

A Report on the Current State of

USER EXPERIENCE ON MEMBERSHIP WEBSITES

Who's Hitting the Mark?





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Introduction

Much has been said about the digital challenges facing membership organisations and how difficult it is to overcome them. In fact, MemberWise publish an annual research summary report on the growth and evolvement of the Membership Sector, with this year's report aptly named 'Harnessing the Web to Drive Membership Value and Growth'. This report, in which 357 managers and directors from across the membership and association sector took part, uncovered the following key findings with respect to member expectations from their online experience:

"There is a general recognition within the membership sector that members expect a high level of self-service"

"Sector players generally agree that members expect their online experience to be interactive and engaging, their journey to be optimised and their experience to be value driven"

But these findings are met with the following, contradictory findings with respect to what associations actually offer their members in terms of an online experience: "Websites are typically structured by function or department rather than by audience" Only 55% of websites are responsive (web pages that automatically render to the size and type of device being used)

"Only two in ten organisations suggest their website is accessible for those with disabilities"

Taken together, these findings highlight a gap between member needs and the associations' current ability to meet those needs. It is therefore not surprising that the contributors to the report described "inadequate integration of membership management systems (CRM/databases) and websites (CMS)" among their key challenges, while three-quarters of the respondents felt operationally challenged by the lack of personalisation on their website.

This research sparked our interest. While many functionalities of a website are dictated by system integration and require a technological foundation, not all are so complex. Are membership organisations doing all they can within the limitations of their legacy systems? Are some transcending these barriers? What is the state of user experience on membership sites today?





We sampled and benchmarked an array of membership sites against 13 aspects of user experience relevant to association websites (having to do with primarily with member recruitment and engagement) to create a detailed snapshot of the digital realm of the membership sector today.

Following are our key findings, along with explanations and screenshots of the different aspects of user experience on membership sites. We hope this report can serve as a basis for comparison and as a guide to help membership organisations and associations to bridge the gap between member expectation and the organisations' delivery of their online experience.





The Research

We created a set of user experience criteria relevant to membership sites. Each of the areas represented a unique aspect of the websites' user experience. The full list of criteria and the factors taken into account can be found in the full table of results at the bottom of this report.

These were the main user experience features analysed:

- **Clarity of Message** 1.
- 2. **Call to Action**
- 3. **User Journey**
- **Content Layout** 4.
- **5**. **Member Registration**
- 6. On Site Help
- **7.** Contact Options
- 8. **Trust & Security**
- **Mobile Friendliness** 9.

In order to create a cohesive picture of the state of membership websites, we selected and tested 10 membership websites belonging to large, well known organisations.



Selected Websites

These were the websites selected to take part in our research:

- 1. **The Trades Union Congress**
- 2. **The British Veterinary Association**
- 3. The Museums Association
- 4. **The Chartered Society of Designers**
- 5. The Royal Meteorological Society
- The Chartered Institute of Journalists 6.
- 7. The Chartered Management Institute
- 8. The Chartered Institute of Marketing
- 9. The Chartered Institute of Building
- 10. The Chartered Institute of Logistics and Transport

Although all sites included member registration and log-in, the target audiences and goals varied from site to site (some also set out to educate about their field, others offered events and courses, etc). We analysed each of these sites according to the aforementioned set of UX criteria, generating an average UX score out of a possible 100 points. We will now turn to discuss the results and key insights.

The Results

The average UX (user experience) score across all membership sites tested was 53.3. The average score of each unique aspect of the website's user experience (the 13 sets of criteria explained above) ranged from 32 - 72 points. Aspects having to do with new member registration (more specifically the online registration process) scored best, while aspects having to do with online help and FAQ's on the site scored lowest overall. The average score of each unique aspect of the websites' user experience is summarised in the following table.





A summary of the average UX score across the websites:

Dimensions of comparison	Average UX score
Call to Action Is there an acceptable amount of calls to action? Do these stand out on the page?	52
Content Layout Is the content scannable? Is it neatly organised, is the layout clear to the user?	64
Clarity of Message Is there one central message to the website? Is it easy to understand what that message is at first glance?	53
Contact Details Is it easy to find the contact details on the website? Is it easy to contact the organisation?	65
FAQ's Are there FAQ's on the site? Are these relevant and useful? Are they easy to find? Presented in a clear and organised way?	34
User Journey Is the user journey seamless? Is it clear what needs to be completed in order to proceed in the process?	67
Registration Form Length Is the length of the form optimal?	72
Registration Form Layout Is the form neatly laid out? Is it divided into an optimal amount of sections, depending on the form length?	44
Registration Form Progress Is it clear to see your progress when filling out the form? Is it obvious where you are in the process?	71
Error Messages Are error messages constructive? Can you clearly understand what you need to fix in order to proceed?	32
Trust & Security Are any steps taken to ensure secure browsing? If payment details are required, are the appropriate security features in place?	52
Help Are there any help features available on the site, either online or offline? How easy is it to get help while filling out the form? While browsing the site?	46
Mobile Friendly Is the website responsive? Suitable for browsing from different devices?	41
Total	53.3

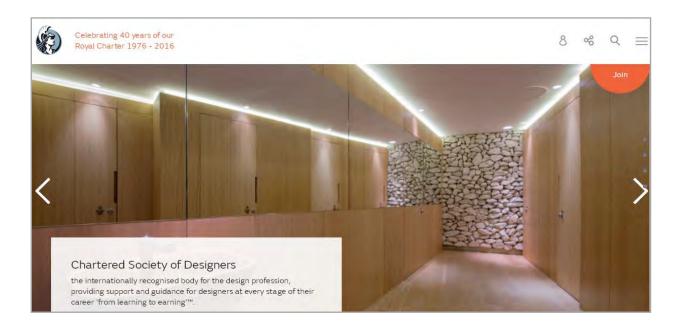
Insights

This research revealed some interesting insights into what users can expect on membership sites, and the state of user experience on membership sites at this point in time. It also outlined which aspects of the website the organisations felt are most important (and therefore have put more effort into). We will now turn to discussing the key takeaways from this research.



Clarity of Message

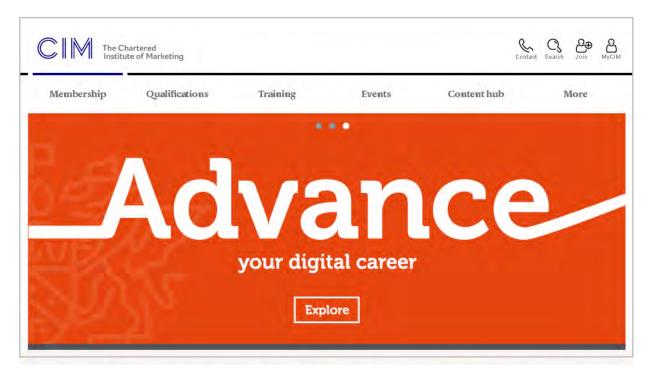
Average (53) - As can be expected, the clarity of the website's main message varied from site to site, with some sites performing better than others. We were looking for websites that clearly stated the purpose of the site and what was expected of the user, both in terms of content and design. Websites that scored well had one or two sentences that explained their essence, with the message standing out against the background of the site in a way that is easy to spot, read and understand. A good example of a site that performed well in this category is The Chartered Society of Designers (CSD). Their website is clean and simple, plainly stating the organisation's goal and mission. This focus helps the user understand within seconds if they have reached the right place and encourages them to interact further with the site. The images seem to have been carefully selected to complement the site's core message. The page is clear and focused, not over-cluttered with too many options. Reducing clutter in this manner has been shown to improve user engagement and retention. It also ensures that you grab your users' attention the second they land on your page and encourages them to read on and remain on your site.



Here is a good example of a clean homepage and clear message from the Chartered Society of Designers. Notice the simple language and concise, one-paragraph explanation of what the organisation is all about, as well as the 'join' button which really stands out against the rest of the site.

Call to action

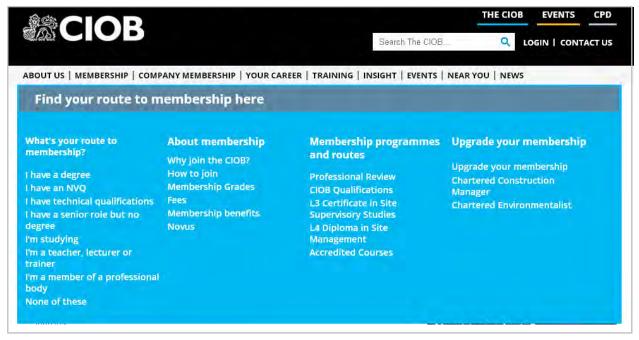
Average (52) - This brings us to the next point, the website's call to action (CTA). Across the sites analysed, the use of CTA's was average in terms of placement, copy (text), and design (size, font, colour). The main CTA was usually placed directly below the core message. On the sites that scored well, the CTA was generally quite clear, both in terms of copy and design, and prominently placed. Sites that scored well focused on one or two main calls to action and effectively lead their users to them. In case the CTA was 'join us' or a variation of this common CTA on membership sites, the ones that scored exceptionally well also offered an explanation of the benefits of joining the organisation in close proximity to the CTA, assisting in the pre-registration process.



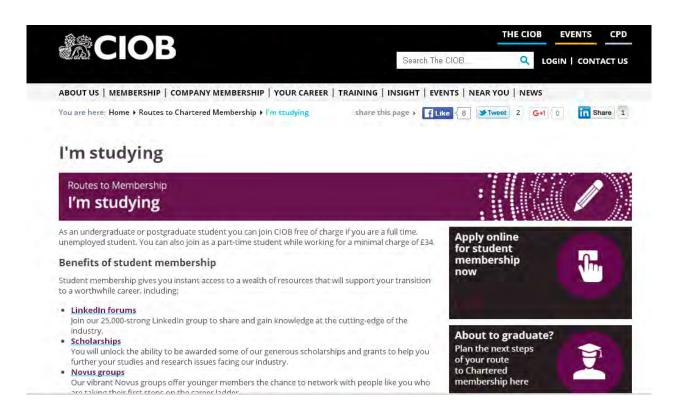
A good example of a prominently placed CTA that stands out on the page, from The Chartered Institute of Marketing. Along with a clear and concise message, this homepage makes it instantaneously obvious to the relevant audience that they have reached the right place and where they are expected to go next.

User Journey

Above Average (67) - Membership sites scored an average of 67 points for user journey, indicating that most had user intent and usability in mind. 3 out of 10 websites were outstanding in this respect. What truly makes a membership website outstanding is if they understand their user audience(s) and build their website from the users' point of view. A common mistake some associations make is creating a website which reflects their internal structure instead of focussing on their members. The Chartered Institute of Building (CIOB) is a good example of an organisation that truly understands their user audience. Their 'join us' process in particular is impressive - Their registration process is split into two (personal and company membership). Under the personal registration process, users can check their eligibility or register and apply for the correct level of membership by answering a set of questions about themselves. Clicking on each option leads the user to a bespoke landing page which is geared around that specific audience. Even for those not currently eligible to join, other options are offered to keep users engaged and offer useful advice.



The Chartered Institute of Building features a drop down menu which offers users a simple way of finding their personal route to membership. Clicking on each link leads to a bespoke landing page.

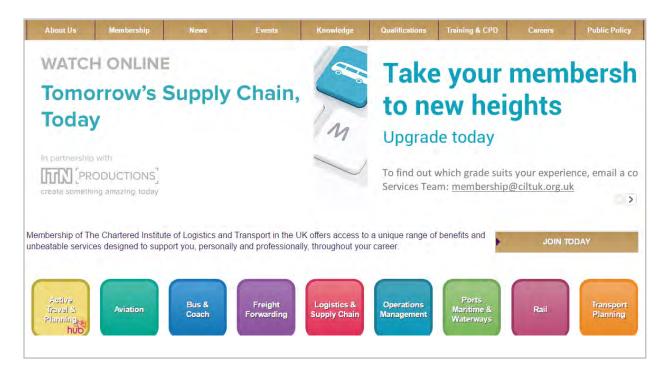


An example landing page targeted for students on The Chartered Institute of Building. Note the targeted calls to action on the right.



Content Layout

Above average (64) - The content layout on the membership sites tested was polarised - It was either excellent or quite poor. We were looking for content that is scanable and neatly organised. We were looking for a content structure that was easy to follow and made sense from a user's point of view. The Chartered Institute of Logistics and Transport is a good example - They offer a wealth of information on their site, including membership options, news, events, qualifications, training, careers, policy and a 'knowledge' section. Despite having so much content on their site, it is all organised in a way that makes it accessible and easy to scan. They cleverly made use of a double navigation – The top one segmented by the sections noted above and the second one by transport type (aviation, bus & coach, rail etc)



The Chartered Institute of Logistics and Transport: Despite having a wealth of content, their site follows a neatly organised content structure which is easy to follow and understand. Note the two navigation bars, one for the site's content sections and the other for transport types.

Some of the sites that scored poorly had a confusing content layout with multiple navigation bars or important content that was hidden from view. These sites were difficult to navigate and didn't naturally lead their users to the most important areas of the site.

Member Registration

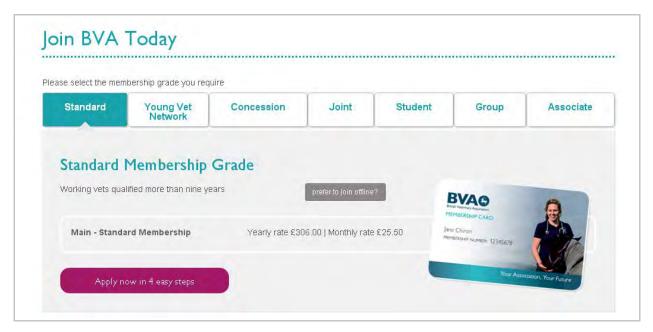
Registration form length - 72 Registration form progress - 71 **Registration form layout - 44 Error Messages - 32**

Above Average - Membership sites scored quite well on aspects having to do with new member registration. In fact, this was the section that scored highest overall. Although there is still some way to go, it appears associations understand the impact this has on getting new members to join their organisation (website conversions). The form length was generally quite good – most websites did not ask their users to fill in unnecessary or duplicate fields, and kept the details requested to a minimum. Most websites had some form of progress indication, showing their users where they are in the process of registration (what has already been completed and what still lies ahead). Some associations also went beyond the basic and offered different types of membership grades online to appeal to a wider audience. However the registration form layout was not ideal, and most websites analysed did not make use of informative error messages. These can be a key facilitator in the registration process. Error messages help users correct mistakes such as email addresses keyed in the wrong format, missing digits on credit card or phone numbers. An informative error message can help users quickly realise and fix their mistake, making it more likely that they continue with the registration process and thus reducing drop off rate.

The British Veterinary Association (BVA) scored highly on all aspects of the membership registration process. They split their registration process into 4 digestible steps, clearly marking to the user where they are in the process. They also offer 7 different types of membership types which are easy to compare. Once you select the appropriate type of membership, you can easily begin the registration process. BVA was one of the few organisations that included a helpful prompt box, communicating to the user what type of information was required at each step and taking them hand-in-hand through the registration process.





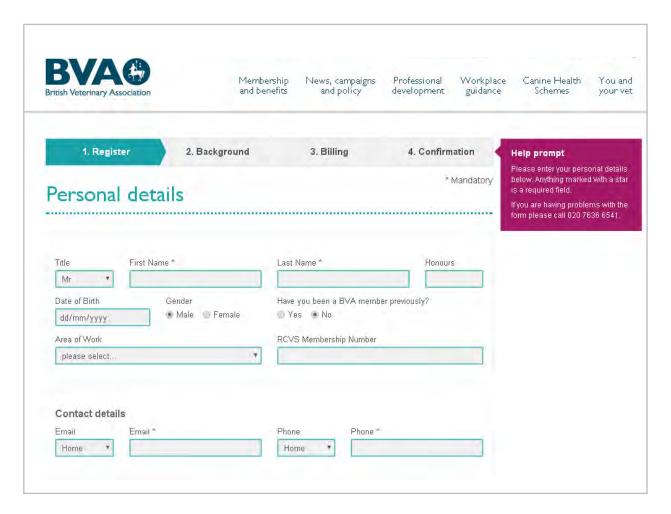


This example from the British Veterinary Association shows different types of membership grades neatly laid out on top. Notice the information about the registration process ("4 easy steps") given right on the call-to-action button.

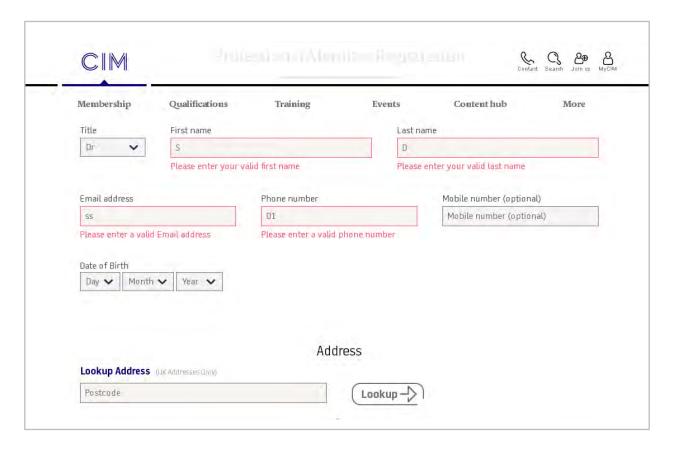


Another example of membership types clearly laid out on the Chartered Institute of Logistics and Transport's website.





A help prompt is visible throughout the registration process, guiding you through the different steps to registration on the British Veterinary Association's website.



The Chartered Institute of Marketing has error messages in place throughout the registration form. These messages help users pinpoint mistakes and navigate their way through the sign up process. These error messages could be further improved by providing more detailed information such as "email addresses should be in the format example@provider.com" or "phone number should contain 10 digits".

On Site Help

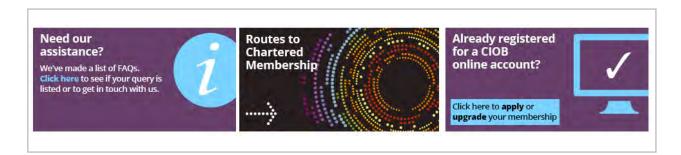
Help Prompts (46)

FAQ's (34)

Below Average - On-site help is an important part of your website's user experience. This can include help prompts that appear when filling out a form or browsing the site, an option to chat with an online agent or simply an invitation to get in touch for further assistance. Even if you work hard to optimise the website's user journey, different users have different needs, and it is likely that a certain user might need some locating specific information on your site or have a question related to your organisation, which might not appear on your site.

FAQ's (Frequently Asked Questions) should be an integral part of your website, benefiting both your user audience (who are likely to have run into a question someone else has already asked) and your internal team (so they don't have to answer the same question over and over). This section can often assist users in their decision to join your association. FAQ's also allow the organisation to provide explanations on issues of common confusion and provide assurance.

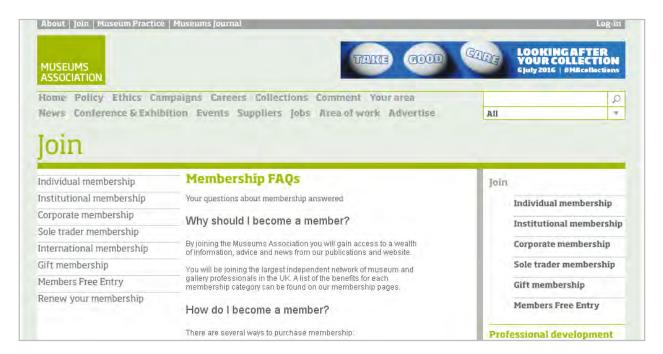
Surprisingly, 5 out of 10 websites analysed didn't have FAQ's on their site, and it was difficult to find the page on those that did. In addition, 5 out of 10 didn't offer any form of online help. The Chartered Institute of Building stood out in this respect, providing both detailed FAQ's and an invitation to get in touch for further help.



The Chartered Institute of Building is here to help. Offering both FAQ's and an option to get in touch for further assistance.



The Museum's Association also excelled in their FAQ section, providing both General FAQ's and an additional page dedicated to Membership FAQ's.



The Museums Association's informative FAQ section, with questions about membership separated out from general FAQ's.



Contact Details

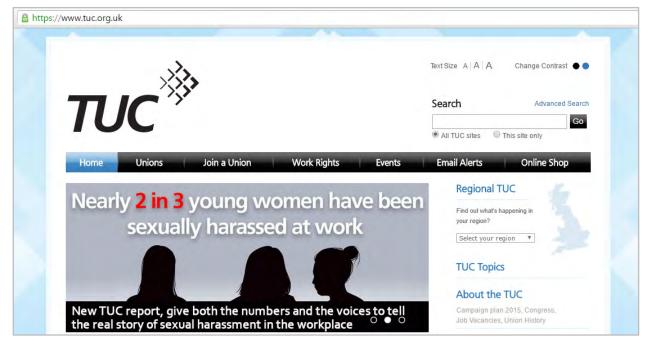
Above Average (65) - Even if you don't offer any type of online help or FAQ's, you should at least display your organisation's contact details clearly so that your users have a way of getting in touch. Some organisations might not want to offer all forms of communication (phone number, email etc) but there should be at least one way to contact your organisation. Many find an online contact form to be the simplest method. Contact details should be easily accessible from the website's homepage. This is a very basic element of user experience and one that is easy to get right. Given this fact, we were surprised at the average score across the sites analysed. The Chartered Institute of Marketing (CIM) are a good example of clearly displaying a 'contact' option, even highlighting the 'contact' button, strategically placed in the top navigation, so that it stands out.



CIM Contact us – The first button on the website's homepage top navigation

Trust & Security

Average (52) - Membership sites scored 52 points on average on trust & security. 5 out of the 10 sites tested did not take any steps to ensure secure browsing (such as using https) and even when payment details were required, not all sites had the appropriate security features in place. Apart from posing a risk to themselves and their members, this practice is likely driving away potential new members. Today it is easier than ever to implement secure browsing and it is recommended to use HTTPs throughout the site (and not just during the registration process, as this leaves the site and your users open to potential attacks). Including icons on your site that indicate to your users that you are giving them a safe browsing experience will foster trust. The Trades Union Congress website is https from start to finish, providing their users with a safe and secure browsing experience.



The Trades Union Congress - Https from start to finish. Also notice the accessibility tools in the top right hand corner. Embedding accessibility tools will ensure you provide a good browsing experience for everyone.

Mobile Friendliness

Below average (41) - It is now an undisputable fact that mobile devices form a critical part of any website's traffic (in fact, mobile searches have officially overtaken desktop searches last year). Organisations that don't have a responsive site (one that adjusts your site design to fit different screen resolutions) is missing out. Apart from providing a sub-optimal experience on these devices, a non-responsive site could also be suffering from lower rankings on search engines, as Google uses mobile friendliness as a ranking signal. Bearing this in mind, the websites analysed scored quite poorly on this important issue. Only 2 out of 10 sites earned a perfect score on mobile friendliness, and many had display issues on different devices.





Conclusion & Key Takeaways

Although membership sites perform quite well in some respects, there is clearly still much room for improvement in terms of user experience.

It seems membership organisations are currently giving more attention to areas that directly impact member registration (for example calls to action and aspects having to do with the registration process or more specifically the registration form), while other aspects that can also dramatically impact conversions (like error messages, help prompts and FAQ's) receive less attention. Areas of rapid technological change (for example, adapting to multiple devices and taking advantage of the more advanced security and accessibility features now available) are also currently lacking. These require ongoing attention to keep up with the latest technological advancements and current trends. The good news is that membership organisations are increasingly realising the importance of their website's user experience, and this is the first and crucial step. They are starting to scrutinize their website from their member's point of view, and considering their needs and expectations. Understanding the website user audience(s) and each audiences needs and expectations from the site, makes it easier to start planning the necessary changes to the site, in order to be able to meet those needs. Implementing these changes to the site will make a massive difference in the site's user experience, leading to greater member engagement, recruitment, retention and satisfaction.

We plan to continue benchmarking membership websites in the future to check on the progress of the field and report our findings.





Index: The Full Table of Result

Dimensions of comparison	British Veterinary Association	Museums Association	Trades Union Congress	Chartered Society of Designers	Royal Meteorological Society	The Chartered Institute of Journalists	Chartered management inst.	Chartered Institute of Marketing	Chartered Institute of Logistics and Transport	Chartered Institute of Building	Average
Call to Action Is there an acceptable amount of calls to action? Do these stand out on the page?	90	20	0	100	40	0	20	100	90	60	52
Content Layout Is the content scannable? Is it neatly organised, is the layout clear to the user?	90	20	20	100	40	0	100	100	90	80	64
Clarity of Message Is there one central message to the web- site? Is it easy to understand what that message is at first glance?	20	10	10	100	40	0	100	100	90	60	53
Contact Details Is it easy to find the contact details on the website? Is it easy to contact the organisation?	80	10	20	90	90	80	0	100	90	90	65
FAQ's Are there FAQ's on the site? Are these relevant and useful? Are they easy to find? Presented in a clear and organised way?	20	20	0	0	100	0	0	100	0	100	34
User Journey Is the user journey seamless? Is it clear what needs to be completed in order to proceed in the process?	90	20	20	90	90	0	100	100	60	100	67
Registration Form Length Is the length of the form optimal?	90	80	0	90	80	80	100	10	90	100	72
Registration Form Layout Is the form neatly laid out? Is it divided into an optimal amount of sections, depending on the form length?	90	10	20	100	10	80	100	10	0	20	44
Registration Form Progress Is it clear to see your progress when filling out the form? Is it obvious where you are in the process?	100	80	0	90	80	80	80	90	10	100	71
Error Messages Are error messages constructive? Can you clearly understand what you need to fix in order to proceed?	20	10	0	80	20	80	0	10	10	90	32
Trust & Security Are any steps taken to ensure secure browsing? If payment details are required, are the appropriate security features in place?	20	0	100	90	90	0	100	10	10	100	52
Help Are there any help features available on the site, either online or offline? How easy is it to get help while filling out the form? While browsing the site?	80	0	0	80	0	0	100	100	0	100	46
Mobile Friendly Is the website responsive? Suitable for browsing from different devices?	100	0	80	50	0	0	80	100	0	0	41
Total Score	68	22	21	82	52	31	68	72	42	77	53.3



