Kids', etc. The main heading is 'Shopping bag'. A table lists the items in the bag, including 'Ben Sherman Black 'Fort' cable knit cardigan'. The table has columns for 'Your order', 'Details', 'Quantity', 'Delivery Availability', 'Price', and 'Total'. Below the table, there's a summary section with 'SUB-TOTAL (excluding delivery)' and a note about standard UK delivery. At the bottom, there are buttons for '<< More Shopping' and 'Checkout >>'. A footer section asks 'Do you have a promotion code?'.

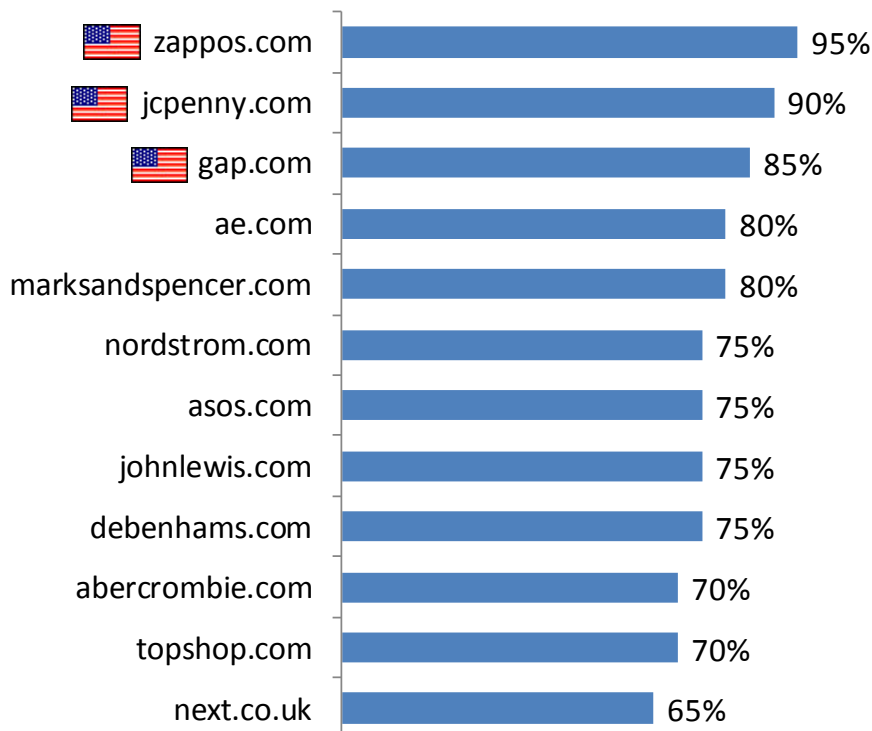
Debenhams is doing most things right, but the Checkout button just isn't very obvious because it is the same grey colour as used elsewhere on the page. (Grey is not a good choice in any event, since it means 'unavailable' in most desktop applications.)

Usability Benchmark

Checkout



The Checkout process is the only area to be dominated by US sites, with the top UK result (Marks & Spencer) coming in at number five. Next brings up the rear by operating its own credit account scheme without actually explaining this to customers.



Checkout Results

Around 45% of users who abandon their shopping basket do so because of the time it took to complete the transaction or failings in the checkout itself (Websurveyor, January 2006). While this figure includes the overall transaction time, checking out is usually the longest part of the process.

In this benchmark group we look at four aspects of sites' checkout pages:

- Login/register
- Billing & delivery details
- Payment details
- Purchase confirmation

For the **login/register** measure we consider whether a site permits checkout without a formal registration, and for customers who have used the site before, whether they are given the chance to log in without re-entering all of their details. The overall score for this metric was quite high at 86%. Abercrombie & Fitch were unusual in not supporting registration at all, while Gap insisted on users registering in order to check out.

Gap alone insisted that users must register in order to check out.

Billing and delivery details were not handled effectively by many sites. The overall average was only 66%, with no site scoring 100%. The issues leading to low scores are quite common – requesting the same information in more than one place, complaints about formatting (of telephone numbers, for example), poor use of screen space and pages being reloaded with no clues for users on how to proceed. All of these problems should be known and avoided by top e-commerce sites, but no merchant passed the benchmark for this measure unscathed. Even John Lewis, one of the UK’s largest and most popular department stores managed to make their billing and delivery details page confusing (see below).

After the customer has entered house number and postcode, the John Lewis site reloads the current page when ‘Find Address’ is pressed, leaving them unsure of what to do next.

On average, the benchmarked sites performed no better on **payment details**. However, here there was a much greater range of scores. Next received 0% because it does not accept payment in the conventional way and requires customers to open a credit account although it does not make mention of this until well into the checkout process (it is described in their terms and conditions, though).

At the high end of scores Gap, J C Penny and Nordstrom all achieved a perfect 100% by having a very direct and obvious payment form (see the J C Penny example below):

credit card

Fields marked with an asterisk (*) are required.

*Card type:

*Name on the card:

*Card number:

*Expiration date:

VISA Card Verification #

(Required for VISA Cards only)
VISA Card Verification # is a three digit number found in the signature area on the back of your VISA credit card. This three digit number is displayed after your credit card number.

☐ I can't read the numbers

J C Penny (shown here), Gap and Zappos all had very direct and obvious payment forms. Penny's was alone in having contingency for an illegible card verification number.

For other sites, the use of screen space was again a problem, even though only a small amount of information is needed for credit card processing. Top Shop, for example, spread its 'confirm and pay' process over four screens, while none of the John Lewis checkout pages fitted in a single 1024 x 768 browser window even though most happily could with only a little adjustment.

In the John Lewis checkout, not even the receipt would fit on a single 1024 x 768 pixel screen because of the poor use of available space.

John Lewis Secure checkout

08456 049 049 [Basket \(& sign out\)](#) [Help \(opens a new window\)](#) [Home page \(& sign out\)](#)

Welcome back Mr Hudson

Welcome Delivery address Delivery options Order summary Payment **Receipt**

Thank you, we have received your order
We will send confirmation of this order to the email address you provided

Order Receipt [Print page](#)

Order number

Delivery address

Mr Hudson

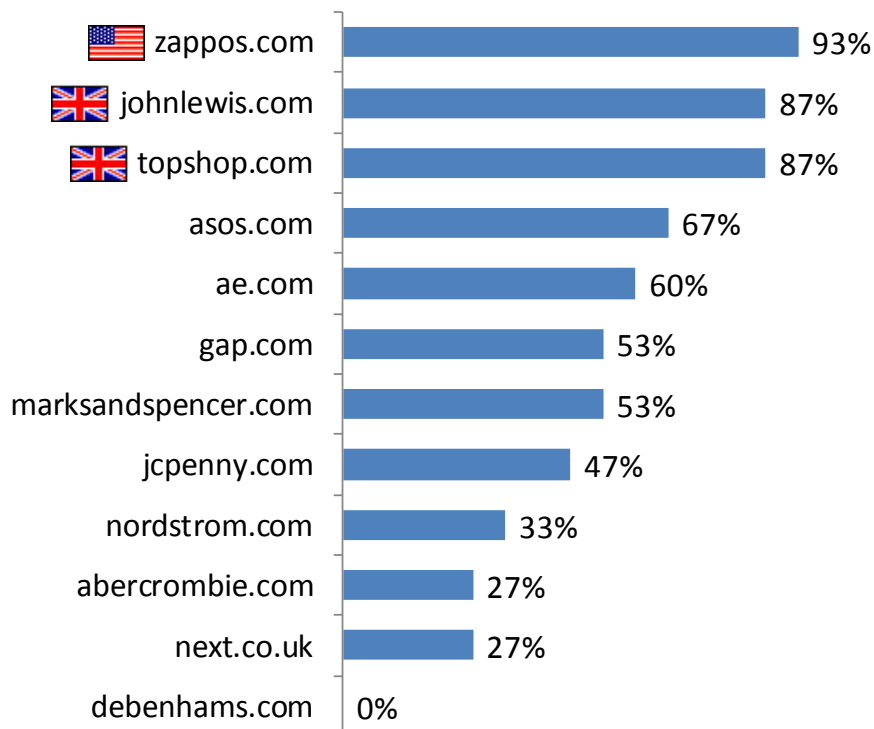
Purchase confirmation provides customers with closure, but when poorly designed, can lead to failed orders instead. All of the clothing retailers in this benchmark performed well on this point, with an overall average of 96%. However, some could have been more forthcoming on issues such as whether customers should expect to receive a confirmation email and how long it might be before their order arrived (Top Shop mentioned neither of these points).

Usability Benchmark

Order Management



Order management features allow customers to track, view and modify orders. Debenhams was alone in not providing any of these features while four other sites scored less than 50%.



Order Management Results

For many other e-commerce market segments, customers would have the expectation of being able to log in to manage orders. Of the twelve clothing sites benchmarked, only Debenhams failed to provide any online order management at all.

The tasks we considered in this group were:

- Check order progress
- View/modify/cancel recent orders
- Find/reconcile charges

An online facility to check order progress was offered by nine sites. Of these American Eagle and Abercrombie & Fitch used an order tracking page based on order number (see the American Eagle example, below):

TRACK YOUR ORDER

American Eagle (shown here) and Abercrombie & Fitch allowed customers to track orders without registration.

Fill out the information below to access tracking information about your order. E-mail is required to confirm your order.

Order Number:

E-mail:

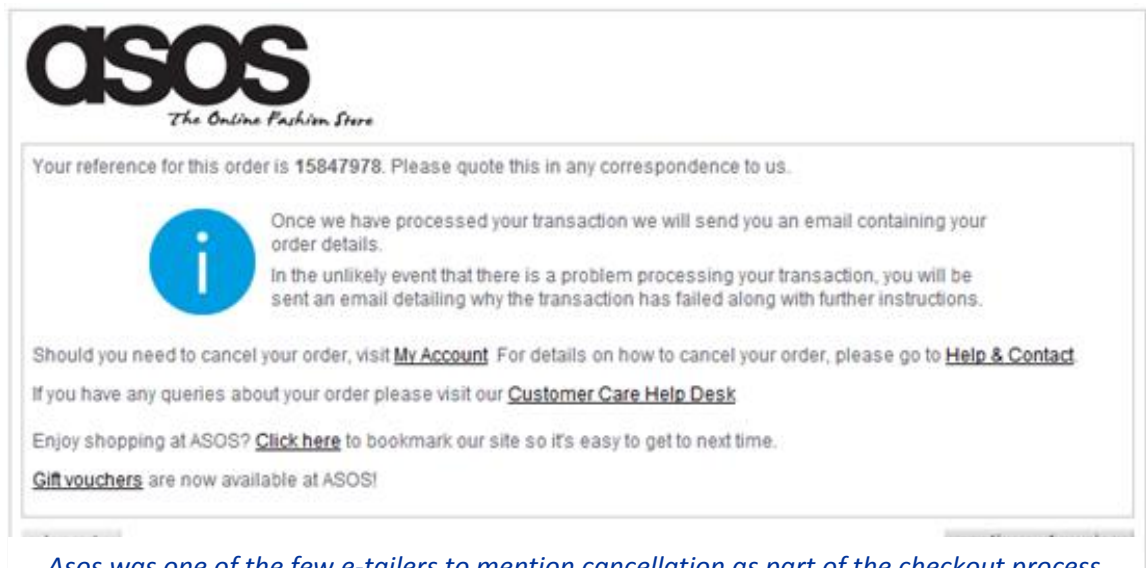
GO >

Registered User?

Sign in to track your orders by date and view your entire order history.

SIGN IN >

Zappos was the only benchmarked site that allowed users to **view, modify or cancel recent orders**. Again, this is a feature that Amazon and other more general e-commerce sites have offered for some time. Cancellation of orders was only available for a short time after ordering, but it does allow customers greater control than most other sites which consider an order 'in progress' the moment it is placed. Abercrombie & Fitch, Next and Debenhams did not offer the ability to view, modify or cancel orders at the time of the evaluation.



Asos was one of the few e-tailers to mention cancellation as part of the checkout process even though all retailers must abide by strict 'distance selling' laws in the UK.

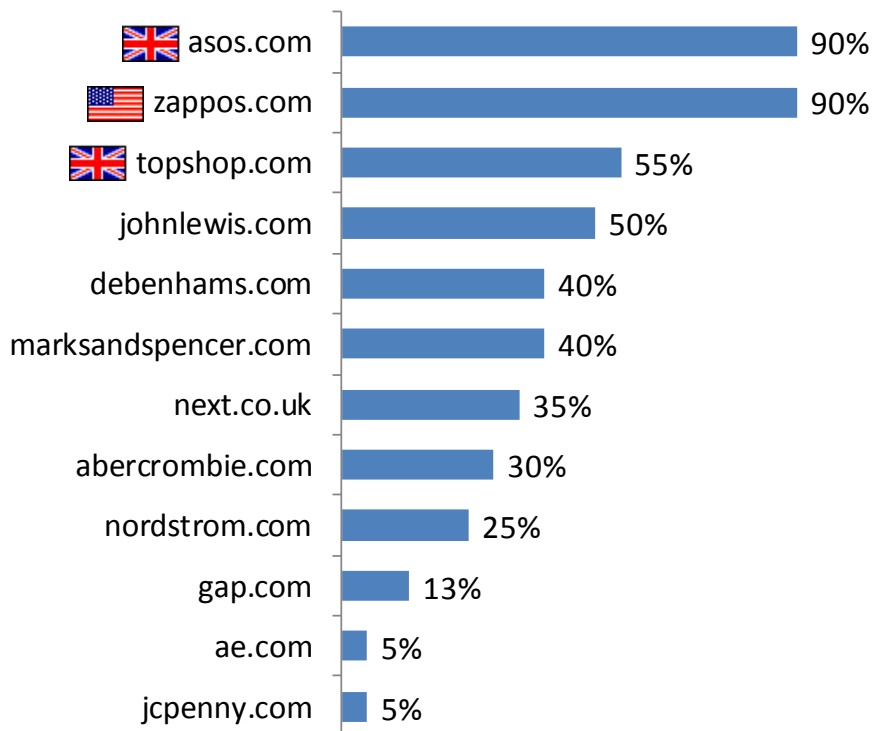
A task often overlooked by developers is **finding or reconciling charges**. Anyone who is trying to verify a credit card statement may need to do this and it is fairly simple to achieve. A list of orders, total cost (including VAT) and a brief description is all that is required. This was a very low-scoring metric across all clothing sites benchmarked with an overall score of just 36%. No site received the top mark.

Usability Benchmark

Online Support



This was one of the lowest scoring metric groups, with most sites struggling to reach 50%. Two sites – Asos and Zappos – stood out as empowering users to solve problems online. At the other extreme, American Eagle and J C Penny provided only minimal information, requiring customers to phone.



Online Support Results

In common with our other benchmarks to date, the online support tasks were difficult to perform due to a lack of features. The tasks were:

- Deal with delivery delays/problems
- Report damaged/non-functional goods
- Ask support question
- Return goods

Only Zappos and Asos made it possible to do more than view a few question-and-answer (FAQ) pages online, earning those sites the joint top score of 90%. In contrast, American Eagle and J C Penny received scores of only 5% by providing nothing more than return instructions online.

Abercrombie & Fitch were one of the few sites to offer an online exchange service. Unfortunately, it was the online customer service offered by the site. (Almost all CS information was illegible because of its small font and low contrast.)

SPEED EXCHANGE

In order to use Speed Exchange you must first provide your original order number and postal code of where your products were shipped.

ORDER NUMBER:

SHIP TO POSTAL CODE:

SUBMIT

Consequently five of the twelve benchmarked sites received no points for **dealing with delivery delays/problems** and **report damaged/non-functional goods tasks**. This is fairly poor in user and customer experience terms, especially when sites such as Amazon and other general e-tailers offer a full range of online services for these issues. The average score across benchmarked sites was only 30% for both of these metrics.

Two of the benchmarked sites allowed customers to **ask a support question** (and get a timely response) online. Zappos provided live help while Asos opted for a one-hour response time email service. Several other sites include FAQ pages and similar, so the average here was somewhat higher than the two metrics described above, at 46%.

Zappos and Asos both offer "24 x 7" online customer care, although the Asos service is a little less immediate, with one-hour email response rather than instant messaging.

Customer Care opening hours:
24 hours a day, 7 days a week

Several sites offered customers the ability to **return goods** online, but often these were moderately crude facilities for printing shipping labels (see the Gap example below). No site provided a fully automated returns process, although Zappos and Asos scored 100% for offering online customer service.

Create your return shipping label

Simply enter your return address below and click the "Create UPS Label" button to create your shipping label.

Return address details* Required fields

First name*

Last name*

Address line 1*

Address line 2

City*

State*

Select One ▼

Zip code*

Create UPS label

The Gap process for creating a UPS label left plenty of potential for error since it was not part of the actual returns process (it was not tied to the original order, for example).



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