Affordable Portables Redesigned Website

Affordable Portables
Lifestyle Furniture

Chicago
Evanston

| Home | Hours & Locations | Shipping | Contact Us | Phone: Chicago: (773)935-6160 | Evanston: (847)866-8124 |

Specials

Come in to our stores
and see our Floor Model
Sale!

Product Categories

Futon Frames & Sleepers
Living Room Furniture
Dining Room Table Sets and Chairs
Kitchen Accessories and Stools
Bedroom Furniture
Office Desks & Chairs
Accessories
Bookcases - Wood, Metal, Unfinished
Bar Stools and Bar Tables
Lamps and Lights
Kids and Teens
Internet Specials Limited Time
Close-Outs

Main Menu

Home
Shipping Policy

Inexpensive Chicago Furniture College Futons Evanston Bargain

FUTONS

DINING ROOMS

KITCHEN

Selection and Inventory: Current State

Content Types:

- Header Text
- Header Image
- Social Media Links (to store review sites)
- Product Links (for individual product pages)
- Product Picture Links (that lead to enlarged versions of products)
- Product Ratings (for individual products)
- Product Descriptions (short for category showcase)
- Product Descriptions (long for individual product pages)
- Navigation Menu (for furniture)
- Navigation Menu (for other content)
- Search Function (for products)
- Form Submission (for login)
- Form Submission (for shipping)
- Form Submission (for account creation)
- External Payment Processor (PayPal)
- Shopping Cart List (Joolma CMS addon)
- Form Submission (for forgotten passwords)
- Form Submission (for forgotten usernames)
- Email Reminder (for sharing individual products)
- Form Submission (for requesting information)
- Text for Shipping Information
- Text for Store information
- Image Links for Individual Product Categories
- Embedded links to individual store reviews by local news
- Embedded video to individual store review
- Image Links for Product Specials
- Embedded Image Link for alternate website to "other store"

Scope:

Affordable Portables'' hierarchy is not very deep (essentially three levels). As befits a furniture store's website, the vast majority of its pages are devoted to the presentation of the hundreds of pieces of furniture the store carries. So, our scope will focus primarily on the categorization of the many items being marketed. We did collect data in our card sort that will help us organize the site's other features with the exception of the Shopping cart. Since this feature is run on a separate, external site, we are not including the checkout/shopping cart areas among the pages our team will address.

Potential Organization Problems:

While we were not able to conduct usability testing on the current version of the Affordable Portables website, exploration of the site and the consideration of accepted design principles revealed a number of potential organization problems. The main page has a traditional layout with a navigational menu and large picture at the top and a selection of

product categories on the left edge. Given that the site's main purpose is to facilitate the purchase of furniture, it's unfortunate that one must usually scroll down just to get past the large header image & see all of the left-hand column's furniture categories. Furthermore, these items fail to use a consistent means of organization. Some categories are grouped by room while others are grouped by furniture type, and their levels of specificity vary widely, from as general as "Bedroom Furniture" to as specific as "Bookcases - Wood, Metal, Unfinished." This lack of consistency is disruptive to easy skimming of categories, potentially confusing the user and impeding progress toward the product he/she seeks. A small font size further discourages exploration of these categories. The product search tool, some users' preferred means of first interacting with the site, is located halfway down the page on the left edge, requiring users to scroll past the Product Categories as well as a duplicate of the top navigational menu's items just to see it.

Once the user finds the individual item she was searching for, the layout of that product's description, price and picture is another issue, since product pages seem to use one of several different layouts. For example, in the Kids and Teens section, the product name is next to price, which is next to the picture with no text description. In the Accessories section, the product name is on top, the picture is in the middle and the price is on the bottom. Since there is no consistency in the pages' organization, comparisons become difficult, users may be confused. All of these organizational issues threaten to frustrate users, diminishing their impression of both the site and the store or worse, cause them to exit the site altogether.

Design Patterns:

The site employs a number of commonly-accepted layout design patterns to varying degrees of success. A featured product, search box, and set of categories that visitors may browse are all included on the home page, although both the feature and the search box are located less prominently than is ideal. The featured product (a bean bag loveseat) is found only by scrolling down past redundant furniture category selection buttons, while the search box, ideally located near the top and well-separated from other items, is instead somewhat far down the cluttered left-hand column, as mentioned above. A sign-in tool (Customer Login) is also included, but fails to appear in the conventionally-favored upper-right corner.

For both the main page's redundant furniture categories as well as each category's individual page, a thumbnail-grid picture manager is used to allow rapid browsing with the aid of illustration. While this format seems well-suited to the site's mission and content, the execution leaves room for improvement. This is most true in the layout used within individual categories, where each item's "tile" is forced, by poor text organization and an excess of white space, to utilize a very small picture.

The site wisely employs both global- and utility-navigation features, offering users a consistent set of options in the top and left menu bars which are consistent through pages and whose order does not vary. Utility (non-content-related) navigation features could arguably be better separated from the content (furniture) navigation features, however.

Design Principles:

The site seems to draw on relatively few tried-and-true design principles, undoubtedly contributing to its somewhat haphazard, disorganized feel. The first principle we do see a somewhat successful example of is the picture superiority effect, evident in the site's large picture of multiple pieces of furniture front and center on the homepage. If pictures are remembered more strongly/easily than words, at least a visitor to this site who was only here a few seconds would probably remember that the store's focus has to do with furniture.

Proximity is employed throughout the site to show that certain information is related. Examples of this can be seen both in the left menu's separated lists and features, as well as in each furniture category's page, where individual pieces of furniture have a picture, name, price, etc. all within a rectangular area or "tile" (though admittedly the tiles are not explicitly drawn). Left-hand menu groupings are placed in visible boxes, using the idea of uniform connectedness to further delineate related groups.

Finally, as mentioned above (and as is true with the vast majority of websites), hierarchy is used to lend some order to the large selection of furniture and other information the site offers. This organizational style is most clearly seen in the individual furniture pieces' organization into furniture categories.

Discovery: Card Sort

Identifying the system:

The focus of this card sort was content drawn from affordableportables.net, the online face of Affordable Portables furniture store.

Goals of the system:

Affordable Portables' website seeks to provide an online furniture shopping experience. This website would be visited when users are specifically looking to browse and purchase furniture. This site can be a means of purchasing furniture online, or it can be an introduction to what a person will see in the physical store. To that end, store information is also provided.

Identifying Users:

While users of this website could technically include anyone interested in browsing or purchasing furniture, the most likely audience would arguably be a younger crowd interested not so much in fine furniture for a permanent home, but rather in affordable furniture, perhaps for an apartment or even a dorm room. Evidence of this is seen in most pieces' relatively affordable prices, the fact that the furniture does not come in sets and the fact that much of it is shipped in parts for easy transport, requiring in-home assembly.

Summary of Card Sort Exercise:

In preparation for our sort, each team member had the opportunity to add cards to a "deck" which was recorded in a shared spreadsheet. Once all three team members had done so, team members then each went through the deck to double check for duplicates, but more

importantly to remove cards that were similar, so as not to lend undue emphasis to any one category. Ultimately an original deck of 68 cards was pared to 48, and these 48 cards attempted to offer sorters a representative sampling of the site's content. Furniture pieces from what we believed to be most of the "major" categories were included to provide insight into users' sorting of the site's products, while other site utilities and features (store information, links, etc.) were included to ensure that sorters could offer their ideas about the site's overall layout.

For the actual sort, each of our three team members conducted a sort with three individuals, yielding a total of nine participants. A range of sort methods was used, allowing us to explore and hopefully benefit from the strengths of each.

Description of Participants:

Maya's Participants:
- Participant 1 - 29 year old female; regular online shopper
- Participant 2 - 26 year old male; frequent online shopper
- Participant 3 - 24 year old female; frequent online shopper

Maya's Method:
- Manual, individual, informal setting (office break-room), not recorded

Ryan's Participants:
- Participant 1 - 26 year old male; occasional online shopper
- Participant 2 - 29 year old male; regular online shopper
- Participant 3 - 36 year old male; regular online shopper

Ryan's Method:
- Online, individual, informal setting (participants' choice), not recorded

Kyle's Participants:
- Participant 1 - 34 year old male; occasional online shopper
- Participant 2 - 25 year old male; regular online shopper
- Participant 3 - 23 year old female; frequent online shopper

Kyle's Method:
- Manual, group, informal setting (empty conference room), not recorded

None of the participants have visited the site.

Methods Used to Analyze Findings:

Analysis was performed via methods published by Donna Spencer in "Card Sorting: Designing Usable Categories". Data was loaded into her spreadsheet which contains formulas that help to show correlations between multiple sorts. and participants. We used thid spreadsheet while agreeing upon standardized category names as well, allowing us to account for variation in naming schemes (ie "Kitchen" and "Dining" could be standardized

into one "Dining" Category). The standardized categories can then also be used show agreement/correlation between participant responses.

Summary of Findings:

Overall, most participants saw some strong correlations with previously established categories (i.e. beds being placed in a Bedroom category), but had a harder time distinguishing between cards that were more vague or couldn't be immediately placed under a certain task or known location. Cards that proved difficult to categorize included store promotions and sales, website functions (such as Customer Login and Shopping Cart) as well as furniture items that could arguably be placed in several categories (such as items that could be interchangeable within Living Room or Kitchen). Certain cards contained special designs or furniture pieces that were neither specific to any room nor related to any particular task. Many participants created a separate category (with a non-specific label, such as Accessories, Miscellaneous, Designer) to contain these items.

The final results led us to create a total of nine categories into which all the cards from our sort could be placed. Participants generally felt the need to distinguish between web functions vs. customer-related functions (ie Search vs. Customer Login), and usually tried to use a location-based taxonomy to define furniture categories. This system, with the aforementioned "Miscellaneous" category allowing a "crossover" category for multi-purposed or unusual furniture, became the basis for the system of standardized categories we created.

APPENDIX

Informed Consent Process:

All participants were furnished with a consent form which they signed & dated prior to beginning the sort. At this time they were also invited to ask any questions they had.

Reflection on Card Sort:

As this was the first card sort for all involved, our choice of different methods allowed the group to get as much insight as possible into different ways of conducting a sort, which will hopefully help us to improve future sorts.

While an online sort offers greater flexibility (participants can do the sort on their time) and possibly a wider field of users, it tends to limit/discourage feedback. There was a "feedback" option/component online, but few participants chose to use that feature. Also, since we only saw the data after each user completed the sort, there was no chance to have immediate dialogue or followup questions. This feedback, we later discovered, may have helped us better understand respondents' thinking.

The two in-person sorts proved to be more informative, providing an opportunity to hear participants' comments and better understand the thought processes of each. Hesitations, last-minute changes, and other small details of the activity could be observed and better understood through followup questions.

The group sort offered perhaps the highest level of feedback, since the participants were constantly interacting and having their thoughts and agree on decisions with others in the group. The group sort also felt more like a "real-world" project, with people bouncing ideas off each other and coming together with a unified understanding of and commitment to their categories. In the individual sort, many participants seemed more hesitant with their groupings when asked to assign labels to each category. Also, individual participants rarely vocalized their thought process when sorting, even in the presence of a moderator. However, when asked at the end, all offered explanations and at least some eagerness to explain their thinking.

After discussing the different methods, we decided that the in-person group card sort offered the richest feedback and data for a given expenditure of time and effort. Therefore, if we were to redo the exercise, we might all lean toward in-person group sorts.

Given our website's familiar content (furniture arranged in a fairly conventional layout) as well as the strong resemblance between our card sort participants and the website's likely target audience, the card sort was able to yield a fair amount of relevant data without prior user research. Most users were familiar with all the card content and were not confused to see any of the usual online shopping features (i.e. shopping cart, social media links). As for potential further user research, it seems unlikely that usability testing on the existing site would be of much benefit, given its fairly repetitive design and the number of clear deficiencies we've outlined in our writeups.

After collecting the sort data and importing it into an analysis spreadsheet, our next step will be to analyze that data to discover the trends and insights contained therein. This analysis can then inform the creation of a new layout--one which seeks to better serve the needs of target users. We will attempt to standardize and improve both the furniture categories and the overall site organization with the goal of creating a better user experience.