

# Forestcamping.com Redesign Proposal

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## Executive Summary

A redesign of the forestcamping.com ecommerce site, also known as the U.S. National Forest Campground Guide, is proposed to improve the site's usefulness, usability, and standing. Although Alexa.com statistics indicate that the site is popular among sites of this kind, the statistics also show that 50 percent of site visits are "bounces" – one pageview only. This indicates that visitors are not finding the content they want and are therefore not returning.

Recommended changes for the redesign include:

- Reorganizing site content to make the content most relevant to users easy to find
- Reducing and rewriting content to make content easier to scan and comprehend
- Broadening the page layout to:
  - Make better use of screen real estate
  - Make content easier to find
- Changing the site title to more accurately reflect the site's purpose and provenance
- Optimizing the site for faster page loads
- Making the site color scheme lighter and brighter, thereby making site content easier to read

Please see the table of contents, below, for information contributing to these recommendations.

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## Analysis

The U.S. National Forest Campground Guide website ([forestcamping.com](http://forestcamping.com)) is placed at number 14 of the Alexa.com listing of most popular sites in the category of recreational outdoor camping. The site is designed for would-be campers and camping enthusiasts. It provides extensive information on U.S. campgrounds and their features, amenities, schedules, and costs. It includes a robust photo library of U.S. national forests and campgrounds visited by site owners and described in their website listings. It provides information about outdoor activities, such as fishing, available at certain campsites, and also lists nearby towns. Such information is useful to campers needing to stock up on supplies or find medical attention, etc. It provides all site information free of charge and, for less than \$10 each, provides this same information, with enhancements, in eBooks that customers can download or order as CDs and have delivered by mail.

The site builds community with camping enthusiasts through social media links (Facebook and Twitter) , a link to the website of a forest-preservation nonprofit organization, subscriptions to the site newsletter, links to volunteer opportunities with the U.S. Forest Services, a “media room” that contains links to newspaper and magazine articles about camping, and forums about camping topics. Photos of the site owners, along with site owner Suzi Dow’s personal blog, add to the sense of community. A Privacy Policy may add to visitors’ comfort.

The site’s subdued green, gold, and tan color scheme reflects the color scheme used by the U.S. Forestry Service website and may build community by identifying with the well-known and respected Forestry Service organization. The “forestry service” color scheme is augmented with an official-looking logo in the top left corner of all site pages. Usability study results show that the color scheme, page title, and logo lead users to believe that the site belongs to a government agency, however, and

redesign should be considered. (See [Usability Study Results](#) and [Recommendations](#) for details.)

A glossary of terms provides definitions to site visitors who may need them, and a site map provides an additional means of site navigation. A custom Google search allows visitors to search for topics within the site.

### Site Set-up

The site uses a three-column layout built on tables using “loose” transitional HTML 4.01. The three-column layout includes a left navigation panel with tabs to site content, a center panel that displays page-specific content, and a right column that displays site owner photos and ads. Ads are also displayed beneath the left nav. A single ad appears above the banner with logo at the top of every page. The banner includes non-clickable icons. The copyright appears in the footer. No date is listed. Clicking the copyright displays a blank Outlook message.

Sans-serif type is used for headings and tabs and for the body text of all pages except the Welcome page.

Metadata in the HTML document header is packed with keywords and a metadata description effective in placing the site near the top (sixth place) in Google search results.

The header also contains JavaScript and cascading styles for the site. Inline styles are counter to web development best practices, as are JavaScript instructions to load all images before loading the page. Site images are not optimized for the web. Together, these front-end development choices result in long page-load times. Please see [Recommendations](#) for recommended changes.

### Site Strengths & Weaknesses

The site’s chief strength is its content. Site owners have compiled hundreds of pages of detailed information useful to campers. They demonstrate their care and attention to accuracy, relevance, and detail in a site section titled, “Campground Selection, Purpose of Publication and Research Method.” A caveat: the section title is overlong and pedantic, and section content might be better reduced or redistributed for readability. But the site owners demonstrate their enthusiasm for camping with this section, thereby building community with fellow campers. And they demonstrate their credibility by meticulously referencing dates and contexts.

### Other Site Strengths

The site has other high-value content, including:

- The Pictures library, which contains hundreds of cataloged and linked photographs. Visitors can scroll through the alphabetic listing of pictures to find the photographs they want to see.
- Forums – visitors can discuss camping issues with fellow camping enthusiasts. They can also stay abreast of site updates by following the site on Facebook and Twitter.

Other site strengths include:

- Shallow navigation – most site content can be accessed in one to three clicks.
- Internal search – visitors can use the internal Google search to quickly find site content.

### Site Weaknesses

The site has two key issues that should be addressed. The first is content organization. The second is front-end development. The content organization issue is detailed below. Front-end development and lesser, but nonetheless important, issues concerning the site's look and feel are covered in [Recommendations](#).

#### Content Organization Issue

[Usability study results](#) indicate that content organization impedes users' ability to complete tasks that they could reasonably be expected to perform on this site. The study confirms pretest site analysis.

The issue of content organization includes poorly labeled navigation tabs and overlong and misplaced content.

#### *Mislabeled Navigation Tabs*

The generic tab labels, "Welcome" and "Introduction," fail to distinguish between the kinds of content accessed from each tab. Visitors may expect content from the two tabs to be similar, if not redundant, because the terms "welcome" and "introduction" both introduce visitors to the site.

Content accessed from the two tabs is in fact distinct. The Welcome tab displays the homepage when clicked. The Introduction tab displays a list of links. The label does not clearly identify the content accessed from the page. Users will likely be confused by the discrepancy between the Introduction tab title and Introduction page content.

The Pictures tab does not identify the kinds of pictures accessed, and in any case displays a list of links, not pictures, when clicked.

The Host Positions tab is out of context in a site dedicated to camping information. [Usability study results](#) indicate that users have difficulty understanding the purpose of this tab.

### *Overlong and Misplaced Page Content*

Welcome page text is overlong. It includes marketing information that users dislike and seldom read (*Don't Make Me Think*, by Steve Krug, New Riders: 2006), as well as unnecessary detail about how to access high-value site content.

Introduction page text consists of intrapage links to detailed content farther down the page. Much of the detailed content, such as information about campground seasons, rates, facilities, and amenities, would be valuable to users. But this content is buried beneath wordy sections and descriptions that most users have neither the time nor the energy to read through (*Letting Go of the Words: Writing Web Content that Works*, by Ginny Reddish, Elsevier: 2007).

One such example is the “Campground Selection, Purpose of Publication and Research Method” section. Visitors looking for camping information will likely be put off by the pedantic and arguably self-serving title and not read this section. But it contains information that may be useful to some. Information about the purpose “of the publication” – really the purpose of the website – would be better placed on the Welcome page, which should clearly state the site’s purpose, minus marketing content that most users find offensive.

High-value content, such as season, rate, and reservation information, is misplaced. Users must scroll through the ambiguously named Introduction page to find it. Using the within-site Google search brought up related information, for example, a discussion about reservations in the site’s forum. But it did not bring up the section that most users could safely be assumed to want – the section that links to the site where reservations can actually be made.

Please see [Recommendations](#) for recommended changes to content organization.

## **Usability Study Results**

A usability study of the U.S. National Forests & Campgrounds Guide website (forestcamping.com) was conducted with three experienced Internet users in three separate 15-minute usability tests spanning two days (August 9-10, 2011). The tests were conducted to assess the site’s visual appeal and branding effectiveness as well as its usability in the performance of routine tasks, such as finding a campground and reserving campground space. None of the three participants had prior knowledge of the site or of usability test questions. (See [Addendum](#) for details.)

Results from that study confirm pretest analysis – that users perceive that the website is owned and operated by the U.S. Forestry Service and feel deceived when they deduce that it is not. The U.S. Forestry Service has its own website – similar in color scheme and content – but much more effective in its execution. (See [Peer Site Comparisons](#) for details.)

The study also confirms the following:

- Participants had difficulty finding information and completing certain tasks, owing to poor labeling of navigation tabs and poor placement of content accessed from those tabs.
- Participants (two of three) disliked the ads prevalent on every page of the site.

Although all three participants were able to find planning information on the first try, two of three had difficulty finding reservation information. Of the two, one could not find reservation information even with facilitator prompts. This same participant had trouble finding a campground in his state and required facilitator assistance to complete this task.

In addition to confirming pretest analyses, the study also uncovered the usability issue of slow page loads. This issue is likely the most significant in terms of user experience. In a web environment where page loads of 2 -4 seconds are the norm, page loads of longer durations will lose visitors, who will likely never return.

See [Recommendations](#) for possible solutions.

## Peer Site Comparisons

The saying, “imitation is the sincerest form of flattery,” applies to this website (forestcamping.com) in that the site mimics the color scheme of the U.S. Forest Service website (<http://www.fs.fed.us/>) and also displays a logo suggesting that forestcamping.com is a government website. Linking to the federal site to provide visitors with useful, related information would be appropriate. Mimicking this site to gain credibility with site visitors is not. Unlike forestcamping.com, the Forest Service site makes optimal use of screen real estate. The left navigation panel tightly organizes clearly labeled, relevant links. Small photographs well illustrate the beauty of our national forests without taking up too much space. News articles formatted for reading on the web span the center column. These treatments are superior to the photo and text formatting on forestcamping.com.

Go Camping America (<http://www.gocampingamerica.com/index.aspx>) is an ecommerce website offering similar information and services. The site uses light

colors on a broad page, making content easy to find. Clearly labeled top-nav tabs provide easy access to content that most visitors can be expected to want (e.g., park locations and rentals). An interactive map and events calendar are valuable tools for site visitors. This site looks more attractive and easier to use than forestcamping.com

Reserve America.com (<http://www.reserveamerica.com/>) is another ecommerce site offering similar information and services. It, too, uses light colors on a broad page, and a clearly labeled top nav linking to relevant content. This site also looks more attractive and easier to use.

## Recommendations

This section provides high-level recommendations for content reorganization and front-end redevelopment. It also includes recommendations for changes to the site's look and feel.

A thorough site overhaul is recommended to make the site more useful, usable, and easy to maintain. Redesigning the site would increase site credibility and traffic and perhaps increase online sales. The redesign would entail reorganizing content and rewriting it for the web as well as using a fluid CSS layout in the platform-neutral HTML5 rather than the outdated table layout in HTML 4.01. Photos would be resized and optimized for the web.

Quick wins could be accomplished by reducing the size of homepage photos, removing unnecessary instructions from homepage text, and removing unnecessary tabs (host positions, site map, contact us, and privacy policy) from the left nav. Host positions could be placed in a Related Links sections, as shown in the [wireframe](#) below. The site map, contact us, and privacy policy tabs could be replaced with links placed in the footer. Ads could be corralled in one area of site pages to reduce clutter. The wireframe also illustrates these recommendations.

### Recommended Content Reorganization

Welcome page text on this site could be reduced to one or two succinct sentences about the site's purpose. Detailed instructions about which tab to click to access site information are unnecessary and should be removed, as site visitors may consider them patronizing. If a tab is clearly labeled, all but the most inexperienced visitors will have no trouble navigating a site.

National Forests & Campgrounds content -- the information that most visitors have come to see -- could follow on the same page. Introduction page content should be merged with National Forests & Campgrounds content and the Introduction tab removed. High-value Introduction page content, such as season pass and

reservation information, could be placed in separate links or tabs on the homepage. (See [Wireframe](#), below, for details.)

Left-navigation tabs -- listed by different orders of priority -- should be reordered or removed. The Bookstore tab, fifth from the top, is a high priority for site owners but a low priority for visitors. That is because people searching the web for camping information are not searching for bookstores.

Pictures, fourth from top, should be relabeled to minimize possible visitor confusion about pictures of people (site owners appear on all pages) and pictures of mountains, forests, and grasslands. A more accurate tab label and different organization of page content would give this important site resource greater prominence, while likely increasing visitor satisfaction and repeat visits. (See [Wireframe](#), below, details.)

Host Positions, sixth from the top, should be removed or relabeled. Most visitors searching the web for camping information are not searching for work. If they were, they would be disappointed, if not annoyed, to learn that they'll have to go to another to apply. (See [Test Participant 1 Responses](#) for usability test results concerning this tab.)

### **Recommended Front-End Redevelopment**

Cascading styles and JavaScript reside in the head of this document, counter to web development standards. Placing styles and JavaScript in the head requires that changes to these be made to individual pages rather than to the entire site. This method is time-consuming and error-prone. It is likely that changing styles using this method will yield inconsistent results and degrade user experience.

The JavaScript in this site requires all images to load before the page renders. Images are not optimized for the web (i.e., their file size is too large). This results in long page-load times for users lacking high-speed Internet connectivity.

The CSS and JavaScript should be saved on separate pages and linked to within the page header. The site's numerous photos should be optimized for the web, using the Save for Web & Devices ... save option in Photoshop.

### **Look and Feel Redesign**

The misleading page title and logo and copycat color scheme give some visitors the impression that they are being deceived.

The dark background color, table layout and overabundance of small, unsightly ads give the site a cramped look and feel. Inconsistent text formatting (serif on the Welcome page, sans-serif everywhere else) makes the site look unprofessional.



The page title should be changed to reduce user confusion about the site's provenance (i.e., that it is an ecommerce, and not a government site). "Guide to Camping in U.S. Forests" is suggested.

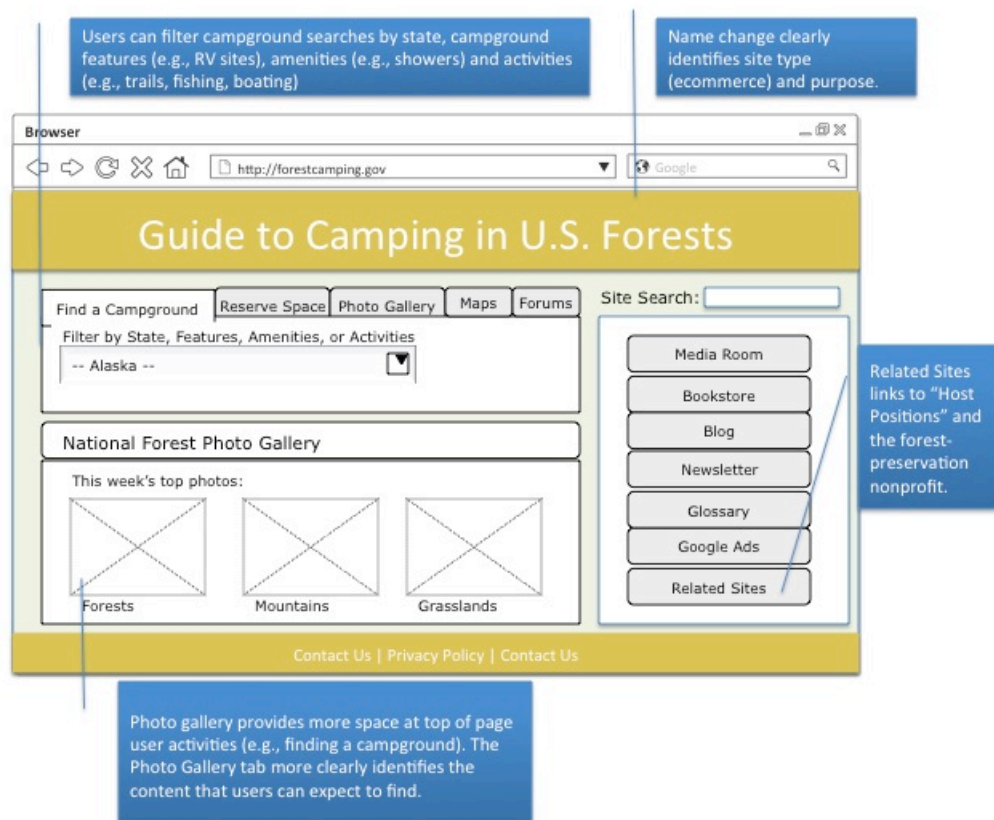
The "U.S. Forest Service" color scheme could be retained if used more effectively. Specifically, the heavy dark background should be lightened and the background space reduced, using a fluid CSS-based layout, not a table-based layout.

Ads could be corralled into a single, less obtrusive area. Unless it is a needed source of site revenue, the Host Position ad should be eliminated. The annoying animated gif ads should be redesigned to be less obtrusive and to better fit with the overall site design.

Non-clickable decorative icons at the top of the page contribute to the site's busyness and should be removed.

The wireframe below illustrates these recommendations.

### Wireframe



## Addendum

### Test Questions, Test Participant Profiles & Responses

This section identifies test participants by occupation and lists each participant's responses to the test questions listed below. It also includes a severity scale that gauges participants' difficulty in completing tasks.

1. What do you make of this site? What strikes you about it?
2. Whose site do you think it is?
3. What can you do on this site? What is it for?
4. Suppose you want to go camping. Where on the site would you find information that you could use to plan your trip?
5. You want to reserve a space at a campground. Using this site, how would you go about it?
6. You want to find a campground in your state. Using this site, how would you find a campground?

### Severity Scale

Severity levels 1 and 2 indicate the participant was able to complete tasks on his or her own, with level 1 indicating completion on the first try and level 2 indicating completion after two or three tries. Level 3 indicates the participant was able to complete the task, but expressed frustration. Level 4 indicates the participant was able to complete the task with facilitator prompts. Level 5 indicates the participant was unable to complete the task, even with prompts.

1 – Complete on 1 <sup>st</sup> try	2 – Complete on 2 <sup>nd</sup> try	3 – Complete on 3 <sup>rd</sup> try	4 – Complete w/help	5 – Unable to complete
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### Test participant 1

**Occupation:** business analyst – helps companies build websites

**Hours/week on Internet:** 50

**Email/Browsing Split:** 25% email, 75% browsing

**Frequently visited websites:** blogs, ecommerce (e.g., Amazon.com), social media (Twitter and Facebook), hospital websites (for job)

**Favorite websites:** Smashing Magazine (<http://www.smashingmagazine.com/>), Twitter (<http://twitter.com/>)

### Test participant 1 responses

**Question 1:** I think it's simple and cheap. It doesn't look like anyone was trying really hard to design it. There are lots of ads. Ads make me think that something is cheap [because the site needs ad revenue to stay online]. The ads don't really mix well. They don't look like anything else on the site. They make me think of an infomercial.

**Question 2:** [Reads] National Forest Campground Guide ... I don't know. It says "U.S. National Forest" [clicks logo]. I don't know who owns it. I thought it was the U.S. National Forest Service. [**Facilitator prompt:** You thought it was a government agency?] Yes.

**Question 3:** I can get information about U.S. national forests. It says it's a guide.

**Question 4:** I think I would go to the National Forests & Campground tab.

1 - Complete on First Try

**Question 5:** [On National Forests & Campground page, says:] Not sure because I don't see anything that I can use to reserve a space. I am confused. [Reads "Find By Forest/Grassland" dropdown menu title.] If I am trying to find a forest, I would use the dropdown. [Clicks dropdown.] Yes, that is what I would expect.

[Clicks Host Positions tab.] No, it's not that. Host Positions is for volunteers. Tab title is confusing. I thought "position" meant "place."

5 - Unable to complete

**Question 6:** [On National Forests & Campground page, facilitator prompts: Would you scroll by state name or forest name first?] I think I would start by state. [Clicks state dropdown and selects Colorado. Clicks "Pike" link, which displays Pike National Forest Campgrounds, Colorado, page. ] It says that it's a lookup table. How do you use that? It's showing different cities. I wish there was a map. I guess a national forest could have multiple cities? [Clicks Deer Creek. Misses Reservation information near top of section. Scrolls to Rates information.

With facilitator prompt, finds static Reservation information.

4 - Complete with help

[Facilitator prompts participant to look at interactive Reservation information (link to [www.recreation.gov](http://www.recreation.gov); phone number also listed) on Introduction tab.] Participant comments: I would never go to the Introduction tab to find this information. Says that he would expect the Introduction to provide general information about the site, rather than details about performing tasks, that Reservations might be its own tab or link, and that his overall experience using the site was "annoying."

He checks the source code of the page and discovers that it is a table layout, that cascading styles and JavaScript are contained in the header, rather than in separate style and script sheets, and that images are not optimized for web use. He says that these last three development choices result in long page loads. Although not timed during the test, conducted using the participant's iPhone for Internet connectivity, the page load was noticeably longer than the optimal page load time of two to four seconds (source: [www.peer1hosting.com](http://www.peer1hosting.com)).

He comments: "I would never intentionally go back to this site. It makes me so angry. Even if someone sent me the link and it was the only way to find this information, I would never go back."

### Test participant 2

**Occupation:** electrical engineer – designs digital signal processing systems

**Hours/week on Internet:** 5

**Email/Browsing Split:** 75% email, 25% browsing

**Frequently visited websites:** work-related websites

**Favorite websites:** none

### Test participant 2 responses

**Question 1:** I hate the ads. I really hate the ad across the top. I don't like the crap on the sides (points to ads and animated gifs in the left and right columns of the page). The center pane is OK. Delete the crap about Facebook (text box at bottom of center column). The left nav looks pretty good.

**Question 2:** U.S. National Forests. Don't know. At first I thought it was the government, but it says "dot com" in the URL, so I don't know. We could look at Contact Us. Clicks, sees the address is [sf@forestcamping.com](mailto:sf@forestcamping.com). Comments: It is not government site, or it would be saying "dot gov." [Facilitator prompts: What do you think of that?] Responds: It's a little misleading. It's a little evasive. It's a con job.

**Question 3:** Information related to camping in U.S. national forests. There's no way they would put all these ads on a government website. Concludes that it's an ecommerce site rather than a government site.

**Question 4:** I would go to the Introduction tab. He clicks the tab. [Facilitator prompts: Is this the information he expected. Is it useful?] He responds: I can't know

without reading it first. He scrolls through the list of links. I would skip Fishing and Management of National Forests. I would start at the top. [Facilitator prompts: Would you expect to find information for planning a camping trip under "Research Method.")] Responds that he'd have to read it first.

Clicks link, which displays relevant information.

1 - Complete on First Try

**Question 5:** From the Research Method page, scrolls to Reservations in fifth section from the top of the page.

Also finds Reservations link on Introduction page.

1 - Complete on First Try

**Question 6:** Scrolls through Introduction page. Facilitator prompts: Where else would you look?

Clicks National Forests & Campgrounds tab. Says: This appears to be what I need.

2 - Complete on 2<sup>nd</sup> Try

[Facilitator prompts: Thoughts on process?] It's O.K. It was pretty easy.

### Test participant 3

**Occupation:** adjunct faculty – teaches freshman biology at community college

**Hours/week on Internet:** 7

**Email/Browsing Split:** 80% email, 20% browsing

**Frequently visited websites:** Turkish news, Wikipedia, Google, Facebook, Richland College (<http://www.rlc.dcccd.edu/>)

**Favorite websites:** Wikipedia, Google, Facebook, Richland College

### Test participant 3 responses

**Question 1:** It's beautiful. The pictures (displayed in top center panel of homepage) are well done. It's calming because it's green. (Page background, left and right columns, and navigation tabs are green.)

**Question 2:** Says she thinks it is a government site.

**Question 3:** It's a U.S. National Forest website for people who would like to go camping.

**Question 4:** National Forests & Campgrounds tab.  
Clicks and confirms that it is a correct choice.

1 - Complete on First Try

**Question 5:** On the National Forests & Campgrounds tab, comments that reservations information is not displayed. Clicks Contact us to see if this page contains reservation information. Clicks Site Map. Clicks Find State Name dropdown on National Forests & Campgrounds page. Scrolls to Texas (her state of residence), clicks "Angelina" at top of list and comments that she does not understand why town names are displayed. Says a map showing locations of both the town and campground would be helpful. Clicks link to campground and finds Reservation information.

Says she would expect to see reservation information listed with the campgrounds name.

3 - Complete on 3<sup>rd</sup> try

**Question 6:** Skipped because this task was completed in answering question 5.