Special Report

No Unsupervised Thinking: How to increase conversions by guiding your audience

You likely invest significant resources driving prospects to your site, from advertising to search-engine optimization. But if this traffic is exposed to your site and doesn't find it compelling, what opportunities have you lost? And will they ever return?

This report will help you recoup the investments you make to promote your site by showing you specific tactics to help you design pages that guide your traffic to conversion, avoid common design pitfalls, and learn what does and does not work from live optimization of audience web pages.

As we see from a recent experiment, it is essential to clearly guide your prospects to your main conversion goals with as few distractions as possible.

EXPERIMENT #1: REDUCING DISTRACTIONS

> *Recoup the investments you make to promote your site.*

This research partner is an established financial institution that offers online savings accounts. It was seeking to increase online account registrations and wanted to know which page would produce the most account signups.

Control

If you take a look at the control page below, along with a simplified wireframe of the page, you'll notice five main blocks of information separated by defined lines and gradients along with three major calls to action. *(Logos and identifying marks have been concealed.)*
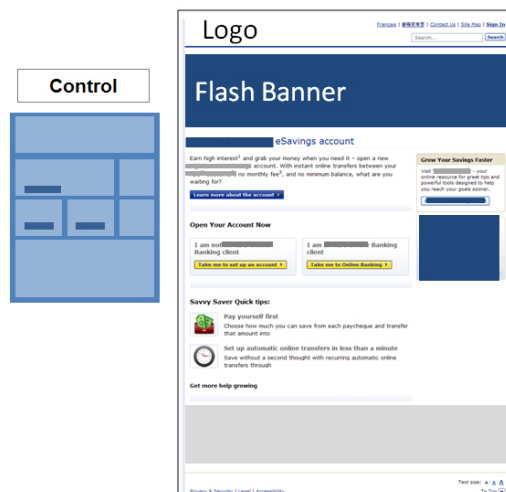
After analyzing this page, we concluded that it had many objectives competing in an unorganized way that may have been creating friction. To explore this hypothesis, we conducted an A/B/C split test focused on reducing the amount of friction.

We developed two treatments in which we gradually reduced the amount of competing information. Below are visual representations of how the information was originally organized and gradually reduced.


Let's take a closer look at the two treatments…

Treatment 1

Without drastically changing the copy, Treatment 1 organized the page into two columns and removed competing calls to action to focus on one major call to action. The main copy has been bolded to better guide the user by directing the eyepath through the text. The second column offered a customer testimonial and removed competing product information.
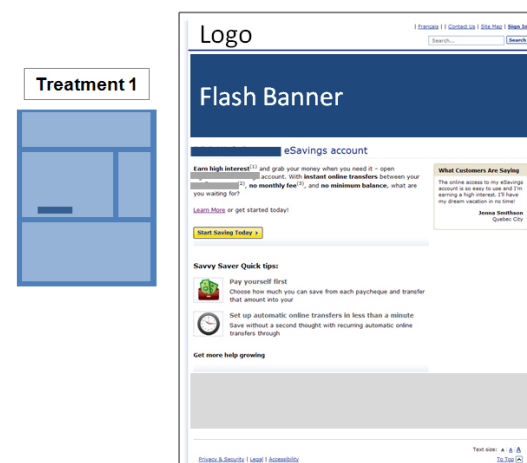
Treatment 2

Treatment 2 reduces the page complexity even further, offering just one column containing main information and a single, clear call to action. The copy has not been drastically altered, but again has been strategically bolded to help drive the user through the page to the call to action – which is now centered.
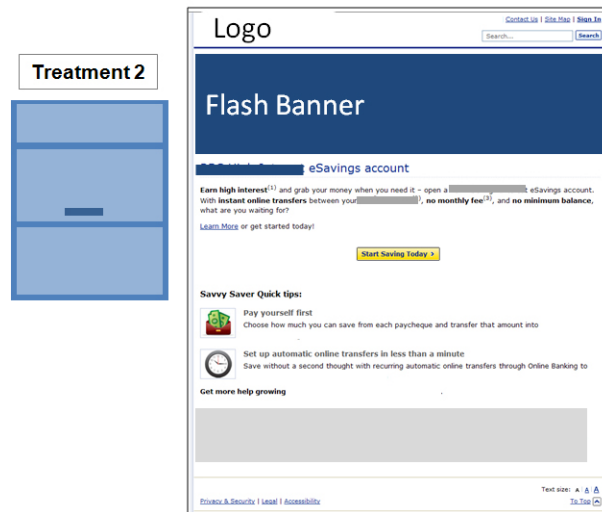
Results:

	Relative CTR (over control)	Relative CR (over control)
Control	0%	0%
Treatment 1	224.4%	15.3%
Treatment 2	265.6%	26.5%

What you need to understand: By simplifying the page layout and reducing the amount of competing objectives, the optimized pages were able to increase clickthrough by as much as 266% and conversion by as much as 26%.

To achieve similar results for your pages, keep these key points in mind:

- Be cognizant of competing objectives on your page.
- Isolate the call to action in the main eye path.
- For this test we couldn't remove the bottom objects, but you should remove as many non-essential elements as possible until you reach an optimized layout.
- Once you've reached that layout, continue to hone in on specific elements and further test small changes (e.g. button size, text color).

Of course, this test is demonstrative of results we've found over years of research.

RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN VISITOR GUIDANCE AND CONVERSION

As this chart illustrates, Experiment 1 showed a direct relationship between how well visitors are directed through a page and how often they perform a stated objective.

Website Direction and Conversion

MARKETING EXPERIMENTS
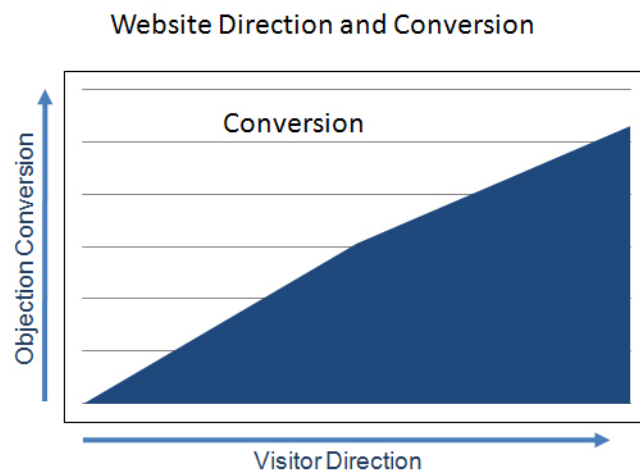
In research project after research project, we see the same direct, positive correlation. Simply put, increasing clarity for the user increases clickthrough and conversion. A website that immediately answers the following questions will achieve its objectives more often:
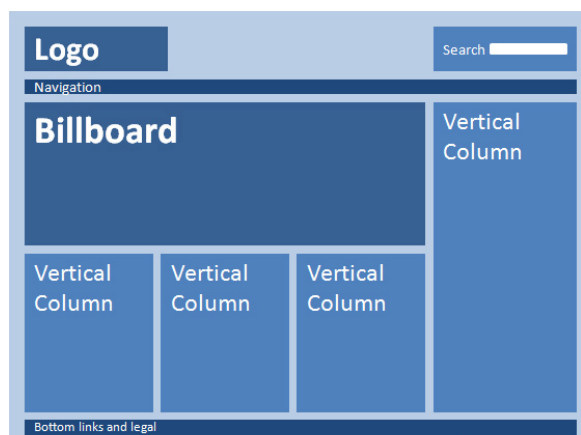
- **Where am I?** – If visitors arrive at a site from a paid search ad, it should be immediately clear that what was promised in the ad is offered on the page.
- **What can I do?** – A page with a conversion goal can't just provide information – it must clearly guide visitors to a particular action. A page that does not clearly guide users promotes unsupervised thinking and reduces the likelihood of completion of that conversion goal.
- **Why should I do it?** – The value proposition must convince potential customers why they should do business with you and not the competition. [*Editor's note: For a closer look at crafting a value proposition as well as other factors for winning over jaded prospects, please see* Optimizing Offer Pages*.*]

These questions occur in the visitors' minds, consciously or unconsciously, anytime they land on a page. Analyze your current and future pages with your web design and marketing teams to ensure these key questions are clearly answered. To help guide your thinking, let's look at two generalized web page templates.

Complex Web Page Template:

Based on research from MarketingSherpa
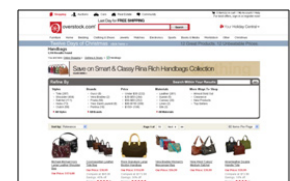
This template probably looks familiar to you. According to our sister company MarketingSherpa, 80% of large B2B sites and 53% of smaller organizations use this layout for their homepage. Many B2C and ecommerce sites also use variations on this theme.

Sometimes this template is necessary if you have competing objectives – for example, a home page with a complex offer, multiple departments, or many stakeholders. The problem occurs when there is little guidance for where to go next. So if you have multiple objectives on a page, decide which is most important. And make sure you clearly point visitors in that direction.

Simple Web Page Template:

The template above works well for a simple objective, for example a single product offer. Key points of the value proposition are in the main column, with the option to add supporting information, such as testimonials or credibility seals, in either the left or right column.

The primary offer does not have to be above the fold, but you should drive visitors' eyepath through the key expressions of the value proposition to the objective (e.g. submission form or link to next step in funnel).

OPTIMIZING THOUGHT SEQUENCES

As you can see, it is vitally important that every element of your web page is guiding visitors through the process to the action you want them to take. But it is important to emphasize that we are not just optimizing web pages; we are optimizing thought sequences. You want to have a conversation with the customer that gets them to understand the value proposition that is built into the page.

Keep these concepts in mind as we explore specific tactics to ensure every element of your web pages is guiding the customer's sequence of thoughts.

Directing visitor eyepath

There are five ways which you can adjust elements on your web pages to guide your visitor:

1. Size
2. Shape
3. Color
4. Position
5. Motion

These elements seem simple enough, yet in practice effective use of them often falls through the cracks – so it's important that you think explicitly about each element. Let's take a closer look.

Size

The larger an element is *in relation to other elements* of a web page, the more it will draw the visitor's attention (e.g. text size, images, banners, buttons).

> *We are not just optimizing web pages; we are optimizing thought sequences.*

Submit   VS.   Start Your Free Trial

This seems straightforward, but you must use size judiciously. There is a tendency with some marketers to create quite lavish elements in a call to action that so overpower users that they skip steps in the conversation, such as missing product features, credibility indicators, or your value proposition. In this case, the question we addressed earlier of "Why should I do it?" has not been answered.

In other cases, buttons are so big that it is not clear they should be clicked on. While there are no hard and fast rules about which buttons work best – you must test to really know – in general you want to make sure that the button looks like a button (perhaps with dimension) and is clearly clickable.

Shape

Adjusting the shape of an object can bring attention to specific elements (e.g. unique fonts, odd-shaped banners, buttons). In the image below, the irregular shape on the bottom left, pointed menu element on the right, and button in the middle that sticks out of the image all attract the eye because of their shape. [*Editor's note: This website was the winner of our value proposition contest in the* [Powerful Value Propositions, Part II](#) *clinic.*]

Shape can not only draw a visitor's attention to an element, it can also serve to hide an element. As MarketingSherpa's research has shown, banner blindness can cause viewers to overlook objects placed in a box that is similar to a third-party online display advertisement. So if you put your headline in a box, visitors may not notice it.

Color

The proper use of colors can draw attention to elements such as banners, buttons, images or text. However, too much color can become desensitizing to visitors.

In the example below, the text color drives viewers to key parts of the offer, and then visitors can read more about the offer. Visitors often don't read the full text of your page, but instead scan to look for key information. Without this color distinction, the text would look tedious and key benefits would likely be ignored.

3 Easy Steps To Making Money!

1). Set up your free account
- **Fast** - sign up in 30 seconds
- **Unlimited access** - take as many surveys as you want
- **No commitment** - you can stop participating at any time

2). Take Surveys
- Access a **wide variety** of surveys
- **Frequent opportunities,** average of 30 surveys a month
- **Voice your opinion**

3). Earn cash & rewards!
- **Win up to $25,000** in our quarterly sweepstakes
- **Earn** up to $15 for each completed survey
- **Get cash rewards,** gift cards & more!

If you emphasize everything, you emphasize nothing.

As with other elements, color must be used judiciously as well. If you emphasize everything, you emphasize nothing. Decide on the most important elements of your web page and value proposition, and use color to highlight them.

You must also make sure that the color schemes you use contrast well, or you may have readability issues due to technological difficulties (colors may bleed together on older monitors) or sheer friction from having to decipher illegible text. If you need help picking color palettes, sites like kuler.adobe.com and colorschemedesigner.com can help.

Position

Where you place elements on a web page will determine if and how they catch the visitor's attention. It is possible to weight the priority of elements, such as headlines and credibility indicators, on your web page by strategically arranging them.

The pages below are not a before and after, but show two different examples of positioning the headline. While both are clearly readable, the headline on the right is in the vertical eyepath of the reader and therefore guides the reader through the conversation better.

Most visitors are not trying to read these headlines. They have more likely found this page through search results or a search ad and it is one of several that are open in separate tabs. Then, much like with junk mail, prospects will go through and close whichever pages don't grab their attention with a compelling value proposition. So in the real world, deciding which headline will work best comes down to testing. While both probably convert a certain amount of visitors, we want to know which position (optimized with other elements such as color and size) will convert the most.

Motion

Adding motion to your page, from an animated image to a video, will immediately grab your user's attention. However, test this method with caution due to possible negative reactions.

In the example below, the motion draws the visitor's attention, but the key value proposition is hidden on the fourth panel. If your visitor doesn't stick around to watch it play out, they will never get those messages.

Since you may only have a second to grab your visitors' attention, you must use text to give them reasons to stick around and not rely on a video to do the heavy lifting by itself. Once you've drawn them in with a compelling headline and text giving a reason for watching, the video can provide additional information.

Also be careful where you position animation. As with other elements, you can actually draw too much attention at the expense of having a conversation with your visitors through the value proposition on your page.

The design of the animated graphic may be an issue as well. As with banner blindness, anything that is displayed in a standard template may get lost in the mistaken belief it is just a third-party advertisement. Experiment with innovative ways to use motion to enhance your value proposition, such as interacting with other elements on your page, so it is clear to visitors that the video or other motion element is worth watching.

Now let's apply what we have learned about directing the visitor's eyepath to some community-submitted web pages.

LIVE OPTIMIZATION

"*Adequacy is the enemy of excellence.*" – Peter Drucker

The following pages all use some of the five elements well, but other elements might have room for improvement. Keep this in mind with your own web pages. It is likely that even pages that use many elements successfully and perform well have room for further improvement.

Outrigger.com

Outrigger Hotels & Resorts operates vacation properties throughout the Asia Pacific region. Opt-ins and past guests are driven from an email to the web page below to make a booking.

What's working

This page is attempting to use size and color to help visitors through its many offers. For a vacation site, size and position of images are crucial since a vacation is a very emotional and visual sell. This page does a good job drawing people in with images. Color is also used to draw attention to the offers.

What to watch

The information is positioned and organized in a very confusing way. Once the visitor moves through the page and gets to the offerings, it's hard to make sense of them. The offers should be categorized and organized so that they are clearer. A table or feature matrix may be a more user-friendly solution. Or for a category that has a lot of offers, like Oahu on this page, an expand/collapse feature might be preferable.

Other recommendations

The site should try strengthening the value proposition of the headline (ex. Savings of over XX%) and test increasing its size. The wording might also confuse visitors who don't associate "hospitality" with hotels and resorts.

Keep necessary information out of the right-hand column. Special rates and discounts should be incorporated in the offer. Perhaps use a small starburst to take advantage of size, shape, and color and draw users to the best offers. The site could also compare itself to more expensive competitors by using color and shape to strike through a higher price at other hotels, and then list the offer price.

Vanguard.com

Links on Vanguard's home page, as well as navigation in the header of every page of the site, drive visitors who are new to Vanguard to open an IRA on this page.
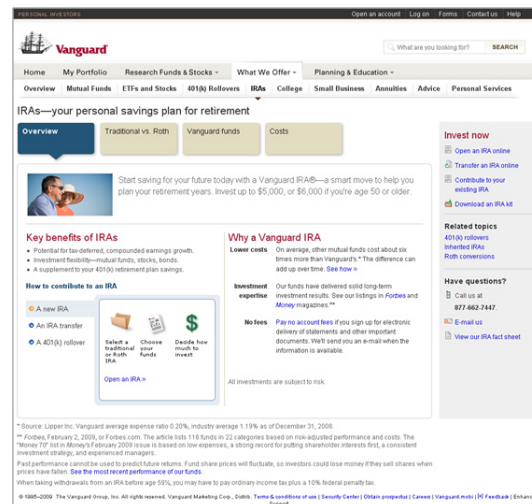
What's working

This page attempts to use color, size, and shape to bring attention to the ultimate goal of opening an IRA

What to watch

There is significant room for improvement, since the positioning and layout might cause the call to action (the box in the lower left with three icons) to be overlooked.

Other recommendations

Remove all unnecessary information. For example, the eye is drawn to the image in the upper left and the headline gets lost. By removing the image and turning large navigation buttons into smaller tabs, the headline will become clearer. An increase in font size will help as well. As will quantifying a value proposition in the headline, such as how much faster one can reach retirement with Vanguard, to help answer the "Who Should I Do It?" question.

Reduce the page to a single-column format where all important information is in the eyepath, and remove unnecessary and distracting navigation choices. Consider using a feature matrix to help compare Vanguard's offerings and contrast them with competitor products.

Nascar.com

This page is attempting to sell avid NASCAR fans an online application that lets them listen to and watch NASCAR races live.

Size, shape, and color can call attention to different elements, but they must be used prudently to communicate the most important goal.

What's working

This page uses shape, size, and color to try to bring attention to some of the calls to action and some of the value proposition.

What to watch

Overuse of color and the lack of contrast between some elements mitigate the use of size and shape. One goal of the page is the free 14-day trial button, which is totally lost. If they haven't already, NASCAR should research which offer generates the most revenue, and ensure that offer has the most weight. Size, shape, and color can call attention to different elements, but they must be used prudently to communicate the most important goal.

Other recommendations

Avoid too many equally weighted objectives. They can be used to a certain degree to show the features, but overuse will quickly lose the visitor.

Reduce the number of graphical elements. With so many competing items on the page, it is very difficult for visitors to ascertain which elements deserve their primary attention. The "learn more" buttons currently get totally lost.

SmartNetwork.com

What's working

This site effectively uses color, size, and shape to bring attention to the lead generation form.

What to watch

Most of the copy is lost in the white-on-blue color scheme. Consider a test with blue on white. White text on a colored background may work for a short element like a headline, but can cause significant friction when used for body copy.

Other recommendations

This site may be depending too much on the video to convey its value proposition. Videos can be a distraction. Consider using more copy to let visitors know why they should fill out the form. While the eye is instantly drawn to the form, the user benefit of completing the form is not clear.

Consider using the newsletter to get the lead. The "View September Issue" call to action at the bottom of the page competes with the profile form submission. By incorporating the September issue into the actual form, the page could increase motivation to complete the form while removing a competing call to action.

OrlandoTravelHotels.com

This website used PPC ads to drive users interested in visiting Orlando to the site to book hotels and vacation packages.

What's Working

Size, shape, color, and position all drive visitors to the primary objective. Shape is used especially well, with the 110% best-rate guarantee graphic. Even in links at the top of the page, size, shape, and color draw visitors to most valuable action – clicking "Hot Deals" link.

What to watch

The roller coaster visual on the page is actually a slideshow. While using several, emotional images can appeal to a wide variety of reasons the audience has for visiting Orlando – from families to adventurers to business travelers – that motion may draw visitors' attention away from the primary objective.

Other recommendations

Establish credibility before asking for the business to answer the "Why should I do it?" question for your visitors. The best-rate guarantee may appear clickable to some visitors, so include a popup that further explains its value. Also, explain other elements of the value proposition that set this site apart from competitors (e.g., business relationships, quick turnaround).

Guide the eyepath through the rest of the page using variable weighting of text and graphics. Make it clear to the audience which images and text is clickable.

FreeCreditReport.com

Experian, a credit bureau, drives visitors who want to check their credit to this site using PPC, SEO, and email, and seeks to have them enroll in its program.

What's working

This site does a good job of using shape and color to bring attention to the call to action.

What to watch

The positioning and layout of this page could better direct the sequence of thoughts. Try changing the page to a one-column format where all the important information is in the direct eyepath. Or perhaps include a second column with anxiety reducers such as customer testimonials, but no key information. Changing the icons in the middle-bottom column to simple, less distracting bullet points is also worth testing. While the location of the call-to-action link is clear, the page may work harder with the button connected to the form.

Other recommendations

Be careful when using imagery like the picture of the three men. Even though it is a recognizable image taken from the TV campaign, it may serve as more of a distraction than support.
The headline is rather generic and may work better with a specific, quantifiable benefit (e.g., number of people helped, number of credit reports downloaded).

BOTTOM LINE

If you don't guide visitors to your main objective, someone else will.

Your competition is just a click away. If you don't guide visitors to your main objective, someone else will. Use the five elements of guiding eyepath (size, shape, color, position, and motion) to clearly communicate with your visitors where they are, what they can do on your page, and why they should do it. In seeking to answers these questions, you may find that the less you put on your page, the higher your conversion rate will be. In the end, it just comes down to taking an informed guess at which elements to tweak and then testing to know for sure which changes work best.

For hundreds of free test ideas and case studies, and information about our Fundamentals of Testing training and certification course, visit: **MarketingExperiments.com**.