

# **Usability Inspection**

Shopbriarwood.com

<http://www.shopbriarwood.com>

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## Table of Contents

<b>Executive Summary .....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Terminology &amp; Conventions Used:.....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Priority Levels .....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Usability Guidelines .....</b>	<b>6</b>
Efficient Navigation .....	6
Organizational Clarity .....	8
Clear Labeling .....	10
Consistent Design.....	11
Matching User Expectations .....	12
Effective Visual Design .....	13
Supporting Readability & Scanability .....	14
Facilitating User Tasks .....	15
Providing Help .....	18
<b>Additional Usability Issues by Page &amp; Section .....</b>	<b>19</b>

## Executive Summary

A usability inspection was conducted of the shopbriarwood.com website. The inspection focused on identifying any and all usability issues, while also pointing out strengths of the website that should be maintained.

The most significant usability issues identified in this evaluation include:

- **Expand navigation to include local navigation menus on 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> level pages.** Currently the only organized navigation is via the global navigation bar drop-down menus. Visitors who navigate to 2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> level pages cannot move to other pages in the structure without accessing the global navigation drop-down menus.
- **Page names, window names, and meaningful URLs would help users understand their current location in the site.** Page names are handled inconsistently throughout the site. Window names are the same for all pages. URLs that appear in the address bar contain cryptic numeric codes that do not give users a clue about where they are in the site hierarchy.
- **Apply consistency to the page layouts throughout the site.** Colors and many page elements are consistent throughout the site but there are other elements that would benefit from a standardized treatment. Most pages use a tabular grid to organize content and configuration and alignment of these grids vary from page to page.
- **Simplify user tasks and provide meaningful instructions for completing them.** Much attention should be paid to simplifying tasks and making sure they lead to expected outcomes. The site should provide information about how many steps are in a task or process and the user's current position within it. Meaningful confirmation information would give the user feedback about whether or not the task was completed successfully.
- **Reorganize navigation menus so that each link leads to one unique page.** Navigational confusion exists where some menu choices link to pages in other menus, sometimes at different structural levels.

These issues are among the most pressing usability concerns for the shopbriarwood.com website. Other issues that deserve attention are detailed in the analysis with recommended solutions.

## Terminology & Conventions Used

Different terms are often used when referring to the same part of the browser window or web page. To facilitate understanding of this analysis, one term was used consistently for each browser/web page element. The terms are:

**global navigation:** Links/buttons that are available from every page, leading to major sections of the website and/or significant pages.

**link label:** The label in this case is the word or words that are linked. These words can be in graphical form (such as the graphical buttons at the top of the sampleclient.com interface) or HTML text that is linked.

**local navigation:** Links/buttons for moving between pages in a section of the website (such as within a module).

**page name:** The primary heading for the page, often shown in larger text and located between the global navigation buttons at the top of the window and the text content of the page.

**window name:** The text at the upper left of the browser window, specified through the HTML <title></title> tags.

Single quotes are used to indicate link labels, page names, and window names. Double quotes indicate non-linked body text, field names, alt text, and are used when generally referring to a page. Any divergence from these conventions is noted in the analysis and is done for the purpose of improving clarity.

## Priority Levels

The issues identified by user testing are grouped into three levels of priority:

**High priority:** These issues are likely to impact a large number of users significantly. They should be resolved as quickly as resources allow.

**Medium priority:** Issues at this priority level are also likely to affect a large number of users but generally are less disruptive to the user experience, relative to the high priority issues. If resources are available to address these issues, they should be addressed.

**Low priority:** Low priority issues typically impact a small subset of the overall user base, although they may impact a larger group. Regardless of the number of users affected, these issues carry only a minor negative impact. Low priority issues are generally easy to resolve. There is less time pressure to fix low priority issues, compared to medium priority issues and especially high priority issues.

## Usability Guidelines

### *Efficient Navigation*

Navigation refers to browsing a website, clicking links to move from page to page. Navigation should be an intuitive experience, so the user does not take the wrong path, get lost or disoriented, or have difficulty retracing their steps on a future visit.

#### Practices to Continue

- **Consistently placed logo and global navigation.** A logo linking to the home page is placed at the top of each page with a global navigation drop-down menu along the bottom of the masthead. These provide users with a means to navigate to every major section of the site from every page.
- **Address and business hours on the masthead.** This is basic information about the mall and could be the primary reason many users visit the site. Placing it on a prominent position on every page enables users to find it quickly.

#### Suggested Changes

##### High Priority:

- **Provide local navigation menus on each section of the site.** Within site sections with pages below the level of global navigation, local navigation menus would provide users a means for accessing other pages at that level. Currently, users who have navigated to 2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup>-level pages must use the global navigation drop-down menus or 'back' button to get to other pages at a local level or return to pages at a higher level. The 'Promotions' page is the only page on the site that attempts to provide local navigation but it does not contain links to all of the 'Promotions' sub-pages.
- **Give navigation links a "pressed" appearance when the user is on the indicated page.** Navigation links or buttons indicating the user's current location should take on a "pressed" appearance to help the user identify the current page's position in the website structure. Global navigation elements currently keep the same appearance except upon mouseover or click. When the user navigates within a site section, the global navigation button indicating that section should keep the same appearance it did upon mouseover. It should also be unlinked to prevent users from pressing it only to be returned to the same page. Local navigation menus should be designed in a similar way to show the user's current location.

- **Add a 'home' button to the global navigation menu.** Although the logo links to the home page, its appearance does not indicate that it is a path to the home page. Adding 'home' to the global navigation menu would provide a more obvious path to the home page. This button should have a pressed appearance and be unlinked when the user is on the home page.
- **Provide page names for all pages.** Each page should have a page name at the top of the content area. Page names are currently placed in the left sidebar of the global navigation pages, but sub-pages are not named in a consistent fashion. Instead, one of three strategies is used:
  1. The page name is the same as that of the top-level navigation item on the related drop-down ('store directory' and 'mall directory pages,' all 'promotions' sub-pages, all 'customer service' sub-pages).
  2. There is no page name ('gift cards', 'leasing', 'partnerships', 'events', 'dining', 'programs', 'store directory').
  3. There is a page name that doesn't match the navigation label ('mall directory', 'movies').

Choosing one consistent strategy for page names and naming pages to match the link that leads to them keeps users informed of their current location in the website.

- **Create unique window names.** Each page should have a unique window name that describes the page content. Currently, every page on the site is titled 'The Mills Properties,' which does not even identify the site as 'Briarwood Mall.' Effective titles could be 'Briarwood Mall: [page title],' where [page title] would be the same as the page title that appears in the content area of the page. Unique page titles would enable users to find pages they have visited in their browser history in order to easily return to them.
- **Provide meaningful URLs.** The URL that appears in the browser address bar should give some clue as to what page the user is on. URLs for the Briarwood Mall site are currently named using numeric codes: for example, the URL for the 'Register' page is <http://www.shopbriarwood.com/static/node1468.jsp>. "Node 1468" may be meaningful to the site developers but it is probably cryptic to users.

#### Medium priority:

- **Indicate links that lead to off-site pages:** On the 'gift card' page, there are two links, one to purchase gift cards, the other to check the current balance on an existing gift card. Both of these links lead to other sites. Providing users some kind of indication that they are leaving the shopbriarwood.com site would help keep them from getting lost.

## ***Organizational Clarity***

Organization refers to how content is chunked (broken up into sections and discrete units), sequenced, and grouped. The quality of an organizational system is dependent on how well content is divided, as well as how easy it is for the user to see and understand the system being used.

### Suggested Changes

#### **High Priority:**

- **Remove cross-linked pages from global navigation drop-down menus.**  
Reorganize the navigation categories so that each 2<sup>nd</sup>-level navigation button links to a unique page within the global category. Currently, several of the drop-down choices link to either the same page as another navigation choice:
  - The 'Register' sub-navigation link in the 'Promotions' menu leads to the same page as the 'Register' global navigation button. The 'Register' category should be removed from both of these menus and placed in a site utilities section from which it will be accessible from every page.
  - The 'Directions' link in the 'Customer Service' menu links to the same page as the 'Visitors' global navigation button. The 'Directions' category should be removed from the 'Customer Service' menu and placed in a site utilities section so that it will be accessible from every page. The 'Visitors' global navigation category should be removed altogether.
  - The 'Customer Service' link in the 'Customer Service' menu and the 'Customer Service' global navigation button lead to two unique pages. Remove the redundant 'Customer Service' choice from the 'Customer Service' menu and link the global navigation 'Customer Service' button to the customer service page.
  - A 'Movies' page is only accessible by the 'Movies' link in the 'Promotions' drop-down menu. On the page that the 'Promotions' global navigation button links to, there are links to the other three items in that drop-down menu ('Events,' 'Dining,' and 'Programs'). However, instead of linking to the 'Movies' page, there is a link to the 'Register' page. Because this link has the same appearance as the 'Events,' 'Dining,' and 'Programs' links, it may lead users to believe that 'Register' is a legitimate part of the 'Promotions' local navigation when, in fact, it should be a site utility.
- **Move the 'Perfect Picks' global navigation category to the 'Promotions' category.** 'Perfect Picks' would be more appropriately placed as an item in the 'Promotions' menu. It could also benefit from a more meaningful label that gives the user a clue about what 'Perfect Picks' is.

- **Create an 'About Us' global navigation category and move the 'Leasing' and 'Partnerships' links from the 'Customer Service' menu to the 'About Us' menu.** These links do not relate to customer service functions and would be more appropriately placed in an 'About Us' category. This category could also contain information about the parent company, "Mills Properties" and its other malls.
- **Make a 'directions' site utility and move the map page to it.** Out of town visitors are likely to look for maps showing the layout of the mall as well as how to get to the mall. Make two map pages and move them to the site utilities. Other pages such as the 'store directory' page or any of the promotional pages could have a button or link that would cross-link to these pages.
- **Place contact information in a more prominent location.** Place a link to the 'Contact Us' page in the site utilities. Currently the only link to contact information is in the bottom navigation links, which appear below the fold on most pages on the site.

**Medium Priority:**

- **Break up the information on the 'Customer Service' page into smaller chunks.** There is an overwhelming amount of information on the current 'Customer Service' page and users may be intimidated enough to leave this page without finding answers to their questions. Breaking this information up into smaller chunks and place it on separate pages within the 'Customer Service' section of the site with a local navigation menu might make it easier to navigate.

## ***Clear Labeling***

The choice of labels is vital to website usability. Most online activity involves reading, so the name given to part of a page or a link label is crucial to accurately understanding and using the website. Poorly chosen and/or vague labels confuse users, leading them down the wrong paths on websites or causing them to leave the website because none of the labels appear to represent the desired content. Labeling issues that pertain to other guidelines may be mentioned under that guideline and are therefore not mentioned here.

## **Suggested Changes**

### **High priority:**

- **Rename the 'Perfect Picks' global navigation.** 'Perfect Picks' is not a meaningful label, especially and the page that this menu item links to does not provide an intelligible explanation. It appears that 'Perfect Picks' are discounts available to users who register for an account at the site.
- **Rename the 'Shopping' button.** The 'Shopping' button leads to a list of all the retail businesses at the mall and would be more appropriately labeled 'Shopping & Restaurants.'

### **Low priority:**

- **Rename the 'Make preferred' link on retail business pages.** There is a link on each store's individual page that allows users to add it as a preferred store. This label does not accurately reflect its function.

## ***Consistent Design***

Consistency pertains to all aspects of a website: layout, labeling, error messages, whether something is HTML text or graphical text on all pages, even the choice of colors. Widespread (multi-page) inconsistencies are noted here, with issues specific to a given page provided in Additional Usability Issues by Page & Section.

### Practices to Continue

- **Background colors are consistent throughout the site.** Background colors for page elements are the same throughout the site.
- **Layouts for most pages share similar elements.** The logo, masthead, and global navigation menus appear on all pages.

### Suggested Changes

#### **High Priority:**

- **Apply page design consistently throughout the site.** Currently, the sub-pages differ from each other in the number and location of grid boxes, and formatting of page content. Implementing a consistent application of the page design provides users with predictability in navigating the site's content.
- **Align grid boxes consistently throughout the site.** The current grid layout has many different box sizes and locations, making the alignment of the elements inconsistent from page to page. Reducing the number of grid boxes and ensuring that they are consistently aligned increases user confidence in the professionalism of the web site.

## ***Matching User Expectations***

The Web has been in existence long enough for users to develop consistent, widespread expectations concerning web page behavior, such as what underlining and colors represent. Underlines are interpreted automatically as indicating a link and the color blue is interpreted automatically as indicating a link.

### Practices to Continue

- **Linking the Briarwood Mall masthead logo to the home page.** Many Web users are familiar with the practice of linking the logo in the upper left to the site's home page, and this works effectively with this site.

### Suggested Changes

#### **High priority:**

- **Include basic visitor's information on the home page.** In addition to providing the hours and address in the banner area, a grid box should be used on the home page to provide the hours, address, telephone number and link to directions. By providing basic visitor's information on the home page, users are able to quickly find information essential to their mall visit.

#### **Medium priority:**

- **Move the Member login box on the home page.** The login box is currently located at the upper right of the home page, where most users expect to find a Search box. Since the site does not have search, the text field box and associated Go button are misleading in that location. Moving the login box to the left side of the content area more closely matches user expectations.
- **Remove underlines from unlinked text.** Several pages, including the 'Gift Cards' page, use underlines to emphasize unlinked text. Underlining on web pages indicates a link and should not be used in other situations. Boldfaced text or a larger font is a more appropriate means of emphasis.

## ***Effective Visual Design***

Visual design concerns the 'look and feel' of the website, specifically how well interface design principles have been applied or followed. Adherence to these principles improves both aesthetics and functionality, because users are able to locate desired information more readily. This section covers widespread interface design issues.

### Suggested Changes

#### **High Priority:**

- **Reduce the size of the content-area banners on sub-pages.** The images and marketing copy that are placed at the top of most sub-pages distract from the main content of the page, and in some cases push the page content below the fold. Reducing the size and/or moving the location of the graphics and marketing copy ensure that important page content is immediately accessible on page load.
- **Improve application of grid layout style.** While the grid layout has the potential to work well for the site's content, the excessive use of boxes distracts from the site content and is visually busy. The grid for each page should consist of a full-width horizontal header and footer, and no more than three grid boxes within the main content area.

#### **Medium Priority:**

- **Reduce number of colors used for backgrounds and text.** While the tan and green color scheme is overall pleasant, there are too many shades of color used for backgrounds and text. Creating a simple color palette that is consistently applied both complements the site's purpose and provides users with a more pleasing experience.
- **Use a single color to denote links.** Currently, there are four different colors used for text that is linked. Using a single link color lets site visitors navigate more efficiently, because they can easily identify page links.

#### **Low Priority:**

- **Remove the 'you are here' arrow on the sub-pages.** The white arrow graphic on the left side of the sub-pages often does not point to anything, and does not provide helpful cues to the user. Removing the arrow also reduces the visual distraction and allows the user to more easily focus on the main page content.
- **Remove the 'More Mills Sites' drop-down from the home page.** The drop-down cross-promoting other malls owned by the Mills company is not helpful to users. This information should be provided in an 'About Us' or 'Contact Us' category.

## ***Supporting Readability & Scanability***

Most of the time users spend online is spent reading and a good portion of that reading is done by scanning through pages, looking for headings and links to follow. The sampleclient.com modules, however, require reading for comprehension, which is a much more careful process than most web surfers typically follow. The extra time required for this type of reading, combined with the fact that reading from a screen is slower and more taxing than reading from a printed page, suggest that the sampleclient.com content should be designed for optimal display both online and in printed format.

### **Suggested Changes**

#### **Medium Priority:**

- **Increase the contrast between the background and text colors.** Brown text is currently used on a tan background, which makes the text difficult to read. Increasing the contrast of the text provides accessibility for a wider group of users.
- **Increase the font size for main content.** The small font size used for the home page content is difficult for older audiences to read. Increasing the font size ensures that all site visitor's can easily access information as intended.
- **Allow users to print pages without graphics and navigational elements.** Adding a print-specific style sheet that would hide images and navigational elements would allow users to print content. Offering users a choice between a printer friendly version of the page and a print of the screen would be optimal.

## ***Facilitating User Tasks***

Web users are task-oriented and users of the sampleclient.com modules are certainly no different in that regard. Websites that support these tasks by facilitating access and reducing the time required for the task are best positioned to keep visitors returning and satisfied with the experience.

### Practices to Continue

**Provide a link to the mall map from each retailer's page.** Each retailer's page has a link to the mall directory map. This allows users to quickly look up where a store or restaurant is located within the mall.

### Suggested Changes

#### **High priority:**

- **Improve the login process.** Users currently cannot tell whether they are logged in or not. Change the login area so that, if a user is already logged in, a message states, 'you are logged in as [member-name]' and a 'logout' link appears. If the user is not logged in, a login form should appear. Options should be available allowing users to log out and delete their accounts.
- **Improve the account registration process.** The current registration process does not provide information about the steps in the process or confirmation that the user has successfully created an account. A task-oriented navigation bar showing the number of steps and the user's current location would orient users while they complete the process. Users should be allowed to move backward and forward in the process without losing any information. At the end of the process, a confirmation page should appear to clearly indicate that the registration process was successfully completed.
- **Provide ways to log out of and delete member accounts.** There is currently no way to log out of an account or delete one that is no longer needed. Provide a logout button and an option to delete accounts.
- **Clearly indicate links that lead to the registration page.** Users who do not have an account at shopbriarwood.com are often faced with the login page when they click a link to a 'Perfect Pick' or 'Hot Buy.' Either place these items completely inside a members-only area or indicate clearly that linking to the actual item requires an account.

- **Simplify the site technology.** The site is currently coded using java server pages. Although there are pages that need to be dynamically generated in order to pull content out of a database, the jsp technology serves to over-complicate the site. Data that is presented consists mainly of store or event information that is returned either in a simple tabular format or as individual pages. An alternate coding strategy could include:
  - Create page elements using an xhtml structure with css for positioning and presentation.
  - Use Javascript to handle behavior that can take place on the client-side, for instance, error-checking of user-entered form field data.
  - Php templates could include static page elements such as the masthead and global and local navigation into each page and interact with the database.
  - A simple content management system could allow mall personnel to add and delete store and restaurant information as businesses come and go. Business owners could also use the content management system to update information about their stores and restaurants.

Developing a web site that conforms to web standards and passes xhtml and css validation will eliminate many of the errors users encounter at the current site. Currently, some browsers have issues with the drop-down global navigation menus, there is a 'Go' button beside the login form that appears and disappears randomly, and, when accessing store pages from some browsers, code shows above the rest of the page. These issues can be disconcerting to users.

#### **Medium priority:**

- **Convert global navigation buttons from graphics to plain html text.** Plain html text navigation buttons styled with css to create hover effects would enable pages to load more quickly and facilitate changes to the global navigation bar. The graphic navigation buttons that are currently in use have very simple text labels on an almost plain background.
- **Provide confirmation that a user has made a store or restaurant a 'preferred retailer.'** This link, which appears on each store or restaurant's page, adds the selected retailer to a registered user's list of preferred retailers. Providing a confirmation page stating clearly that the retailer has been added would let users know that their action accomplished the task. Currently, clicking on the 'make preferred' link on a store info page leads to the registration page. To confirm that the retailer was added, users have to click on 'preferred retailers' under the 'Update my profile' menu to see if the retailer now has a check mark in front of it.

- **Provide a key to the map that identifies where individual stores are.** The mall directory map is coded with letters to identify major sections of the mall and numbers for each retailer. Users who arrive at the map page not knowing the code for the section and retailer they want to find must navigate to the individual retailer page to look up the code, and then return to the mall map. Optionally, when users navigate from a retailer page to the mall directory page, javascript could store the name of the retailer and its location code in a cookie and display it on the mall directory page. Users would not have to remember that information or write it down.

**Low priority:**

- **Improve operation of dhtml drop-down menus.** Improve functionality of the dhtml drop-down navigation menus at the top of the page directly beneath the masthead so that they are easy to access by all browsers. It is currently difficult to click sub-navigation items in the Firefox 1.5 for Macintosh OS X browser.

## ***Providing Help***

Even the most carefully designed website may need a help section, especially if the site functionality is fairly complex and users are expected to step through various processes. Unfortunately, the label 'Help' is generally off-putting to users, who resist visiting that area of the website because of previous 'Help' experiences (with desktop software or other websites) that were not satisfying. Users may also associate 'Help' with only technical problems and not visit that area for more content-based questions, such as where to find something or what module to complete next.

### **Suggested Changes**

#### **High priority:**

- **Provide more help to users navigating the registration process.** Provide instructions to users navigating the registration form. Clearly indicate required fields and provide instructions for completing the form.

#### **Medium priority:**

- **Create a "frequently asked questions" section.** Many users would be helped by instructions for completing the forms available on the on the site, particularly the registration process. There is currently no way for users to get information about navigating the registration process and the 'Contact Us' link is buried on the bottom navigation bar, which is below the fold on most pages.

## Additional Usability Issues by Page & Section

Further usability issues specific to a page, module, or section within a module are indicated below. Some repetition may occur with issues noted in the general analysis, if the page or section in question requires significant and/or specialized assistance with that issue. Only the pages, modules, and sections with further issues are considered.

### Individual Retailer Pages

Each retail establishment in the mall (store or restaurant, etc.) has an assigned page on which it can post information about its business.

#### Low priority:

- **Indicate specific hours of business.** Retailers whose business hours are the same as the mall's hours currently list their hours as "mall hours." Users not familiar with the mall's hours must look up to the masthead at the top of the page to find the mall's hours. Specific hours of business should be indicated whether or not they match the mall's hours and, because there is plenty of space, an additional field indicating mall hours could be listed below the 'Hours:' field.

### Site Map

#### Low priority:

- **Create a simpler site map.** The current site map uses an expand/collapse folder system. The user clicks on a folder to make the items in the folder appear and clicks it again to make them disappear. There are not a lot of pages on the site except for individual store information pages, which are listed in the store directory and do not need to be repeated on the site map. This menu would be a lot more usable if users did not have to navigate the expanding/collapsing links.

### Mall Directory

#### High priority:

- **Indicate that the printable map is a PDF document.** The 'printable mall directory' graphic links to a 236K PDF file. Users who click on this link expecting it to lead to another web page might be frustrated when *Adobe Acrobat* begins loading. Links to PDF documents should be clearly labeled to indicate that the file is a PDF and show the size of the document, i.e., "236K PDF."