



DO TRAVEL SEARCH ENGINES DELIVER?

An Examination of the Leading Sites

By William J. McGee

December 20, 2005

Consumer Reports WebWatch
101 Truman Avenue
Yonkers, N.Y. 10703-1057
914.378.2600
www.ConsumerWebWatch.org

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Executive Summary	1
About Consumer Reports WebWatch	4
An Overview of the Travel Search Engine Market	5
What is an Aggregator?	5
Are Consumers Using Travel Search Engines?	7
Findings and Concerns	9
Incomplete Searching Methodology	9
Customer Service: Surfing the 'Net Without a Net.	10
Potential Bias: Questions Remain	11
Browser Compatibility: Old Problems Persist	12
Linking: Not all TSEs Offer Connectivity	12
A Closer Analysis of Leading Travel Search Engines	13
AOL Pinpoint Travel	13
Booking Buddy	14
Cheapflights	15
ITA Software	16
Kayak	17
Mobissimo	18
Pricegrabber	18
QIXO	19
SideStep	20
Travelzoo	21
Yahoo Farechase	22
Bibliography	24
Appendix A: Other Related Travel Sites	26

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The sudden growth of travel search and aggregator sites since late 2004 has changed the way Americans research and book travel. Sites such as Kayak, Mobissimo and SideStep aren't bound by databases and other reservations systems and instead search several online travel Web sites simultaneously to return rates for airline tickets, hotels and rental cars. While these travel search engines have seemingly simplified the online travel shopping process, Consumer Reports WebWatch discovered some serious issues – including slow customer service and site technical problems. Therefore, our advice to consumers remains consistent since WebWatch began researching travel sites in 2002: No single site is sufficient as a one-stop destination for the cheapest air fares, hotel rooms and other travel products. For instance, for airline tickets, consumers should shop among aggregators (Expedia, Orbitz, Travelocity); search sites as described above; and airline sites.

This report provides an overview of the emerging travel search engine market, and an examination of its business practices. To that end, WebWatch has analyzed 11 of the most popular TSEs, based on traffic data provided by Nielsen NetRatings: AOL Pinpoint Travel; BookingBuddy; Cheapflights; ITA Software; Kayak;

Mobissimo; Pricegrabber; QIXO; SideStep; Travelzoo; and Yahoo FareChase.

After examining the performance, offerings and customer service capabilities of these TSEs, WebWatch found that several engines may improve the online shopping experience, but none is a silver bullet for consumers. Furthermore, and more critically, these sites collectively raise serious questions and issues:

KEY FINDINGS

Consumer Reports WebWatch examined 11 travel search engines and found:

- None of the sites culled fares and rates from the entire universe of travel sites available.
- There's a disturbing "customer service vacuum" since many of these sites do not encourage direct communication with consumers.
- Technological glitches may prevent certain itineraries and rates from being captured by travel search sites.
- Questions remain about potential bias on display screens.

■ Despite offering a broad range of choices, none of the TSEs evaluated include all the leading online travel agencies in their inventories, so many “Web-only” rates are not captured;

■ Although some TSEs search low-fare airlines such as JetBlue, certain low-fare carriers – including Southwest, the nation’s low-fare airline leader – are missing from inventories;

■ Even when a TSE claims to have “searched” another travel site, technological deficiencies may prevent certain itineraries and rates from being captured;

■ A disturbing “customer service vacuum” exists among TSEs evaluated;

■ Potentially biased displays are not adequately addressed, and some TSEs are inherently limited because they are partnered with a specific travel site – such as Yahoo’s relationship with Travelocity – and therefore do not search additional sites;

■ Three of the 11 TSEs examined by WebWatch suffered browser compatibility problems not seen among the leading travel agency sites for many years.

This examination made it apparent no one site does it all, nor is it likely that such a site will emerge at any time in the near future, as some search sites acknowledge. Hugo Burge, vice chairman for Cheapflights, argues no single travel site or travel search site can truly claim to be a one-stop shop: “Meta-search sites are searching in real time, but with a limited number of sites. They can’t guarantee the best deal. It’s a huge challenge.”

So despite the hype and promises, for now the best advice remains: You’d better shop around. More important, you should be very clear about the booking channels you’re employing if using a TSE to search other



WHAT IS A TSE?

Travel companies and analysts often use the terms “search sites,” “meta-search sites,” “aggregators” or “travel-specific search engines” to describe Web sites that provide rates for various travel products — including airlines, hotels, and rental cars — culled from other travel Web sites. Throughout this report, the terms “travel search engines” and “TSEs” will be used in the most generic sense to refer to all such Web sites.

travel sites, since there remains lingering confusion over the TSEs' role and accountability in the booking process, as this report will more fully explain.

CREDITS

The project was written and directed by William J. McGee, a travel journalist, consultant to Consumer Reports WebWatch and editor of *Consumer Reports Travel Letter* from 2000 to 2002. This project was funded by Consumer Reports WebWatch and edited by Tracy Ziemer, WebWatch's senior producer.

FIGURE 2

SEARCH CAPABILITIES OF TRAVEL SEARCH SITES

WEB SITE	SEARCH FOR DOMESTIC AND FOREIGN AIRFARE?	SEARCH FOR HOTEL ROOMS?	SEARCH FOR RENTAL CARS?	COMPATIBLE WITH MOST BROWSERS?	PROVIDES DIRECT LINK TO SITES WHILE SAVING SEARCH CRITERIA?
AOL PINPOINT TRAVEL	✓	✓			✓
BOOKINGBUDDY	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
CHEAPFLIGHTS	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
ITA SOFTWARE	✓			✓	
KAYAK	✓	✓	✓		✓
MOBISSIMO	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
PRICEGRABBER	✓	✓		✓	✓
QIXO	✓	✓	✓	✓	Booking through QIXO
SIDESTEP	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
TRAVELZOO	✓	✓		✓	✓
YAHOO FARECHASE	✓	✓	✓		✓

ABOUT CONSUMER REPORTS WEBWATCH

Consumer Reports WebWatch is a project of Consumers Union, non-profit publisher of Consumer Reports magazine and ConsumerReports.org. The project is supported by The Pew Charitable Trusts, which invests in ideas that fuel timely action and results; the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, which promotes excellence in journal-

ism worldwide and invests in the vitality of 26 U.S. communities; and the Open Society Institute, which encourages debate in areas in which one view of an issue dominates all others. WebWatch's Web site launched April 16, 2002. <http://www.consumerwebwatch.org>

AN OVERVIEW OF THE TRAVEL SEARCH ENGINE MARKET

Travel remains the single largest component of e-commerce, generating \$52 billion of the \$145 billion online market in the U.S. in 2004, according to Forrester Research, a consulting firm in Cambridge, Mass. But despite the dominance of such online travel agency heavyweights as Expedia, Hotwire, Orbitz, Priceline and Travelocity, most users consult multiple Web sites when shopping online for travel.

In fact, the average consumer visits 3.6 sites when shopping for an airline ticket online, according to PhoCusWright, a Sherman, Conn.-based travel technology firm. Yahoo claims 76% of all online travel purchases are preceded by some sort of search function, according to Malcolmson, director of product development for Yahoo Travel. And the 2004 Travel Consumer Survey published by Darien, Conn.-based JupiterResearch noted that "nearly two in five online travel consumers say they believe that no one site has the lowest rates or fares."

Thus a niche was created for players such as BookingBuddy, Cheapflights, Kayak, Mobissimo, Pricegrabber, QIXO, SideStep, Travelzoo, and Yahoo FareChase, which seek to find the lowest rates from

multiple travel sites, thereby seemingly eliminating the need for consumers to cross-shop from site to site.

WHAT IS AN AGGREGATOR?

Within the class of travel search engines are several sub-categories of sites that offer a range of services and search methods:

■ Portal sites.

Several of the leading generic search and information aggregator sites also offer travel components, some of which are discussed in this report. In the broadest sense, virtually any search engine could be considered a "travel search engine." However, some generic search engines also should be ranked as TSEs, since they include both paid and unpaid links to travel sites and maintain "travel" pages, often accompanied by original editorial content. This category of generic search sites includes About.com, AOL, MSN, Yahoo.

■ Meta-search sites.

These sites use technological tools to "scrape" or scan other travel sites, including third-party travel agency sites

– such as Expedia, Orbitz and Travelocity – and branded sites maintained by individual travel companies, such as Delta.com, Hilton.com, or Hertz.com, for example. This category was largely established by companies with executives with technological experience and includes Kayak, Mobissimo, SideStep, and Yahoo FareChase.

■ **Aggregators of “hot deals” and “special fares.”**

These sites collect and publish bargain rates by advising consumers where to find them online (sometimes but not always through a direct link). Rather than providing detailed search tools, these sites generally focus on offering advertised specials, such as last-minute sales from travel suppliers eager to deplete unused inventory; therefore, these sites often work best for consumers who are flexible about destinations and other key itinerary components. This category was largely established by companies with journalistic pedigrees and includes Bestfares, BookingBuddy, Cheapflights, Travelzoo, and USAToday.com’s travel listings.

■ **Destination aggregators.**

Such sites often provide specific editorial content, such as user reviews of travel products or detailed destination information. In some ways, these sites are similar to non-Internet media, such as newspapers or magazines, in that they provide news alerts and rate advisories, but the

burden of surfing to these deals often is left to the consumer. In many cases, the emphasis is on the destination rather than the booking specifics. Whether these reviews and/or recommendations are in any way affected by business agreements with travel suppliers remains an unanswered question in many cases. This category was largely established in the tradition of destination guidebooks and includes Fodor’s, IgoUgo, Lonely Planet, TripAdvisor, and Yahoo Travel.

Within the sub-category of meta-search sites, there is yet another sub-division: 1) sites attempting to woo consumers directly to them; and 2) sites using their technology to power other sites’ search functions. Danny Sullivan, editor of SearchEngineWatch.com, analyzed the market in 2004 and noted: “Some search engines get their results by turning to third-party ‘search providers’ to ‘power’ their listings. To make matters more confusing, these search providers may run their own search engine sites as well.”

For example, Kayak launched its own consumer site, but also partnered with About.com, Lonely Planet, and USAToday.com, as well as AOL Pinpoint Travel. This issue arose at “Trust or Consequence: Why Credibility Is the Killer App in Online Travel,” WebWatch’s travel conference in Dallas on March 1, 2005. Steve Hafner, the CEO and co-founder of Kayak, said, “We’re relying on getting our technology company, and getting [our] system...out to other Web sites that already have consumers who are shopping for travel products and services.” Kayak will not say if these business agreements allow Kayak’s partners to alter Kayak’s content in any way or if identical data are provided by each of these sites.

To add yet another layer of confusion, some brands maintain separate search or booking sites. For example, Yahoo uses Travelocity as the search engine for Yahoo.com, yet separately launched Yahoo FareChase, which uses a completely different search engine.

Furthermore, there is a broad array of business models within the travel search sector, with some sites being paid for directing consumers to other sites. However, most sites do not charge shoppers a fee before passing them off to another travel site.

**YAHOO USES TRAVELOCITY
AS THE SEARCH ENGINE
FOR YAHOO.COM
YET SEPARATELY LAUNCHED
YAHOO FARECHASE,
WHICH USES A
COMPLETELY DIFFERENT
SEARCH ENGINE.**

ARE CONSUMERS USING TRAVEL SEARCH ENGINES?

With a few exceptions — SideStep and QIXO began operating in 2000 — most TSEs have emerged within the last two years. Most analysts believe this sudden growth is due to a niche created by the maturation of the online travel market. WebWatch and others have repeatedly noted that none of the established travel agency sites (such as Expedia, Orbitz, and Travelocity) continually offer the best deals, so consumers need to shop several sites. Many TSEs claim they do the comparison shopping for them. So what effect have these TSEs been having on consumer behavior and the industry?

Clearly more consumers are turning to TSEs, both for vacations and corporate travel. Forrester Research noted in a recent report on search engines: "Meta-search sites are sub-niche players — for now." The report featured an extensive survey of U.S. shoppers and statistically showed who used search engines for travel research, including differentiating between those who browse for travel ("lookers") and those who use sites to purchase travel products ("bookers"):

- Online Leisure Travel Lookers: 22%
- Online Leisure Travel Bookers: 50%
- Online Business Travel Lookers: 13%
- Online Business Travel Bookers: 35%

In a research report released in April 2005, London-based EyeforTravel noted: "The TSE market is still small and does not have a significant impact on the industry today." However, the report also said: "The TSE market is growing on a par with the [online travel agency] market. The total market size of TSEs for the year 2004 was \$1.3 billion, and is expected to grow at the rate of 35% a year to \$1.8 billion in 2005."

EyeforTravel claims TSE revenues derived from paid links to travel sites are divided thusly:

- Airlines: 43%
- Hotels: 22%
- Car rentals/ground transportation/rail: 35%

In May 2005, New York City-based Hitwise, an online

competitive intelligence service that monitors 25 million Internet users a day, stated that among TSEs, Kayak had shown the largest six-month increase in market share, up 6,019% between Oct. 2004 and April 2005 — not surprising considering the "beta" version launched in late 2004. Hitwise claimed that during the same six-month period, market share for Yahoo FareChase rose 659%; Mobissimo rose 350%; and Cheapflights rose 56%.

It seems apparent that in years to come, the current TSEs, with their emphasis on price above all, will be viewed as bare-bones and one-dimensional. Diane Clarkson, an analyst for JupiterResearch, released a report in June 2005 that noted: "For consumers, TSEs' current value lies primarily in price-based comparison shopping. Differentiation and increasing consumer value will require enriching content, expanding product assortments, and possibly implementing customer relationship management."

■ Business Tensions

The world of TSEs is one of complex payment structures and acronyms built around CPCs (cost per clicks), CPMs (cost per impressions), CPAs (cost per actions), PPCs (pay per clicks), CACs (customer acquisition costs), and CTRs (click-through rates). For consumers, this alphabet soup means money is changing hands based on their online travel buying habits, specifically *how* they shop and *where* they shop.

Clearly incentives for working with TSEs differ among travel suppliers (such as airlines) and integrated online travel agencies (such as Expedia, Orbitz, or Travelocity). The EyeforTravel research report, for example, notes TSEs currently refer transactions worth \$780 million to direct suppliers (with airlines commanding the largest share at \$561 million). The report says a "comparatively lesser amount" is referred to online travel agencies. Little wonder EyeforTravel concludes: "TSEs are considered both competitor and marketing tool by other travel players."

Now, just as some shoppers are using TSEs to obtain a comprehensive overview of possible shopping options, there is evidence that travel companies have qualms about being linked. By early 2005, travel sites — including the Big Three of Expedia, Orbitz, and Travelocity — began airing concerns about the TSE market.

In an article in *The Wall Street Journal* in March, Michelle Peluso, the CEO of Travelocity, was quoted saying: "We continue to evaluate them all [TSEs], but we're still not convinced that any of them are good for consumers, suppliers, or us. We see these engines as commoditizing travel at a time when we're working hard with suppliers to go in the opposite direction."

In the same article, Steven McArthur, president of Expedia North America, said, "Our view is that anyone that aggregates travel is a competitor in one way or another." In a January article in *The Los Angeles Times*, Kendra Thornton, a spokeswoman for Orbitz, said: "We are in the process of reevaluating our relationship with SideStep and Kayak and all other travel search engines."

For consumers, a key issue is determining which travel suppliers are included in a TSE's mix. For example, JetBlue's flights are listed in Kayak, Mobissimo, QIXO, SideStep, Yahoo FareChase, and other search sites, even though the carrier is absent from many popular travel sites.

And some travel companies don't wish to be included in any sites but their own, particularly Southwest Airlines, notorious for fighting *not* to be included in leading travel sites. Yet BookingBuddy has found a solution of sorts: it allows users to input itineraries and then select Southwest.com from a drop-down bar. Southwest doesn't object to this arrangement, BookingBuddy told WebWatch.

Which raises the question: If TSEs allow search by specific airlines, hotel chains, car rental firms, or cruise lines, why not surf directly to the branded site maintained by such companies and shop directly? One simple but nonetheless vital justification for the existence of TSEs is the consumer's ability to input search parameters and itinerary details only once, and then link back and forth between a variety of travel sites. As elementary as it sounds, this simple practice may keep some TSEs alive.

■ How they do business

At WebWatch's online travel conference in Dallas, TSE executives asserted their business models allow for free usage by consumers and no payment at all from certain

FOR CONSUMERS, A KEY ISSUE IS DETERMINING WHICH TRAVEL SUPPLIERS ARE INCLUDED IN A TSE's MIX.

travel suppliers. To which Cheryl Rosner, then president of Hotels.com (now Expedia Corporate Travel President), responded, "Call me crazy, but I think you guys have to get paid at some point for something. You can't just be sitting out there saying, 'I'm just going to get out there and aggregate and acquire traffic for all of my suppliers for free, because this is an altruistic or philanthropic venture that we've undertaken.'"

JupiterResearch's Clarkson recognizes the challenges: "Without the participation of all or most major online travel agencies, TSEs are not comprehensive. However, online travel agencies that participate are at a disadvantage because their service fees may render them noncompetitive." [Indeed, after searching for a flight on AOL Pinpoint Travel, WebWatch was linked to Northwest Airlines' own site, where a message appeared: "Reminder: You don't pay service fees when you purchase at nwa.com."]

Clarkson also spells out why some travel suppliers — particularly airlines — may be wary of TSEs, because "displaying products based on price will heighten consumers' price sensitivity." She says this is particularly important for "traditional airlines," since their fares are being displayed next to those of low-cost carriers.

Even so, Brian Barth, the CEO and founder of SideStep, believes TSEs are here to stay. "We're going to be living in an environment with all three: bricks-and-mortar travel agencies, online travel agencies, and search. Privately, [travel suppliers] will say this is the future. But that doesn't mean they'll speed it along either."

FINDINGS AND CONCERNS

A primary drawback for all travel search engines is the faulty claim they are “searching the Web” for the absolute best travel deals. True, they are searching the Web, but it’s a big Web and no one site has the capability to find all the best bargains. It’s doubtful such a travel site will ever arise.

In an effort to remain competitive, agency sites such as Expedia, Hotwire, Orbitz, Priceline and Travelocity have prevented TSEs from listing special “Web-only” rates these sites have negotiated with their business partners. In addition, the exclusion of certain low-fare airlines – most notably low-cost carriers Southwest and JetBlue – from TSE inventories is another fundamental limitation.

The limited universe of travel rates TSEs can offer – despite all the hype to the contrary – is just one issue with these types of sites. Detailed below are other key areas of concern:

INCOMPLETE SEARCHING METHODOLOGY: “SCRAPING” MAY NOT BE ENOUGH

EyeforTravel’s research report illustrates how TSEs gather travel booking and fare data from a variety

of direct and indirect channels, including:

- travel suppliers;
- global distribution systems/computer reservations systems commonly used by travel agencies;
- offline sellers of tours and other packages;
- online travel agencies.

Some industry observers believe Kayak has a technical advantage over competitors since it is powered in large part by ITA Software, a technology designed to find and mix millions of potential airfare combinations. This technology, created by a Cambridge, Mass.-based firm of the same name, was created as a business-to-business product and is used by travel agencies, third-party travel sites, and even airlines to power their own branded sites.

But even the most comprehensive TSEs still miss large chunks of inventory. Bob Harrell, president of New York City-based consultancy Harrell Associates Inc., says “scraping” fares from travel sites is an inexact science. He notes, “Some of these systems can be very sensitive to changes in technology and the layout of the screen being scraped. Screen-scrapers are only good if the screen doesn’t change.” *[Disclosure: Harrell Associates collaborated with Consumer Reports WebWatch on three online travel research projects in 2002 and 2003.]*

Harrell explains there is a high level of sensitivity to syntax, so if scraping parameters are input and then a screen's layout changes even in a small way, a single wrong character will prevent the search tool from finding the correct fare, or the data will be collected incorrectly. He adds, "Air is the easiest to scrape. But what about hotels and other travel products? Sometimes, these [TSEs] have a very limited scope and it can be more limited with non-air data, such as hotels and cars."

Undoubtedly such problems contribute to a related issue: Many listed fares and rates in TSEs suddenly are not available for booking on the linked site. This phenomenon has been noted by *Condé Nast Traveler* and other publications.

CUSTOMER SERVICE: SURFING THE 'NET WITHOUT A NET

For consumers, customer service may be the TSEs' biggest weak spot. In simple terms, users often are on their own when surfing among TSEs. If a problem arises before a consumer is "handed off" to a linked travel site in order to book the travel products searched for, the issue probably will not be addressed.

The issue of hand-offs requires further explanation. Consumers familiar with travel agency sites such as Expedia, Orbitz, and Travelocity are used to entering specific trip itinerary information (such as flight times, hotel location, car rental vehicle type, etc.) and then being offered a variety of products from multiple travel suppliers, ready for booking directly through that site.

Conversely, most TSEs search a variety of travel sites — travel supplier sites and travel agency sites alike — and then provide details about specific products. The TSEs that offer "direct linking" (such as Kayak, Mobissimo, and SideStep) then connect the consumer directly with the travel site offering the desired rate, and the consumer may book that itinerary with that site — not with the TSE itself. In another scenario, some TSEs simply list itineraries and rates but do not provide a "direct link" to the travel site, so the shopper must then re-enter all the itinerary data into the travel site offering the desired rate.

For some consumers, this complex chain of links and hand-offs undoubtedly generates confusion. If, for example, a shopper uses Kayak, is referred to Hotwire, and books a hotel room with Marriott, but then learns the trip must be cancelled...well, what now?

Such a case was recently detailed in the *Traveler's Aide* column on USA Today.com (www.usatoday.com/travel/columnist/burbank/2005-05-03-burbank_x.htm), in which a consumer used SideStep to book through Lodging.com for a Ramada room and encountered a problem. Although SideStep wasn't at fault, the customer was confused about where to turn. *[Disclosure: This report's author is a paid freelance travel columnist for USA Today.com.]*

Brian Barth, the CEO and founder of SideStep, acknowledges, "We can't take the hands-off approach of a Google." SideStep says it tries to be "very clear" about notifying consumers when they are leaving the site and being linked to another site. But Barth adds, "We don't run a call center and never will."

An executive for another TSE says: "'Buyer beware' isn't fair necessarily, but sites do need to be clear about saying, 'We are not selling you this ticket.'" Unfortunately, not all TSEs have accomplished this successfully.

As explained in the previous section, WebWatch initiated anonymous contact with the customer service departments at six of the TSEs evaluated. Unlike leading travel agency sites (such as Expedia, Orbitz, and Travelocity),

CUSTOMER SERVICE MAY BE THE BIGGEST WEAK SPOT. USERS OFTEN ARE ON THEIR OWN WHEN SURFING AMONG TSEs.

none of these six sites offered toll-free telephone assistance for users. Five of the sites offered e-mail as a communication channel and one, QIXO, offered an interactive "live chat 24-hour customer service" help desk.

An identical query regarding the site's charge card security policy was sent to all six sites. Those sites that responded to this query were then sent a follow-up question regarding how long the site had been in operation. All queries were sent at the start of a business day to measure how quickly the sites responded. This testing was conducted anonymously in April 2005.

Unfortunately, the results were poor, as explained in greater detail later in this report. Of the six sites evaluated only QIXO and SideStep fully and completely responded to these queries, while two sites did not respond at all. QIXO deserved credit for initiating the live chat program; however, it was clear from the responses to WebWatch's queries that further customer service training was needed at QIXO since the responses were uninformative and vague. Of the other four sites evaluated, Pricegrabber and Yahoo FareChase did not follow up after initial responses, while Kayak and Mobissimo failed to respond at all.

POTENTIAL BIAS: QUESTIONS REMAIN

At a recent travel conference, Svetlozar Nestorov, president of technology and co-founder of Mobissimo, said the infinitesimal flight combinations available via TSEs could overwhelm a customer: "Too much choice is bad for you, and bad for your happiness." So what is his recipe for consumer happiness? Nestorov's vision is a database of reliable travel suppliers, recommended by his site: "It's about getting you to tell us what you want to do. Trust us, and we will tell you where to go."

Such answers raise quite a few questions, such as how such recommendations will be compensated, and whose interests will reign: the consumer's or the business partner's?

This topic of bias dominated discussions at "Trust or Consequence: Why Credibility Is the Killer App in Online

CONSUMERS MAY HAVE DIFFICULTY DISCERNING WHICH EDITORIAL COMPONENTS ARE PAID AND WHICH ARE UNBIASED LISTINGS.

Travel," WebWatch's travel conference in Dallas on March 1, 2005. This was particularly true during a panel discussion among executives from online travel companies, including Kayak, Mobissimo, and SideStep.

Kayak's Hafner said objectivity is an advantage for his site: "Marriott's trying to sell you a Marriott. Travelocity's trying to sell you what they have on their store shelves. That calls objectivity into question for consumers, and that leads to cross-shopping as well."

Just as they are on travel agency sites, the screens on TSEs are replete with all manner of advertisements for travel companies. When viewing such busy screens, consumers may have difficulty discerning which editorial components are paid placement and which are unbiased listings of the best available deals and itineraries.

Beatrice Tarka, CEO and co-founder of Mobissimo, maintained that consumers understand the difference between organic listings and paid advertising: "We have opted for having objective results, which are in the middle, and we have the sponsored links....This has nothing to do with the objective results." [It should be noted that when WebWatch reviewed Mobissimo.com and searched for rates on the site, advertisements for travel companies popped up on the screen; however, they sometimes promoted the companies listed first, and sometimes did not.]

Kayak stated the lack of a deal would not prevent a consumer from seeing that company's products on Kayak's

screens. Hafner said: “We don’t make money by selling consumers something. What we do is, we help them find the information they want. But we don’t, in general, at least at Kayak.com, we don’t suppress results.”

SideStep’s Barth added: “We believe that good information is the antidote of commoditization. And that the more information you can give people, the better off.”

The placement of links can be affected by marketing deals as well. Cheapflights, for example, doesn’t provide booking capability, but does provide links to several travel sites for consumers searching for rates. Burge acknowledged to WebWatch that the order of these links is determined in part by fees paid for higher listings, and says the links may change with time.

Krista Pappas, chief strategist for BookingBuddy, offered this insight into her site’s travel listings: Any travel company displaying a button or banner ad is paying BookingBuddy, while any company in a drop-down may or may not be paying. (This is not explained to consumers on the site.) She says at any given time there are 15 to 20 paid advertisers among the listed companies. She also adds, “The only time we’ve removed a company from this list is when they’ve asked us.”

SideStep’s Barth is more blunt than most travel executives. He acknowledges his site has marketing partners, but states: “What SideStep displays is not affected by paid agreements.”

Unfortunately for consumers, all TSEs can’t make such a claim.

BROWSER COMPATIBILITY: OLD PROBLEMS PERSIST

For many consumers, particularly the growing population of Macintosh users, some TSEs are not a viable option at all. They have built-in limitations in their browsers that prevent consumers using Macintosh products from using these sites in part or in whole.

Three of the 11 TSEs analyzed by WebWatch — AOL Pinpoint Travel; Kayak; and Yahoo FareChase — are limited in this way. Undoubtedly this problem is driving a significant number of potential shoppers away from these three sites.

In more than three years of testing from 2002 to 2005, WebWatch did not encounter browser issues with any of the dozens of travel sites it examined, in the U.S. or abroad. At press time, none of the four TSEs listed above had expanded their browser capabilities.

LINKING: NOT ALL TSEs OFFER CONNECTIVITY

Two of the 11 TSEs analyzed by WebWatch did not offer direct links to other travel sites. In both cases, this was due to inherent business issues.

ITA Software, a product that is not designed for consumers, did not offer links. Users can obtain fare information for airlines only and contact a traditional travel agency to book. In addition, QIXO was the only TSE that also served as a booking site itself and therefore did not provide direct links to other travel sites.

**SOME TSEs HAVE BUILT-IN
LIMITATIONS THAT
PREVENT MACINTOSH
USERS FROM USING THESE
SITES.**

A CLOSER ANALYSIS OF LEADING TRAVEL SEARCH ENGINES

Note: Some TSEs allow shoppers to input trip itinerary information so the TSE can search multiple travel sites and the consumer can be linked directly to these sites. Other TSEs search multiple travel sites but do not provide a direct link that retains all the itinerary data, so although the user receives information on rates and itineraries, he or she then must input the trip details again after linking. As for booking directly through the TSE itself, only QIXO offers such a function.

AOL PINPOINT TRAVEL

<http://www.pinpointtravel.com>

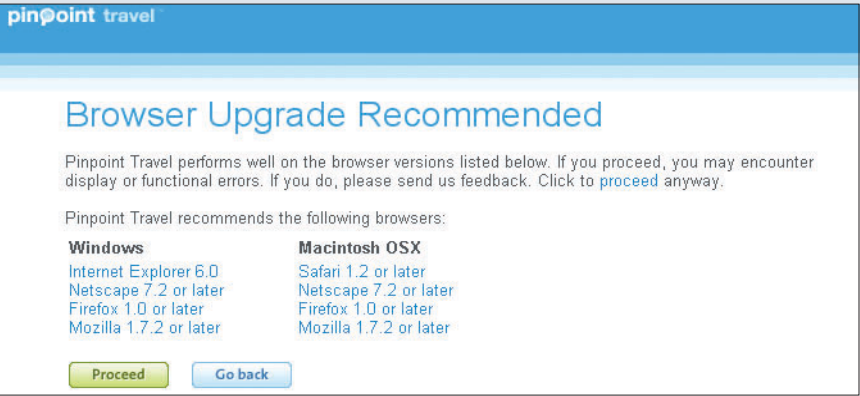
Compatibility: Incompatible with some browsers

Provides Direct Links to Travel Sites? Yes

Travel Products Offered: Airlines, hotels

According to Nielsen NetRatings, AOL Pinpoint Travel is one of the most popular travel search sites, ranking ninth among all travel sites in September 2005.

FIGURE 3: AOL PINPOINT TRAVEL



The screenshot shows the AOL Pinpoint Travel website with a blue header. The main content area displays a message titled "Browser Upgrade Recommended". The text below the title reads: "Pinpoint Travel performs well on the browser versions listed below. If you proceed, you may encounter display or functional errors. If you do, please send us feedback. Click to [proceed](#) anyway." Below this, it says "Pinpoint Travel recommends the following browsers:" and lists two columns of browser versions: "Windows" (Internet Explorer 6.0, Netscape 7.2 or later, Firefox 1.0 or later, Mozilla 1.7.2 or later) and "Macintosh OSX" (Safari 1.2 or later, Netscape 7.2 or later, Firefox 1.0 or later, Mozilla 1.7.2 or later). At the bottom of the message are two buttons: "Proceed" and "Go back".

Unfortunately, AOL Pinpoint Travel is one of a few search sites that is not compatible with all browsers.

AOL Pinpoint Travel is a separate site from AOL's branded travel page; this system is powered by Kayak and boasts of searching "over 50 travel sites." However, it has browser limitations for some users. For Macintosh users, the site is compatible only with Safari 1.2, Netscape 7.2, Firefox 1.0, and Mozilla 1.7.2.

AOL Pinpoint Travel offers a customized tool for frequent shoppers: The "Best Match" feature provides a calculated itinerary based on user preferences recorded after "signing on" to the site. However, when it comes to providing a complete suite of search tools, some of Kayak's inherent limitations — such as the inability to search by class of service (airlines), bed size (hotels), and vehicle type (car rentals) — carry over to AOL Pinpoint Travel. This bare-bones site also does not search for cruise products.

BOOKINGBUDDY

<http://www.bookingbuddy.com>

Browser Compatibility: Compatible with most browsers

Provide Direct Links to Travel Sites: Yes

Travel Products Offered: Airlines, hotels, car rentals, cruises

BookingBuddy is a product of the Smarter Living Network, which was founded in Boston in 1998. Krista Pappas, chief strategist for BookingBuddy, calls the site "a consumer-based travel product search engine" and says it generates more than 1.5 million unique visitors per month.

BookingBuddy is linked directly off the SmarterTravel site (www.smartertravel.com). SmarterTravel itself provides a travel booking tool on its homepage that is "powered by" Priceline and Kayak.

BookingBuddy is compatible with most browsers, but not as fast as some of its competitors. It also does not offer as many search and sorting tools, such as searching for flights by hour of the day or airline class of service. However, it offers a wider array of links via drop-down bars, so the user can comparison shop without re-entering data. In effect, though, the shopper is the "search engine," since BookingBuddy does not search all these sites simultaneously.

FIGURE 4: BOOKINGBUDDY

The screenshot shows the BookingBuddy.com website interface. At the top, there is a navigation bar with tabs for AIR, HOTEL, CAR, CRUISE, and VACATION. Below this, the page is divided into two main sections: STEP 1: Build your trip and STEP 2: Search for cheap flights. STEP 1 includes fields for Round Trip (selected) or One Way, Travelers (1), From: City or airport code, To: City or airport code, Depart: Oct 2005, 21, and Return: Oct 2005, 28. STEP 2 displays a grid of search links for various travel sites: Travelocity, Orbitz, Expedia, Kayak, Hotwire, and Priceline. A 'search other' button is also present. A newsletter subscription form is located at the top right, with the text 'Subscribe to Booking Buddy's Best Buys Free Newsletter' and a 'subscribe' button. The BookingBuddy.com logo is prominently displayed at the top left.

BookingBuddy offers a wide array of links to other travel sites via drop-down bars.

CHEAPFLIGHTS

<http://www.cheapflights.com>

Compatibility: Compatible with most browsers

Provides Direct Links to Travel Sites? Yes

Travel Products Offered: Airlines, hotels, car rentals

Cheapflights was founded in the United Kingdom in 1996 and recently launched a sister site based in Boston for the U.S. market. Cheapflights' Hugo Burge explains, "We appeal to mercenary travelers who have flexibility."

Cheapflights offers two airline functions: "search cheap flights" and "book flights online." The "search cheap flights" function offers bare-bones search technology — only the cities of origin and destination can be input.

The "book flights online" function is more in keeping with rival TSEs; the consumer can input most, but not all, of the

specifics of an airline journey, and then choose to search via one of four online links: Priceline, Hotwire, Orbitz, and Travelocity (in that order). However, each site must be searched separately, suggesting the significant benefit is shoppers can input search criteria only once for four separate sites without re-entering the itinerary details.

The hotel and car rental products on Cheapflights are less detailed. For hotels, shoppers are unable to input dates, check-in/check-out times, specific locations, discounts, or any other search criteria. Burge says he's "a bit embarrassed" by the limitation of Cheapflights' car rental page, which simply links to four travel sites.

The site's listings of fares and links are cluttered with advertisements — more than most travel sites — which may create confusion for some consumers unclear about the difference between paid and unpaid content.

FIGURE 5: CHEAPFLIGHTS

The screenshot displays the Cheapflights.com homepage. At the top, the logo and tagline "Cheapflights.com – your starting point for cheap flights" are visible. Below the logo is a newsletter sign-up section with a text input field for an email address, a "Sign Up" button, and a link "Why sign up?". To the right are navigation buttons for "Search flights" and "Book airline tickets".

The main content area features a "Book Airline Tickets" section. It includes a "Step 1" form titled "Enter your details:" with fields for "From:", "To:", "Departure Date:" (set to Oct 2005, 21 Fri), "Time:" (Anytime), "Return Date (if applicable):" (set to Oct 2005, 24 Mon), and "Time:" (Anytime). There are also dropdowns for "Adults:" (1 adult), "Seniors:" (0 seniors), and "Children:" (0 children). A "Ticket Type:" section has radio buttons for "One Way" and "Return".

Below the form is a "Step 2" section titled "Search using:" with four search engine options: "priceline.com", "Expedia.com", "Hotwire", and "kayak". Each option includes a "Go" button and a brief description of the service. For example, Priceline is described as "Priceline lets you name your own price" and Hotwire as "Hotwire. Discounts for unknown flight times & airline name."

On the right side of the page, there is a yellow box with the text "Deals on your route!" and two links: "List all Departures" and "List all Destinations", with a "Find Deals Now!" button below them. Below this is a link for "Flights from UK & Ireland" with a UK flag icon.

A callout box on the right side of the screenshot contains the text: "Cheapflights' 'Book Airline Tickets' function is much better than the simplistic 'Search Flights' function on the home page."

ITA SOFTWARE

<http://www.itasoftware.com>

Compatibility: Compatible with most browsers

Provide Direct Links to Travel Sites? No

Travel Products Offered: Airlines

For consumers, searching directly through ITA means two things: 1) a guarantee of receiving plentiful data on itineraries and rates; and 2) the inability to be linked to other travel sites or book online.

The Cambridge, Mass.-based company's claim is it has "created the world's first modern system for airfare pricing, airfare shopping, and seat availability management in over 30 years." ITA Software quietly powers several airline Web sites, and spokeswoman Cara Kretz says, "We're a B-to-B. We have no plans to become a consumer-direct model."

Although ITA is a business-to-business enterprise, its Web site can be used by consumers to comparison shop for

airfares only. After obtaining fares, users then can contact a travel agency and relay the itemized fare codes provided by the site for booking. This may sound cumbersome, but ITA's reputation for thorough searching will make it worthwhile for many shoppers.

ITA's proprietary software (dubbed the QPX system) powers a range of leading travel Web sites, including airline sites for Alaska, Alitalia, America West, and Continental, and integrated booking systems for Accovia, Cheap Tickets, Galileo, NLG, and Orbitz. Reportedly, at least one travel site prefers not to disclose that it's powered by ITA, because of public relations concerns that it is not powered by another travel technology firm with close business ties.

ITA's listings are thorough and detailed – the site even offers a very helpful "Warnings" column on its flight listings, which flags such items as "long layover" or "tight connection."

FIGURE 6: ITA SOFTWARE

User guest | [Create user account](#) |

Specific dates
When you know your travel dates and destination

Weekend search
Find the cheapest weekend to travel in any 30 day period

Multi-Segment

Round Trip | [One Way](#) | [Multi-Segment](#)

from: or any airport within 0 miles

to: or any airport within 0 miles

outbound date: Nov 4 on this day only departing anytime

return date: Nov 11 on this day only departing anytime

travelers: adults (18 to 61) 1 seniors (62 plus) 0 youths (12 to 17) 0 children (2 to 11) 0 infants in seat (under 2) 0 infants on lap (under 2) 0

stops: nonstops only up to 1 stop up to 2 stops no limit

sales city: BOS
(change only for trips originating outside the United States: [learn more](#))

[more options](#) (cabin, airport changes, seat availability, etc)

October 2005 | November 2005 | December 2005

Su	Mo	Tu	We	Th	Fr	Sa
				1	2	3
				4	5	6
				7	8	9
				10	11	12
				13	14	15
				16	17	18
				19	20	21
				22	23	24
				25	26	27
				28	29	30
				31		

ITA's Trip Planner is one of the most thorough shopping tools available, but consumers can't link or book through the site.

KAYAK

<http://www.kayak.com>

Compatibility: Incompatible with some browsers

Provides Direct Links to Travel Sites? Yes

Travel Products Offered: Airlines, hotels, car rentals, cruises

There are those who question Kayak's long-term business plans: Will it remain a consumer site? Or will it eventually decide that long-term viability means operating exclusively as the search engine for sites such as About.com, AOL Pinpoint Travel, Lonely Planet, Smarter Travel, Travelot, and USAToday.com? These questions were asked at WebWatch's "Trust or Consequence" online travel conference earlier this year in Dallas. For now, Kayak seems prepared to maintain its own consumer site while still seeking additional partner sites. Its rapid growth has been exemplified by the traffic figures provided by Nielsen NetRatings: in September 2005, Kayak achieved a unique audience that rivals long established travel sites.

Of the six sites tested, Kayak was one of two (along with Mobissimo) that did not respond at all to WebWatch's initial e-mail query. No follow-up e-mail query was sent. This was disappointing because the e-mail address is the primary form of communication offered to consumers. Like most TSEs (but unlike the major travel agency sites such as Expedia, Orbitz, and Travelocity), Kayak does not support direct contact from consumers via toll-free telephone lines.

Kayak currently offers search functionality for airlines (including JetBlue) and hotels, but its ability to search for car rental and cruise itineraries derives primarily from a series of links, some of which require re-entering data.

A very useful, consumer-friendly feature about Kayak is the "Refine Your Search" bar, which allows the shopper to instantly tweak price ranges, times, and a variety of parameters. It's the best shopping tool offered by any of the TSEs. In addition, any registered member of Kayak can provide comments about the site's content or functionality.

The search function is fast and thorough. But Kayak acknowledges it doesn't support most Macintosh computers and hasn't disclosed plans about addressing that issue.

Kayak's interface raises potential bias questions. WebWatch's assessment of Kayak's car rental product revealed three tiers of links: large icons (Thrifty, CarRentals.com, Avis); smaller icons (Dollar, Hotwire, Budget, Payless, Advantage); and a "visit a site homepage" drop-down bar (Alamo, Auto Europe, Enterprise, Hertz, National). The first two tiers allowed the user to save the booking information, while the third did not. It is not disclosed whether these differences are due to marketing agreements.

FIGURE 7: KAYAK

Kayak.com and Apple Macintosh

Kayak.com works on the Apple Macintosh! However, there are some specific requirements Mac users should be aware of. (These are the same Mac environments that our engineers use to develop Kayak.com.)

To try Kayak.com on your Macintosh, you will need:

- Apple Operating System [Mac OS X](#) Version 10.2 (Jaguar) or 10.3 (Panther). Kayak.com **does not work on Mac OS 9 or earlier.**
- Internet [Browser](#): Mozilla FireFox 1.0, Camino 0.8+, Mozilla 1.6+ or Safari (although some features of Kayak do not work on Safari). Kayak.com **will not work with Microsoft Internet Explorer on the Mac.**

If you are using Mac OS 9 (or older) or Microsoft Internet Explorer on your Mac, you will need to instead change to one of the newer environments above to use Kayak.com. This is one of the many hard choices we have had to make regarding browser support. Supporting OS 9 would be big changes in the way Kayak.com works, and it wouldn't be fair to the 99% of other users to compromise to that degree. Sorry.

This warning about browser restrictions makes it clear that not all consumers can benefit from Kayak.

MOBISSIMO

<http://www.mobissimo.com>

Compatibility: Compatible with most browsers

Provides Direct Links to Travel Sites? Yes

Travel Products Offered: Airlines, hotels, car rentals.

At press time, Mobissimo listed 114 travel companies in its “supplier network” of airlines, hotel properties, car rental firms and online travel agencies. The site’s clearest advantage over its competitors is a breadth of links to partners outside the U.S.; Americans searching for low rates overseas (particularly in Europe) would be well-served by a visit to Mobissimo. This may be due in part to the company’s two senior managers, who began their careers in Europe.

The site, launched in San Mateo, Calif., in 2003, also boasts inclusion of low-fare carriers such as JetBlue, as well as third-party travel sites such as CheapSeats, Cheaptickets, Onetravel, and Opodo. Mobissimo also has proved adept at finding financing: One of its investors, Index Ventures, has an advisory board that includes the chief technology officer for AOL.

For potential users, Mobissimo is compatible with most browsers. However, the Mobissimo interface is stark even when compared with other search sites. The hotel product, for example, allows the user to enter only the city, dates,

and number of rooms and guests, without the capability to search by star rating, hotel chain, bed size, etc.

When WebWatch examined Mobissimo, the hotel search function displayed incorrect rates in some cases, and in one case the lowest listed rate was for a government/military discount, even though there was no function to request such a rate. On the plus side, users are clearly notified when they are leaving the Mobissimo site and linking to another site.

Of the six sites tested, Mobissimo was one of two (along with Kayak) that did not respond at all to WebWatch’s initial e-mail query. No follow-up e-mail query was sent. Unfortunately, Mobissimo offers its e-mail address under the heading of “Support.” The only other form of communication offered to users on the site is a fax number.

PRICEGRABBER

http://www.pricegrabber.com~home_travel.php

Compatibility: Compatible with most browsers

Provides Direct Links to Travel Sites? Yes

Travel Products Offered: Airlines, hotels

Pricegrabber’s customer service was particularly disappointing. In response to WebWatch’s first e-mail query, a “Trouble Ticket Number” was generated but no further information was provided. Then there was no response to the

FIGURE 8: MOBISSIMO

Mobissimo's search functions are rather bare-bones, as shown in the hotels page.

second e-mail and no further correspondence was forwarded as a follow up to the "Trouble Ticket Number." Since the system generated such a response, it seemed reasonable there would be some form of follow-up, but WebWatch was disappointed that no reply e-mails were sent, and no customer service telephone line was available.

Since its launch in 1999, Pricegrabber established itself as a leading comparison shopping site for a variety of products. According to The Financial Times, the Web site's revenue grew to \$27 million 2003 from \$52,000 in 1999. Analysts said it was inevitable Pricegrabber would decide to expand by developing a travel site, as it did late in 2004.

Unfortunately, although the site is compatible with most browsers, WebWatch repeatedly found it to be rather slow. Currently it offers search functions only for airlines and hotels, and not for any other travel products, such as car rentals or cruises.

With the search function for airlines, a consumer can search for airline tickets for a maximum of just three passengers per itinerary, the fewest offered by any of the TSEs

examined by WebWatch. The search function for hotels is quite simplistic: the user cannot search by bed size, hotel chain, arrival time, or star rating or price range.

QIXO

<http://www.qixo.com>

Compatibility: Compatible with most browsers

Provides Direct Links to Travel Sites? No, offers bookings directly through QIXO

Travel Products Offered: Airlines, hotels, car rentals, cruises

Unlike the other sites tested, QIXO did not communicate via an e-mail system but instead offered an interactive "live chat 24-hour customer service" channel. In response to WebWatch's first question regarding charge card security, the response was immediate but not very reassuring: "It is a secure site. You can input your credit card information. We process many bookings a day." In response to the second question inquiring how long QIXO has been operating, that response was immediate as well: "It has been few years since it has started." The uninformative answers and awkward language raised questions about the responder's credibility. Although the responses were fast, they were not very helpful.

FIGURE 9: PRICEGRABBER

PriceGrabber.com
Comparison Shopping Beyond Compare™

Your Lists **Now** | Your Account | Sell Yours!

Home Computers Photo Electronics Home & Garden Autos Movies Video Games Toys Jewelry & Watches Apparel **Travel** More ↓

Frequently Asked Questions

SHOP FOR IN **All Products**

TRAVEL BETA [find a flight](#) [find a hotel](#)

Find a hotel

City Country

Checking-in Checking-out

Rooms Adults Children

Step 1 **Search multiple travel sites at one time**

Step 2 **Locate the hotels and rates that are best for you**

Step 3 **Make your booking direct with the hotel or travel site**

Most rival search sites offer more search functions than Pricegrabber.

QIXO must be considered a veteran TSE, since the San Francisco-based company was founded in 2000. It's also an interesting hybrid: it's a search site (with a slogan declaring "The Largest Airfare Search Engine!") as well as being a travel agency site that processes bookings. In fact, it was the only one of the 11 sites WebWatch examined that accepted direct bookings.

Because of this, QIXO imposes requirements other TSEs do not. Users must: 1) register with the site; 2) have a charge card with a U.S. address; and 3) pay a non-refundable \$20 charge per ticket.

QIXO's searching and sorting tools were among the best of the TSEs examined. But it was one of the slowest TSEs; in several cases, results didn't appear and had to be reloaded.

On its search page, QIXO boasts of searching 27 travel sites but lists only 21, most of them U.S. and European airlines (including JetBlue), and several travel agency sites: CheapSeats, Europebyair, and Opodo.

QIXO also maintains an interesting "affiliate program,"

detailed on the site. Travel agents or anyone who "owns a Web site" can link to QIXO to generate revenue on bookings, with dollar amounts spelled out.

SIDESTEP

<http://www.sidestep.com>

Compatibility: Compatible with most browsers

Provide Direct Links to Travel Sites? Yes

Travel Products Offered: Airlines, hotels, car rentals

Among the six sites tested, SideStep provided the best customer service by far. The response to WebWatch's first e-mail was immediate, detailed, informative, and friendly, as was the second response. In both cases, the replies combined boiler-plate information with specific remarks tailored to the questioner. For example, after noting that SideStep has been in business for six years, the Support Center employee added: "I've been here since Day One ☺." The WebWatch tester commented: "Best customer service by miles."

Founded in 1999, SideStep is viewed by many as the grandfather of TSEs. For consumers, it offers one of the

FIGURE 10: QIXO

... for those who will be satisfied only by a g
bunch, both for its relative efficiency and eas
the other aggregators in c

As shown in this notification about charge cards, QIXO imposes more requirements than other travel search sites.

best features: The SideStep “Toolbar,” downloaded by more than 8 million shoppers, which allows the user to compare prices side-by-side with other travel sites.

SideStep also is among the most effective of the TSEs reviewed at empowering consumers to narrow their shopping sprees among the seemingly infinite number of travel itineraries available online. The site’s SmartSort “results summary/filter” function allows the user to hone in on specific departure and/or arrival times, flight connections, and other parameters. Also, a user can shop for airline tickets for up to seven passengers per itinerary, the largest number allowed by any of the search sites examined by WebWatch.

Users need to be aware that partner companies could receive preferential treatment on the screen, although this is

clearly labeled. For example, when searching for a three-day car rental in St. Louis, the first listing was Enterprise at \$115.49; the second was National at \$156.23; and the third was Thrifty at \$83.52. The Enterprise and National listings, though more expensive, were designated with “sponsor” icons; all listings from the third position on down were ranked by price, lowest to highest.

TRAVELZOO

<http://www.travelzoo.com>

Compatibility: Compatible with most browsers

Provides Direct Links to Travel Sites? Yes

Travel Products Offered: Airlines, hotels

Travelzoo executives say the site assumes its users are more sophisticated about destinations. The site’s home page resembles a clearinghouse for travel suppliers’ excess inven-

FIGURE 11: SIDESTEP

The screenshot displays the SideStep search engine interface. At the top, there's a navigation bar with icons for Flight, Hotel, Car, and Flight + Hotel. Below this, a search form is visible with fields for 'From', 'To', 'Departing', and 'Returning'. A 'SmartSort' sidebar on the left shows a 'Results summary/filter' for a flight from New York (LGA) to Los Angeles, displaying 57 flights with filters for price, departure times, and stops. A 'Search Multiple Travel Sites' button is prominent. The footer includes links for Deals, Newsletter, and Toolbar.

SideStep
The traveler's search engineSM

Find the best bargains from multiple travel sites. With one search!

SideStep searches sites like Orbitz.com

Type of flight: Roundtrip One way

From (city name or airport code) Departing 11/04/05 Time Anytime

To (city name or airport code) Returning 11/09/05 Time Anytime

Home > Roundtrip flight results
New York (LGA) - Los Angeles
Depart: Jan 20, 06 (Friday)
Change Dates
Select multiple filters to narrow results
Search progress: 5% Getting results

SmartSortSM
Results summary/filter
Displaying 57 of 57 flights

Price Priced from

Outbound departure

<input type="checkbox"/> 5am - 9am	\$317
<input type="checkbox"/> 9am - 12pm	\$310
<input type="checkbox"/> 12pm - 5pm	\$318

Return departure

<input type="checkbox"/> 5am - 9am	\$310
<input type="checkbox"/> 9am - 12pm	\$317
<input type="checkbox"/> 12pm - 5pm	\$310
<input type="checkbox"/> After 9pm	\$310

Stops

<input type="checkbox"/> Nonstop	\$317
<input type="checkbox"/> 1 Stop	\$318
<input type="checkbox"/> 2 Stops	\$318

Search Multiple Travel Sites

Deals Newsletter Toolbar

Compare
Airline Flight Route
> AirTran Airways (Flight
Depart: New York, NY (LGA)
to Los Angeles, CA
Return: Los Angeles, CA

Deals Newsletter Toolbar

FAQ/Help | Privacy policy | Terms of service | Advertise with us
Chicago Hotels | Las Vegas Hotels | London Hotels | Los Angeles Hotels | Philadelphia Hotels | San Diego Hotels | San Francisco Hotels | Seattle

The SmartSort results summary and filter is one of the best shopping tools offered by a travel search site.

tory, with few descriptives about destinations. "It's not necessarily the best tool for consumers who don't know where they want to go," said Elizabeth Rose, who until recently was the site's senior vice president of strategy.

Travelzoo offers "SuperSearch," a booking tool for airlines and hotels only. It allows the user to input itinerary information and then provides additional windows for more than a dozen sites. The good news is the consumer doesn't have to input the information again but the bad news is this system is more cumbersome and not as convenient as being offered integrated listings of rates from multiple sites.

Travelzoo does not provide search functionality for car rentals or cruises. The site searches a wide variety of travel sites, including the travel agency sites Orbitz, Priceline, and Travelocity, as well as low-fare airlines such as Frontier and JetBlue. WebWatch found Travelzoo to be slower than average in processing searches.

It's clear there is a hierarchy of Travelzoo travel partners but Kelly Ford, vice president of marketing, says, "You can't just buy your way in." As for the search tool, the order of the links changes based on the itinerary. For example, a request for flights from Los Angeles to Miami

generated the following "recommended sites," in order: Orbitz, Travelocity, Priceline, and several others. Yet the order for flights from Newark to San Francisco was Travelocity, Orbitz, Lowestfare, and several others. In addition, the first tier of "recommended sites" includes icons with color logos, while the second tier is a bare-bones list only accessible through a drop-down bar.

YAHOO FARECHASE

<http://farechase.yahoo.com>

Compatibility: Incompatible with some browsers

Provides Direct Links to Travel Sites? Yes

Travel Products Offered: Airlines, hotels, car rentals

In July 2004, Yahoo acquired FareChase for an undisclosed sum. The smaller company had created a niche by developing travel search software for travel agencies and corporations. FareChase, founded in 1999, relocated from New York City to Yahoo's headquarters in Sunnyvale, Calif.

Yahoo FareChase offers search functionality for airlines, hotels, and car rentals, but not cruises. Although incompatible with some browsers, it provides fast searches, but WebWatch encountered a problem linking to Air Canada's site.

FIGURE 12: TRAVELZOO

The screenshot shows the Travelzoo SuperSearch interface. At the top, the logo for "TRAVELZOO super search" is displayed, along with the text "Intelligent Travel Search Powered by 862,948 User Ratings". Below the logo are two tabs: "Flights" (selected) and "Hotels".

Step 1: Build your trip

Round-trip One-way [Multi-City](#)
 From: (U.S./Canada only - city name / airport code)
 To: (city name / airport code)
 Search nearby airports for lower fares
 Prefer nonstop
 Depart: Oct 15 [calendar icon] Anytime [dropdown]
 Return: Oct 21 [calendar icon] Anytime [dropdown]
 My dates are flexible
 Travelers: 1 [dropdown]

[Show Recommended Sites ... >>](#)

Welcome to Travelzoo SuperSearch!
 The free, easy way to uncover the best of when and where you need to go

How SuperSearch Works:

Step 1: Tell us when and where you want to go

Step 2: SuperSearch recommends the best deals by cross-checking your trip plans with 862,948 user ratings and comprehensive flight data

Step 3: Search the sites that interest you by clicking on each link to see fares and schedules for

Travelzoo's SuperSearch function offers rates from many sites but does not integrate them into a single list.

Yahoo FareChase offers an extensive list of travel sites it searches for deals, including more than 20 airline sites (among them: low-fare operators AirTran, Independence Air, JetBlue, and Spirit); hotel sites; and third-party sites such as CheapSeats.com and onetravel.com.

Yahoo FareChase provides a very handy “refine results” bar, which allows the user to tweak the results by various parameters, such as times, airlines, airports, etc. The site

also offers “white label” flights, an opaque option that does not reveal the airline’s name until after booking.

Yahoo FareChase’s customer service was disappointing. In response to WebWatch’s first e-mail query, the WebWatch tester received a Web form with an e-mail address. The query was promptly sent to the appropriate address but there was no response and the tester received no further correspondence.

FIGURE 13: YAHOO FARECHASE

YAHOO! FARECHASE BETA

Welcome, **crowelizabeth**
[\[Sign Out, My Account\]](#) [FareChase Home](#)

Browser/OS not supported

FareChase does not currently support the browser and platform configuration that you are using. Today you can use FareChase with one of these browsers:

- Windows IE 5.5, 6.0
- Windows Mozilla Suite 1.7
- Windows Firefox 0.8, 0.9, 1.0
- Windows Netscape 7.1, 7.2
- Mac Safari 1.2
- Mac Firefox 1.0

Please see our [Frequently Asked Questions](#) for additional information about browser and platform support. We will continue to add additional platform support in the future. Please contact [FareChase customer care](#) if you have any questions.

Search Here. Travel Everywhere.

Welcome to Yahoo! FareChase, a whole new way to find your perfect trip.

Save Time
 It's simple to search dozens of popular air, car, and hotel sites.

Save Money
 Compare the best trips at the best prices in one place.

Book Directly
 Find the deal you want and book directly with the travel supplier or online agency.

An important note about privacy and Yahoo! FareChase
 Yahoo! FareChase searches the websites of multiple travel service providers. To enable you to click from a Yahoo! FareChase search result to the booking process, Yahoo! may display the relevant booking pages of certain travel service provider websites. When you enter information on these pages, the information is transferred by Yahoo! to the travel service provider and is subject to the privacy policies of the travel service provider you have selected. Your personal information will not be stored or otherwise used by Yahoo!. For more information, please read the [Yahoo! FareChase privacy practices](#).
[Frequently Asked Questions](#) - [Information for Travel Sites](#)

For many consumers, Yahoo FareChase is limited by browser compatibility issues.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

BusinessWeek magazine: "This Travel Search Site Could Go Far," Ben Elgin, New York City; Oct. 19, 2004.

CNN/Money.com: "Savvy Online Travel Booking," Grace Wong, New York City; June 27, 2005.

Condé Nast Traveler magazine: "How to Beat the New Sky-High Fares," Barbara S. Peterson, New York City; June, 2005.

Consumer Reports magazine: "Travel Search Engines: New Routes to Deals," Yonkers, N.Y.; March, 2005.

Consumer Reports Travel Letter: all issues, Yonkers, N.Y.; Jan., 1999-Jan., 2003, inclusive.

Consumer Reports WebWatch: online travel research reports, Yonkers, N.Y.; June, 2002-March, 2005, inclusive.

Consumer Reports WebWatch: "The Internet Travel Industry: What Consumers Should Expect and Need to Know, and Options for a Better Marketplace," Yonkers, N.Y.; abstract paper prepared by Harrell Associates Inc., New York City; June 6, 2002.

Consumer Reports WebWatch Conference: "Trust or Consequence: Why Credibility Is the Killer App in Online Travel," Dallas (audio transcript); March 1, 2005.

EyeForTravel: "A Strategic Analysis of the Travel Search Engine (TSE) Market," (research report) London; April, 2005.

The Financial Times: "Pricegrabber Unveils Travel Search Engine," Amy Yee, New York City; Jan. 6, 2005.

Forrester Research: "The Search Engines Web Travelers Use," Henry H. Hartevelt, Cambridge, Mass.; March 22, 2005.

Hitwise.com: "Travel Search Engines' Rapid Rise Poses Threat to Travel Agencies," New York City; May 12, 2005.

The Internet Travel Guru: "Which Airfare Web Site Should I Use?," Bob Cowen, Detroit; April 1, 2005.

JupiterResearch: "Online Travel Search: Understanding Consumer Behavior to Influence Purchase Decisions," Niki Scevak, Darien, Conn.; June 9, 2004.

JupiterResearch: "What Impact Will the New Travel Search Engines Have on the Industry?," Diane Clarkson, Darien, Conn.; June 13, 2005.

Kiplinger's magazine: "Little-Known Travel Web Sites Can Pay Big," Money Power section, Washington, D.C.; March 21, 2005.

The Los Angeles Times: "Better Deals Using Search Sites?," James Gilden, Los Angeles; Jan. 23, 2005.

The Los Angeles Times: "Coming Up with a Quicker Route to Landing a Good Airfare Deal," James Gilden, Los Angeles; July 18, 2004.

The New York Times: "Airlines Spur Travel Agency Shift," Bob Tedeschi, New York City; Jan. 31, 2005.

The New York Times: "Travel Sites Want to Help You Find a Cheap Trip," Bob Tedeschi, New York City; Oct. 18, 2004.

PhoCusWright: "Suppliers Gain from Online Travel Buyers' Promiscuity," Consumer Travel Trends Survey Seventh Edition, Sherman, Conn.; June, 2005.

SearchEngineWatch.com: "Who Powers Whom?," Danny Sullivan, Mecklermedia, Westport, Conn.; July 23, 2004.

Time magazine: "The Google of Travel Searches?," Jennifer Leo, New York City; June 28, 2004.

Travel & Leisure: "35 Best Travel Sites," Andrea Bennett, New York City; Oct., 2004.

Travel Technology Update: Michele McDonald (editor), AMC Communications International, Wildwood, Mo.; Dec., 2002-June, 2005, inclusive.

USA Today: "Search Engines Get More Specifics," Laura Bly, McLean, Va.; Nov. 18, 2004.

USA Today: "The Airline Industry Goes Direct," David Grossman, McLean, Va.; Oct. 4, 2004.

The Wall Street Journal: "Ready for Takeoff? New Online Travel Sites Aim to Offer What Their Predecessors Couldn't: One-Stop Shopping," Elizabeth Souder, New York City; March 21, 2005.

The Washington Post: "Aggregator Sites: One-Stop Shopping?," Gary Lee, Washington, D.C.; Nov. 14, 2004.

APPENDIX A: OTHER RELATED TRAVEL SITES

Here is a list — by no means definitive — of some leading travel sites that offer U.S. consumers one or more components of searching for deals, rates, or travel information.

■ ABOUT.COM (www.about.com/travel)

Acquired in March 2005 by The New York Times Company, About.com says each month more than 22 million consumers visit its site, which is “powered” by Kayak.

■ AOL <http://travel.channel.aol.com>

From its main page, AOL maintains a travel site “powered” by Travelocity, so the user is basically shopping via Travelocity with a different home page interface. (Its sister site, AOL Pinpoint Travel, is powered by Kayak.)

■ BESTFARES (www.bestfares.com)

Tom Parsons’ Bestfares site offers a wide variety of low rates, sub-categorized in helpful ways and a useful tool known as “Quickfare Finder.”

■ FODOR’S (www.fodors.com)

The Web site for the travel publisher Fodor’s (www.fodors.com) offers online booking capabilities via a link with Expedia.

■ IGOUGO (www.igougo.com)

Acquired in April 2005 by Sabre Holdings, the site boasts 350,000 members and offers “real travelers sharing honest opinions,” with more than 300,000 journals and 200,000 photos of travel experiences.

■ LONELY PLANET (www.lonelyplanet.com)

The well-known travel guide publisher features a “travel services” function providing eclectic links to international travel sites.

■ MSN TRAVEL CENTRAL (travel.msn.com)

Despite Microsoft’s sale of Expedia to IAC/InterActive Corp., shoppers on MSN’s Web site are provided access to Expedia.

■ NEW YORK/NEWARK AREA AIRFARES (newyorkairfares.blogspot.com)

This helpful site (founded by George Hobica, known as “The Travel Guy”) caters to a specific clientele: travelers departing from the greater New York City area.

■ OLODO

Yet another travel search site is on the horizon, with

Atlanta-based Olodo (www.olodo.com) planning a 2005 launch. At press time, a beta version boasted an extensive line-up of products, with functionality planned for airlines, hotels, car rentals, cruises, bus, and rail.

■ **TRAVELOT** (www.travelot.com/Home.do)

“Best Fare...Anywhere” is the simple slogan of this site, which was launched in January 2005 and is powered by Kayak. Its “Bookingwiz” product offers rates from “best providers.”

■ **TRIPADVISOR** (www.tripadvisor.com)

Also owned by IAC/InterActiveCorp., it calls itself “the largest site for unbiased travel reviews;” a links page defaults to IAC partners Expedia and Hotels.com.

■ **USATODAY.COM**

(www.usatoday.com/travel)

In addition to original travel content, this site provides an “Airfare Search” tool powered by Kayak.

[Disclosure: The author of this report writes a monthly travel column for USA Today.com.]

■ **YAHOO** <http://travel.yahoo.com>

The Yahoo travel page offers booking capabilities via Travelocity (and cruise booking options via NLG). So Yahoo users are essentially using Travelocity or NLG, via a different interface and home page. (Separately, Yahoo maintains the Yahoo FareChase site, which is powered by the FareChase search engine and is detailed above; to further confuse matters, there’s a link to FareChase on the Yahoo Travel page.)