

Navigation Best Practices and Competitive Analysis

Prepared by: Nils Hanson

Nils Hanson

nilshanson@gmail.com

www.nilshanson.com

Notes _____

Navigation Best Practices and Competitive Analysis

Note

Background: This document examines navigational styles used within e-commerce web sites. The e-commerce category was picked because of the large amount of information that must be presented and categorized within the navigation and web site. Each web site in this heuristic evaluation relies on a different form of navigation to present information to their users.

Competitive Analysis

A competitive analysis provides valuable insight into best practices and industry benchmarks that can inform the development of a web site navigational system. The purpose of this competitive analysis is to:

- Assess similar industry competitors in the area of online shopping
- Investigate how competitors display navigation and wayfinding information
- Identify best practices that can act as catalysts for innovation
- Translate the findings of the analysis and best practices into a set of recommendations

The analysis focuses on the following corporate sites within the e-commerce shopping industry:



Amazon relies heavily on search to allow users to find products of interest. All categories are also accessible from the home page by rolling over a single tab.

The logo for Lands' End, consisting of the words "LANDS' END" in a white, serif font on a dark blue rectangular background.

Lands' End groups its content into high level categories allowing the user to drill down to specific products. They do a good job of limiting the amount of navigational links presented to the user at any single time. Lands' End also provides search help, a site map and great wayfinding.



Target makes use of dhtml drop down menus to provide its users with all the categories presented on the site. Although this is an efficient means for navigating it can cause accessibility problems if JavaScript is disabled or the user has a visual impairment and must use a screen reader.



Walmart relies on a "tabbed" style navigation and high level groupings.



Zappos displays a lot of content on the home page and does so in a very cluttered and chaotic way. The navigation lacks hierarchy and the wayfinding methods used are rather poor. Furthermore, the navigation lacks consistency in visual treatment.

Note

How do we compare the sites? A high-level **heuristic evaluation** is performed on competitor sites to arrive at a qualified ranking. A heuristic evaluation is an informal usability inspection technique in which interface elements are evaluated to see if they conform to generally accepted principles (heuristic). The purpose of reviewing in this manner is to assess the degree to which user and organizational requirements are being achieved, identify best practices, and provide feedback in a form that can be used to plan the development of user interface design for navigation design.

Criteria and rating system for competitor sites

The following criteria are used to evaluate each of the sites:

- 1.0 Navigation is clear and understandable
- 2.0 Sense of orientation is obvious (where can I go)
- 3.0 Location feedback is obvious (where am I)
- 4.0 Navigation groupings are natural or follow logical order
- 5.0 Labels are simple + understandable
- 6.0 Search is available

A rating from 1 to 5 is given to each criterion, using the following scale:

- 1) Not done or very poorly done
- 2) Below average, lacking quality and consistency
- 3) Average - similar to others in the market and good overall, but has a few problems
- 4) Good - very well done
- 5) Superior quality and best practice

1.0 Navigation is clear and understandable

Note

Presentation Of Information: The information should be presented in a way that is clear and easy to understand and easily scannable

Affords Clicking: It should be obvious that the navigation elements are clickable

Amount Of Information: The amount of information should not be so much to overwhelm the user

Accessibility: The navigation should work with JavaScript disabled and screen readers

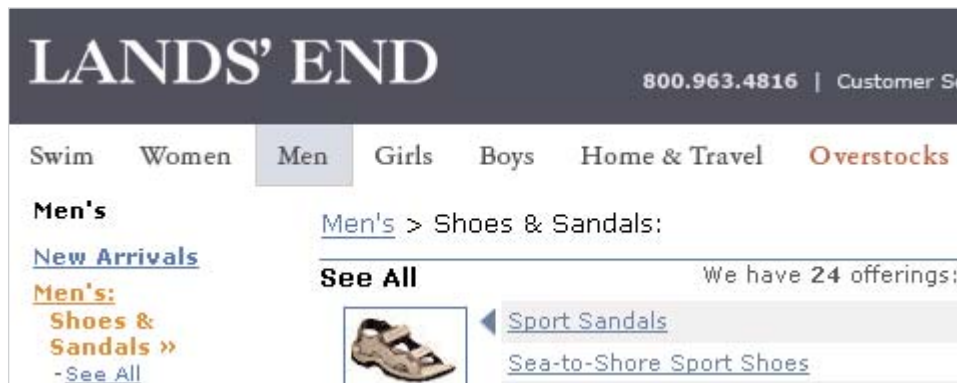
Visibility: The navigation should be highly visible so users can determine at a glance what they can and cannot do

Consistency: Navigation should be presented in a consistent manner throughout the web site

Attributes	Amazon	Lands' End	Target	Walmart	Zappos
Presentation Of Information	3	4	4	3	1
Affords Clicking	3	5	4	3	2
Amount Of Information	4	5	4	3	1
Accessibility	3	4	2	4	3
Visibility	4	4	3	3	2
Perception of ease-of-use.	3	5	3	3	3
Consistency	3	4	3	3	2
Score	23	31	23	19	14

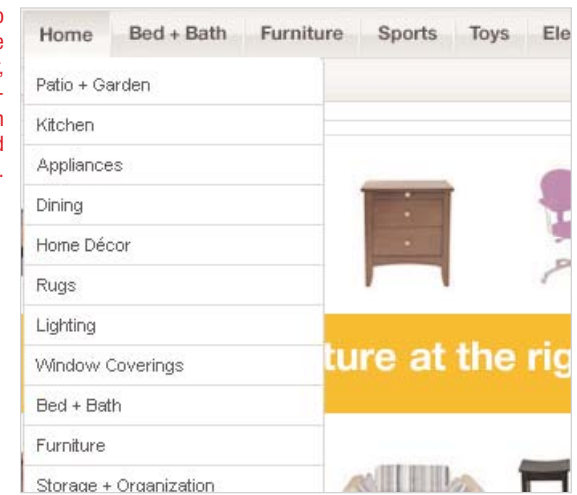
Best Practices

The navigation should be designed in a manner that is simple, easy and efficient for the user. It's best to limit the amount of navigation presented to the user at anyone time, while still giving them the functions needed to complete their goals. The navigation should be placed in an area that is easily findable to the user and should be created in a way that is accessible to a disabled user (screen reader) or with JavaScript disabled. Link treatments and buttons should always afford clicking and the navigation treatment and design should be consistent from page to page. There must be a consistent relationship between the action performed and the results displayed when using navigational elements.



Lands' End groups information into broad categories then lets the user drill down to the product level using a secondary navigation on the left side of the page.

Target uses DHTML style drop downs to allow the user to browse all of the site categories while saving space. However, this style of navigation can cause problems if JavaScript is disabled. This can also cause problems with visual impaired people who use screen readers.



2.0 Sense of orientation is obvious (where can I go)

Note

Presentation Of Information: The information should be presented in a way that is clear and easy to understand and easily scannable
Affords Clicking: It should be obvious that the navigation elements are clickable
Amount Of Information: The amount of information should not be so much to overwhelm the user

Attributes	Amazon	Lands' End	Target	Walmart	Zappos
Presentation Of Information	4	5	4	3	2
Affords Clicking	4	4	4	4	4
Amount Of Information	3	5	3	3	1
Site Map	1	2	2	2	1
Score	12	16	13	12	8

Best Practices

The navigation display enough navigation to allow the user to easily and efficiently achieve their goals. It's important that the navigation be consistent with the users' mental model and habits; by doing this a more efficient navigational experience can be created. Once this is completed similar information can be grouped together using commonly understood and descriptive labels. A site map can be a valuable way for users to find information if a search is not available and can also improve higher search engine visibility.

The screenshot shows the Zappos.com homepage, which is extremely cluttered. At the top, there is a navigation bar with links for Shopping Cart, My Account, My Favorites, and Help. Below this is a main navigation menu with categories like Shoes, Handbags, Brands, Search, On Sale, and Search by Size. The page is filled with various promotional banners, including 'Free Shipping BOTH Ways!', 'HACKER SAFE', and 'Free Shoe Giveaway!'. There are also several search boxes and filters, such as 'Search by Size' and 'Narrow Shoes/Wide Shoes'. The overall layout is chaotic and difficult to navigate.

The screenshot shows the Lands' End website homepage, which is much cleaner and more organized than Zappos.com. The top navigation bar is simple, with links for Swim, Women, Men, Girls, Boys, Home & Travel, and Overstocks. The main content area features a large image of a smiling woman and the text 'Sneak peek at new look Figure-flat tunics'. The overall design is minimalist and easy to read.

Lands' End limits the amount of information displayed and uses broad categories for the user to choose from. The labels used are also very short, descriptive and easy to read.

Zappos.com presents an overwhelming amount of information in a very cluttered and chaotic way. Although the buttons afford clicking, there are too many and they are not treated consistently. A better approach would be to limit the amount of information displayed, using descriptive labels, allowing the user to easily drill down into specific product pages.

3.0 Location feedback is obvious (where am I)

- Note**
- Wayfinding (Breadcrumbs):** The site should provide the user with orientation as to where they are within the web site
- Headers:** The site makes use of headers that are easy and understandable to read
- Clear Navigation Status:** The navigation should visibly display where the user is within the site
- Visibility:** The navigation is highly visible so users can determine at a glance what they can and cannot do

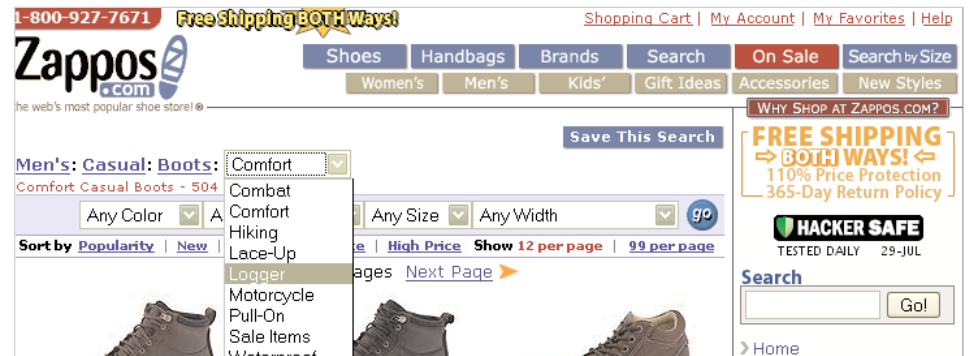
Attributes	Amazon	Lands' End	Target	Walmart	Zappos
Wayfinding (Breadcrumbs)	1	2	2	2	2
Headers	2	2	3	3	1
Clear Navigation Status	4	5	2	2	1
Visibility	3	5	3	2	1
Score	10	14	10	9	5

Best Practices

Location feedback is important because it gives the user a sense of location within an application. This feedback can take place in page headers, navigation status and breadcrumbs. It's important that all these items be placed and designed in a way that are visible to the user. The user should always have a way to get back to the home page if needed. Feedback also allows the user to see what has been accomplished after completing a specific action. For example, after clicking on the "books" link in the navigation the user is presented with a page containing the header "books".



Walmart uses a tab style navigation and makes it quite obvious for the user to determine where they are within the site navigation. Walmart also uses bold headers and makes use of breadcrumbs.



Zappos.com does not make it obvious as to where the user is within the site. They do not use any visual cues within the navigation nor do they use headers/page titles. Zappos does however use breadcrumbs and gives the user the ability to navigate within the breadcrumbs to different sections of the site.

4.0 Navigation groupings are natural or follow a logical order

Note

Presentation Of Information: The information should be presented in a way that is clear and easy to understand and easily scannable

Amount Of Information: The amount of information should not be so much to overwhelm the user

Labeling: The labeling should be descriptive and meaningful to the user

Attributes	Amazon	Lands' End	Target	Walmart	Zappos
Presentation Of Information	3	5	4	3	2
Amount of information	4	5	3	3	2
Labeling	4	5	4	4	3
Score	11	15	11	10	7

Best Practice. Navigational groupings should be consistent with the users mental model and habits. Thus the navigation should support the users behaviors. Its important that the amount of information not be overwhelming to the user. The top level navigation can start broad allowing the user to funnel down into more specific content areas. Exercises such as a card sort can help determine content groupings.

The screenshot shows the Amazon.com navigation menu. It features a grid of 34 product categories grouped by similarity. The categories are: Books, Music, DVD, VHS, Magazines & Newspapers, Computer & Video Games, Software, Amazon Shorts, Electronics, Audio & Video, Camera & Photo, Cell Phones & Service, Computers, Office Products, Musical Instruments, Home & Garden, Bed & Bath, Furniture & Décor, Gourmet Food, Kitchen & Housewares, Outdoor Living, Pet Supplies, Automotive, Tools & Hardware, Industrial & Scientific, Apparel & Accessories, Shoes, Jewelry & Watches, Grocery, Beauty, Health & Personal Care, Sports & Outdoors, Toys & Games, Baby, Wish List, Gift Ideas, Fresh Flowers & Indoor Plants, Wedding Registry, Baby Registry, Free e-Cards, In-Store Pickup, Your Profile, Auctions, Outlet, zShops, Your Media Library, AmazonConnect, Broadband Services, E-mail Subscriptions, Photo Services, Movie Showtimes, Yellow Pages, Travel, Amazon Fishbowl, Financial Services, Sell Your Stuff, Associates Program, Advantage Program, Paid Placements, Web Services, Corporate Accounts.

Amazon displays all 34 product categories on one central window that can be accessed from any page. The product categories are grouped based on similarity.

The screenshot shows the Walmart.com navigation menu. It features 15 categories displayed in tabs: Electronics, Movies, Music, Books, Toys, Baby, Jewelry, Sports & Fitness, For the Home, Garden & Patio, Photo Center, Video Games, Apparel, Gifts & Flowers, Pharmacy. The search bar is also visible.

Walmart displays 15 of its categories within the tabs of its primary navigation. This large amount of information displayed in tabs makes it difficult to scan and is slightly overwhelming. Tabs are usually used best for displaying smaller amounts of information.

5.0 Labels are simple and understandable

Note

Length Of Labels: Long labels can be hard to read and in some cases make the navigation less scalable

Descriptions: Labels should be descriptive and meaningful to the user

Differentiation: Multiple labels that start with the same word can be inefficient to scan

Easy To Read: The text used for the labels should be presented in a readable font and a color that contrast with the background color

Attributes	Amazon	Lands' End	Target	Walmart	Zappos
Length Of Labels	4	4	4	4	4
Descriptions	5	4	4	3	3
Differentiation	4	5	4	4	3
Easy To Read (Contrast)	5	5	3	3	3
Score	18	18	15	14	12

Best Practices

Labels should be short, descriptive and make sense to the user. Having short labels usually allows for a more scalable navigation. The labels should be visually presented in a way that is easily readable and in contrast to the background color. Labels that are differentiated are more easily and efficiently read. Thus, allowing the user to differentiate the information at a glance rather than read the entire word. The labels should always appear clickable. Common names should be used instead of branded names for link labels.

The screenshot shows a navigation bar for Zappos.com. At the top, there is a banner for "Free Delivery! Receive your order in 4-5 days with FREE standard shipping!". Below this, there are several promotional banners: "ZAPPOS COUTURE", "Trends The newest designs!", "Shop Handbags", "Sandals", and "Back to School". A secondary navigation menu includes links for "Boots", "Sandals", "Juniors", "Kids", and "Back To School". There is also a "Search by Size" section with "Narrow Shoes" and "Wide Shoes" options, and a "Go!" button. Brand logos for "CONVERSE" and "KEEN" are visible at the bottom.

Zappo's displays an overwhelming amount of information. The secondary navigation is duplicated with images presented as banner ads. A better approach would be to understand user behavior then limit the amount of information presented to the use.

Lands' End uses simple and short labels to present the information within the secondary navigation. They also highlight the selected page using a bright orange that stand out from the normal blue links.

The screenshot shows the "Men's" navigation menu on Lands' End. The "Men's" section is highlighted in orange. Under "New Arrivals", "Men's: Shoes & Sandals" is highlighted in orange and followed by sub-links: "- See All", "- Casual", "- Refined", and "- Wide". Other categories listed include "Polos & T-Shirts", "Casual Shirts", "Casual Pants", "Jeans", "Shorts & Swim", "Dress Shirts", and "Ties". To the right, there is a "See All" section for "Men's > Shoes & Sandals:" with a sub-menu for "Sport Sandals" containing "Sea-to-Shore", "Sport Slides special pricing", and "Sport Thongs special pricing". Below this, a "Casual" section features a shoe image and a sub-menu for "Sea-to-Shore" containing "Sport Sandals", "Sport Slides special pricing", and "Sport Thongs special pricing".

6.0 Search is available

Note

Basic Search: Consist of a simple field to search the content of the site

Advanced Search: Provides a way to filter search results (example, search within categories)

Help: Provides tips on using the search function

Recommendations: Does the search return Recommendations if there is not data to return within the search

Attributes	Amazon	Lands' End	Target	Walmart	Zappos
Basic Search	1	1	1	1	1
Advanced Search	2	2	2	2	0
Help	0	2	1	0	0
Recommendations	2	0	0	2	2
Score	5	5	4	5	35

Best Practices

Properly structured and meta-tagged information allow users to search and quickly find information. Advanced search options such as filtering and searching within sections allow to narrow search results and can be helpful if searching large amounts of information. Search tips can be helpful for novice users or for users who want to understand advanced search functions. For example, Google allows the user to search only certain terms by surround the terms with quotation marks. If no search results are found the user can be presented with Recommendations or a site map.



Amazon relies heavily on search to allow its users to find the products they are interested in. The use can also filter their search within specific categories. If there are no search results to return the user is taken to the site map.

A screenshot of the Lands' End search tips page. The page title is 'Search Tips'. It features a diagram of a search form with three numbered steps: 1. Type keywords into the search box, 2. Select a category from the dropdown menu (currently showing 'In All Products'), and 3. Click the 'go' button. To the right of the diagram is the text 'How to use search' followed by the same three steps. Below the diagram, there are two sections: 'Broaden your search.' which advises being general and provides an example of using 'Coats.' instead of 'Tyrolean duffle coat.', and 'Try alternate terms.' which advises using different names for the same category and provides an example of using 'chinos.' instead of 'khakis.'

Lands' End provides its users with search tips.

8.0 Key findings and conclusion

Note

This analysis of these e-commerce sites provides insight into a range of best practices and opportunities for competitive advantage. The purpose of this competitive analysis is to:

- Assess competitors and navigational treatments
- Investigate how competitors display and present navigation and wayfinding treatments
- Identify best practices that can act as catalysts for innovation
- Understand how e-commerce sites incorporate navigation and wayfinding into their site structure
- Translate the findings of the analysis and best practices into a set of recommendations

The competitive analysis identifies and recommends **baseline features** and functionality to ensure that navigational elements are meeting common practices

Navigation Baseline features

- Navigation schemes should be consistent throughout
- Page titles should match link labels
- Links should be clearly represented (e.g. underlined) and should be same color throughout the site
- Consider wayfinding tools such as breadcrumb trails or highlighting navigation sections
- Using a persistent, global navigation scheme throughout the site
- The site should contain a basic search
- Persistent, global navigation scheme throughout the site
- Buttons should afford clicking
- Navigation should be accessible to disabled users and to users with JavaScript disabled
- Sense of orientation should be obvious (Where can I go?)
- Avoid using branding or product names in navigation or section titles as this only leads to confusion
- Use alternative text with any images and html header tags for page headers

Competitive Advantage

- Advanced Search
- Recommendations given when no search results are returned
- Search tips
- Site map
- Allow users to control and set preferences for the type of content they would like to see
- Provide Live Chat or Help for the site
- Short and descriptive labels (Commonly used terms)
- Limit the amount of navigation and link treatments
- Color schemes should take into account people with vision impairments such as shade and color blindness