Wood

Usability Evaluation
July 21, 2010

Contained is a heuristic evaluation of the Wood rental communities website.

A "heuristic evaluation" identifies usability opportunities for improvement by checking the website (layout, design, template and content) against commonly accepted best-practice guidelines of user interaction design.

Layout and Design

The Wood website has a simple design with large imagery and prominent links to the content. But while this design is big and bold, it does occupy a large part of the display, requiring the user to scroll to get to content.

As background to the design is a gradated pattern. This pattern makes the text positioned on top of it harder to read than a plain color background would be. Also affecting the contrast of the text displayed is the chosen text color, which in some areas is a lighter green coloring.

The text display on site pages is not consistent in size, and does not provide visual breathing room around paragraphs making it hard to consume the content and appears visually unfinished.

On the homepage and about us sections of the site is a text/graphical feature for equal housing opportunities. This appears to be placed haphazardly on the site and is not integrated with the design. If the equal housing feature is either a disclaimer or selling point of the site then it should be included on all relevant pages consistently as part of the design and not as an intrusion to the display.

Recommendations: Modify the design so important information is located higher on the visible page. Text and visual treatments should be consistent.

Site Navigation and Flow

The site is broken into six (6) main areas (including the homepage) plus the bottom navigation links.

On the surface, the navigation makes sense and is within reason of what is expected. It's only after the user begins to click through the available options that they will notice that many of the options lead to the same place. In fact, only the homepage, overview and golf pages do not lead either directly or indirectly to the locations section.

Navigationally, the site fails to lead the user to any specific destination and misses out on the opportunity to reinforce the desired action of contacting the rental offices.

Without these types of messages on key pages the prospective customer needs to be very motivated to take action. Most commonly the user would move on to other more attractive sites that provide a higher sense of security and clearer user actions.
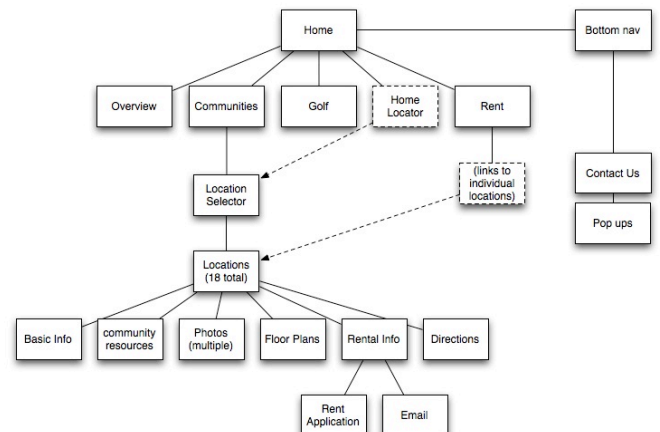
Recommendation: Organize the site flow to lead the user through the experience. Remove redundant pages and include clear concise user actions.

Content:

The normal organization similar websites are very much like a story being told, with sections being chapters in a book, each chapter leading to the next. The organization of the Wood website does not follow this general convention.

Homepage:

The homepage does have a preferred option leading the user to the "about" page, but this is where the dialog stops, leaving the rest of the journey to the main navigation.

Visually, the homepage elements consist of a center text area and links below the text to specific properties.

As on the entire site, here the user must also scroll to get to the majority of information only to be confronted by a large block of text. This text is set justified from left to right making it more difficult to read. Compounding this problem, the spacing between lines and paragraphs makes it difficult to read and becomes unappealing to view.

Recommendation: Reduce and refocus text, and fix spacing issues.

Communities Section:

The communities section is the heart of the website. It contains links to all of the properties available.

Viewing the content is achieved through two types of navigation. By navigating over the small boxes on a map the user receives additional information on the property. When the user hovers over the titles in the secondary navigation they receive a photo of the property. Clicking on either of these elements takes the user to a collection of pages about this property.

There are many questions regarding the map, the most pressing of which is why are there two sets of navigation that do different things but go to the same place.

It would be a better user experience to remove or combine the lower navigation with the upper to show basic information and a photo of the property if the user hovers over an item.

There are additional problems with the map. The target areas (little boxes) for each location are small and can be difficult for older consumers to navigate.

When a user successfully navigates to a live area the resulting information area is not "hot". Only the little box, which is now hidden, will click through to more information. If the user moves the cursor outside of the now hidden box the area collapses, hiding the information.

The navigation area below is not without issues. Visually, all of the available options do not fit within the rectangles, making for an unprofessional, unfinished appearance.

**Recommendation:** Revise the map selector so it is more usable and efficient

Communities Information:

When a user clicks on one of the properties they are presented with a set of six pages containing general information, community resources, photo gallery, floor plans, rental info and directions.

These options are available in a top sub-menu except for the general information page. The only way to return to this page from any of the other sub pages is through breadcrumb navigation below the tab navigation.

By not including the main page in the sub-navigation you are effectively lose the user in this section.

The majority of users will not see the breadcrumb navigation because of its placement and the gibberish
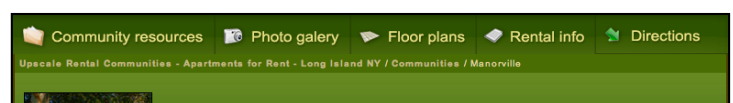
that precedes the links.

The phrase "Upscale Rental Communities - Apartments for Rent - Long Island NY" pre-pending the breadcrumb may increase search placement but provides a stumbling block to the user.

The first of the sub-navigation links is "Community Resources". This list of local services is arguably the least important of the options and tells little about the property in a long scrolling list.

The second of the options is "Photo Galery" which aside from the miss spelling of "gallery" in the navigation is a nice set of photo examples. Currently however there is no way to navigate between photos which is a feature seen in most common photo galleries. Without this option, the user is forced to close each window and open another to see each more than one photo. This deprives the user of the immersive experience you would hope for when viewing such galleries.

In total, all the sub links are laid out poorly, forcing the user to scroll down on a page where they have already been forced to scroll down by the general design.

The subsection is also missing some basic affordances, which would allow the user to easily navigate. These include the previously mentioned breadcrumb, section titles, and tab selections.

While the subsection is visually a series of tabs they fail to function as expected. Clicking on any of the options does not "select" a tab, which would afford the user the visual cue of what is currently being viewed.

Since each of the tabs is designed as a separate page the entire page re-loads when switching between tabs. While this is not usually a problem on most websites, this site with the burden of the heavy flash top graphic presents a noticeable lag between loading pages. This coupled with the need to scroll down to get to the "next tab" makes for an awkward experience.

Recommendations: Remove unnecessary items from breadcrumb navigation. Include all major links in sub navigation. Adjust tabs to work as expected.

Golf Section

The display of the golf section does not match the display of the other sections of the site. The text is visually much smaller than other sections making it appear to be tacked on and not part of the site.

The text is also very long, and can appear daunting as viewed as giant chunk of information.

Setting the text into sections with section headers to segment the text and integrating images within the text instead of in a separate photo gallery would enhance the overall appeal of the section.

Additionally, if golf is a major selling point to visitors, it is advisable to add a call to action within and at the bottom of the section.

Recommendation: Visually break up text to make it more inviting.

Other Links:

Of the remaining links none add features or functionality. Both the "rent" and the "home locator" lead to the properties section. The only difference being an intermediate page for the "rent" section that lists specific properties.

On the bottom navigation are two unique links. One for "contact us" and the other labeled "pop-ups". The item labeled pop-ups did not seem to do anything.

Relegating contact us to a small link on the bottom navigation is confusing since it is assumed a major action of the site is to initiate contact.

User Groups

It is difficult to determine the target users are to this site or if there are any age restrictions to rental.

If not for the review of the Dutc website the assumption would be that there are no age restrictions.

Throughout the imagery and text there is nothing referencing the target user or people in any of the images on the site. Prospective customers relate to a site, in part, by the imagery used. The text throughout the site however is too small for middle age and older user groups.

Recommendation: Add imagery consistent with target user group(s).

SEO

The site contains appropriate META description, keywords and titles. In reviewing general search visibility the site appears appropriately for "Wood rental" (1st position), "rental long island golf" (3rd position) but does not appear for "long island rental apartment" which is not surprising because of the large amount of sites vying for this vertical.

Recommendation Index:

- Modify the design so important information is located higher on the visible page.

- Text and visual treatments should be consistent.

- Organize the site flow to lead the user through the experience. Remove redundant pages and include clear concise user actions.

- Reduce and refocus text, and fix spacing issues.

- Revise the map selector so it is more usable and efficient

- Remove unnecessary items from breadcrumb navigation.

- Include all major links in sub navigation.

- Adjust tabs to work as expected.

- Visually break up text to make it more inviting.

- Add imagery consistent with target user group(s).

Overall View

There are many issues preventing the site from effectively leading users to the desired content and assisting in completing rental transactions. From a site design that requires the user to scroll to get to important information, sub navigation missing basic elements, and interactive maps that fail at basic interaction the site requires an overhaul to address basic issues.

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Design:           2 of 5    **
Navigation:       1 of 5    *
Content:          3 of 5    ***
Call to action:   1 of 5    *
SEO:              4 of 5    ****
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**Overall: 2 of 5   **