

WHERE THE WIREFRAMES ARE

The Use and Abuse of Page Layouts in the Practice of Information Architecture

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Wireframes have become an essential tool in the information architect's arsenal. Like any deliverable, however, wireframes come with risks, and can be used irresponsibly. The promise of wireframes -- rapid prototyping, instant client reaction, and guidance for visual designers -- can quickly backfire on the unsuspecting information architect. Clients will find that their Web site is not rendered in precisely the same way and designers will find themselves confined by the constraints imposed by wireframes. Risks like these abound.

This poster explores wireframes, providing a definition of this tool and its advantages and disadvantages. The purpose of this presentation is not to discourage the use of wireframes. Instead we explain the risks and offer a viable alternative that accomplishes the same objectives while mitigating the risks.

About Wireframes

This sample wireframe comes from a travel client -- an aggregator site allowing users to select from multiple carriers.

To give the client a sense of the site as quickly as possible, we rendered this page layout in Visio. The client, however, demanded more and more detail and we ended up with a detailed page layout but one that was difficult to translate to HTML.

WIREFRAMES DEFINED

- usually appear in black-and-white or grayscale
- show information priorities as a page layout
- can include actual or greeked information
- do not necessarily describe consequences of a user's action
- do not usually include bitmapped images
- can have styled text
- might only show the content area of a page, and not the "chrome" -- design elements and global navigation
- does not necessarily appear to-scale
- can be rendered in either print or digital (HTML, JPG, etc.) format

AAATravel **Air Center** Welcome back, **John Doe**! Your suitcase holds one other itinerary.

Going from Washington, DC to Miami, FL [rent a car in Miami](#)
[reserve a hotel room](#) **Bargains** [e-bay](#)

If you're not leaving from Washington, DC, [click here](#). round trip one-way multi-leg

leaving: month day year time

returning: month day year time

passengers: Adults Children

[Create a profile now.](#)

Book Direct with

American Airlines	Delta	Continental	USAirways
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Miami Vacation Packages

- South Beach Hilton, 3 nights \$379
- Grand Hyatt, 3 nights \$389
- Ramada, 3 nights \$399

weather
look for variable cloudiness with a chance of rain. today tue wed thu

news
There is frequent street crime in Miami. Petty theft is common -- refrain from wearing flashy jewelry or watches and do not publicly display money. Travelers who stay within well-lit and populated areas and take normal precautions against petty theft shouldn't encounter significant problems. When driving, stick to roads designated by the sunburst symbol. [about Miami...](#)

Member Specials

Fare Alert We'll email you when the price goes down!	Flight Tracker Check the status of any flight	Email Notification Let friends and family know when your flight arrives.			
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CONS

- hinders creativity and innovation by imposing limits on design team
- distracts client from tasks at hand: evaluating page priorities, understanding information relationships
- is not necessarily HTML-ready if not developed to scale
- is not necessarily HTML-ready if developed without "chrome"
- do not provide accurate usability testing results
- relies on other documentation to provide a complete picture
- does not consider color, typography, and other brand identity elements
- requires spending time to wrestle with layout details

PROS

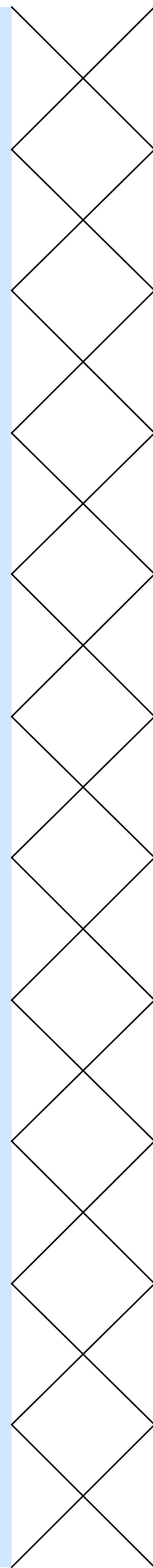
- demonstrates a site concept quickly, allowing clients to react to content placement and rendering
- can provide guidance to visual designers with respect to information priorities
- allows for usability testing early in the project lifecycle
- can elaborate on a singular vision for the site
- can facilitate collaboration between design team and information architects
- is easy for clients to understand

Using Page Description Diagrams

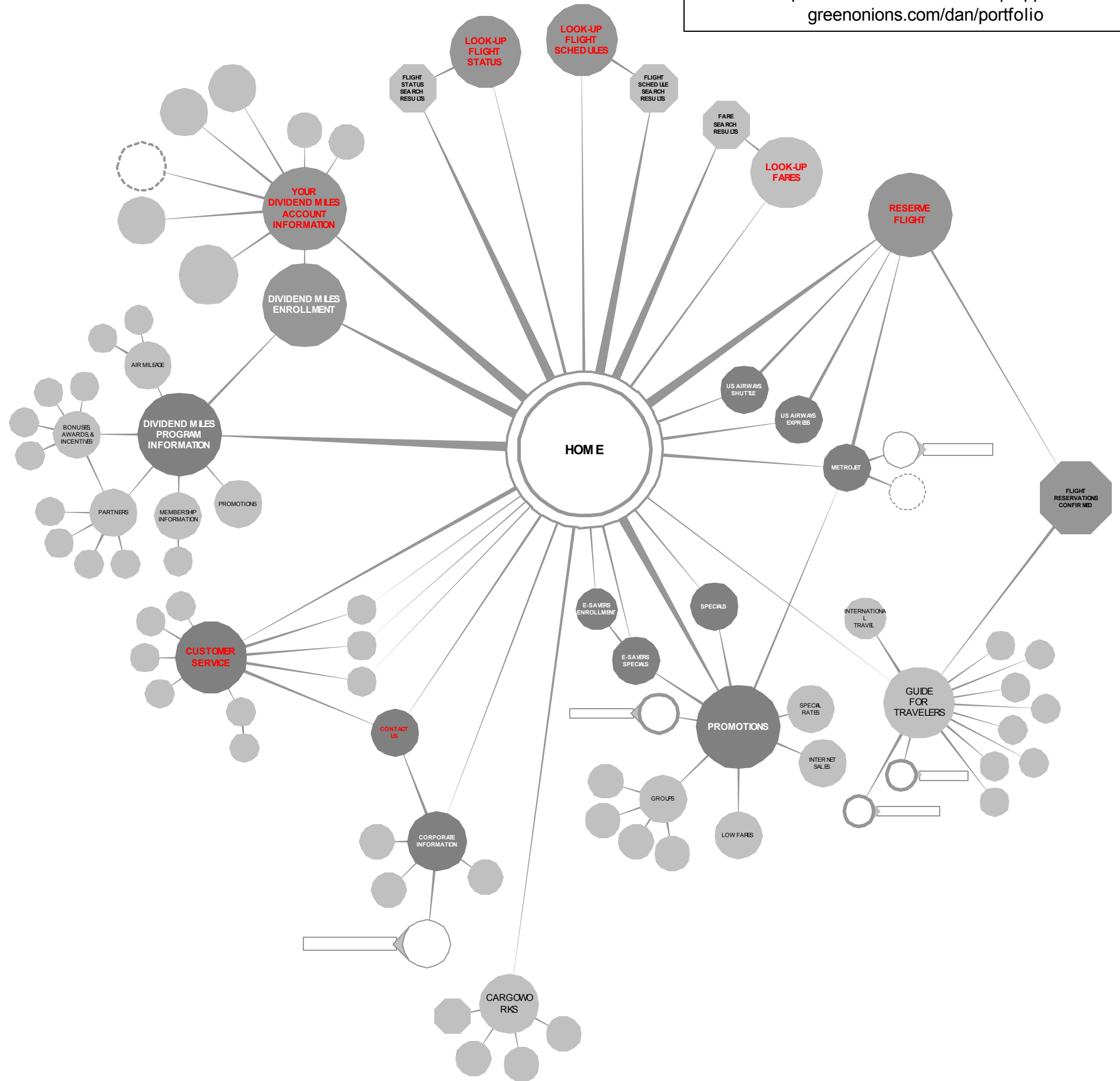
Like constructing wireframes, building page description diagrams must start with a site map, or some other explanation of the system's structure and content relationships. The site structure description should show which content is linked to the home page as well as relative priorities, anticipated traffic, value to the user, etc.

Effective site mapping techniques can incorporate all of these variables. Clients, however, may need to get a better handle on what their site looks like. This is where information architects have to walk the fine line between satisfying the client's need without jeopardizing the success of the project.

Keep in mind that this entire process must start with requirements gathering, which defines the problem and puts it in context through business goals and user needs.



a complete version of this site map appears at:
greenonions.com/dan/portfolio



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LOOK-UP SCHEDULE/FARES

The Check Flights function provides a gateway into the Travelocity booking engine. Customers supply an origin, a destination, a departure and a return time. The engine returns a list of relevant flights. The form requesting this information appears on the home page. The form might look like this:

Origin

Destination

Departure January 1 morning

Return January 1 morning

LOG INTO DIVIDEND MILES ACCOUNT

A small form allows Divident Miles customers to log into their account. The form requests the account number and pin. This area of the page also includes a link to the Divident Miles enrollment form, and a link to information about the Divident Miles program. The form might look something like this:

DIVIDEND MILES

Account#

PIN

forgot your PIN? [click here](#)

[program information](#)

LOOK-UP FLIGHT STATUS (FLIFO)

Customers supply a flight number, and the system returns the current flight status. To help customers understand "flight status," the form includes the verbiage "arrival time" and "departure time." The form might look like this:

Arrival Time
Departure Time
Status

}

LINK TO BOOKING ENGINE

The home page must also include a link to the booking engine. In the future, depending on the technology, we could eliminate the link from the home page. Customers would move to the booking engine from the schedule and fare look-up applications.

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PROMOTIONS

US Airways offers several different kinds of promotions. The home page will allow customers to get more information about all the promotions, get information specifically about E-Savers, or look at other current specials. This area of the page might look like this:

PROMOTIONS

E-SAVERS

[Information about E-Savers](#)

[Current E-Savers Promotions](#)

[Enroll in the E-Savers Program](#)

SPECIALS

Washington, DC -> Atlanta	\$69
Atlanta -> Miami	\$69
Atlanta -> Dallas	\$69
New York (JFK) -> Pittsburgh	\$69
New York (JFK) -> Baltimore	\$69

[more specials...](#)

US AIRWAYS VACATIONS

[more information...](#)

US AIRWAYS GROUPS AND MEETINGS

[more information...](#)

SERVICES

We recommend that US Airways spell out value proposition, particularly when services use common words like "express" or "shuttle." The home page must contain some messaging to help customers understand the value US Airways provides in its services. We recommend that US Airways uses no more than six items. This messaging could take the form:

- Economical travel on [MetroJet](#)
- Flexible schedules on [US Airways Express](#)
- Luxurious comfort on [US Airways Shuttle](#)
- Speedy delivery with [CargoWorks](#)

3

GUIDE FOR TRAVELERS

The Web site contains a lot of important information for travelers, including in-flight entertainment, terminal maps, and weather. This almanac must be available, but must not overwhelm the user experience. Customers can easily get lost in this information. Making it easy to navigate will make it more valuable to customers. The mechanism for accessing this information from the home page might look like this:

Guide for Travelers

-- select a travel document --

our travel guide includes [weather](#), [terminal maps](#), and [aircraft diagrams](#).

This device may be used throughout the site to give customers a means for accessing travelers guide information.

CORPORATE INFORMATION

The home page will include a link to US Airways corporate information.

GLOBAL NAVIGATION

- [Home](#)
- [Customer Service](#)
- [Contact Us](#)
- [Fares](#)
- [Schedules](#)
- [Flight Status](#)
- [Dividend Miles](#)
- [Reservations](#)

Global Navigation must be scalable to accommodate some new tools. We recommend, however, limiting this area to essential items (like Customer Service and Contact Us) and travel tools (like Look Up Schedules).

An Alternative:

Page Description Diagrams

The Result

What follows are the primary deliverables from our engagement with US Airways. This was the first project we employed page description diagrams and the result was so successful we have used it on many projects since.



The Three Aspects of Page Description Diagrams

Relative Priorities

Instead of laying out the page as if it would be on the Web, the page description diagram uses the space to represent priority. In this case, items on the left side are higher priority than those on the right. This focuses the conversation on information priorities and provides direction to designers.

Item Descriptions

Each item should have a description that explains what kind of information it contains. Using this space to justify the existence of the item is not recommended, as that should have happened during the requirements process. This allows information architects to elaborate on functionality.

Item Appearance

Clients may benefit from a simple layout of the contents of the item, which can help them visualize how users could interact with the information. These layouts should be caveated "for placement only." This allows information architects to initiate conversations about interactivity.