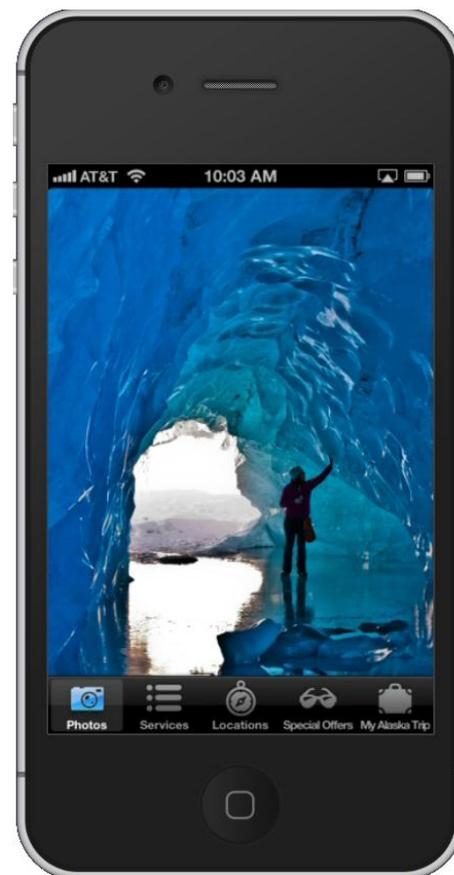




Travel Alaska

Mobile App Usability Test Report of Findings

April 2013



Objectives

The goals of this research were to:

- Learn more about what content and features Alaska travelers seek from a destination app in general, and develop a deeper understanding of the ideal user experience on the Travel Alaska app
- Study users first responses to the app
- Assess the overall appeal of design elements
- Assess the content and navigational effectiveness of the app
- Examine specific functionality offered on the app through task completion in order to evaluate accuracy, time on task and users' emotional responses to the app
- Gauge the app's ability to market ATIA member businesses
- Generate ideas for potential improvements
- Identify missing or non-functioning content

Destination Analysts, Inc.



April 2013



Methodology

- 60-minute in-depth interviews of twenty-eight travelers who will visit the state of Alaska in summer 2013.
- Interviews were conducted via online video conference using Destination Analysts' online usability lab. Using an application called Reflector, respondents' iPhone screens were mirrored on to their personal computer screen so that Destination Analysts research staff could observe respondents' behaviors and actions on their device.
- Respondents shared their feedback and opinions on the Travel Alaska app as they used it to accomplish several in-market and out-of-market travel planning related tasks.
- All respondents participated in a brief technical check at least 48 hours prior to their interview in order to download the Travel Alaska app.
- Prior to the research project, eight participants already had already downloaded the Travel Alaska app on their iPhone to help plan their upcoming trip

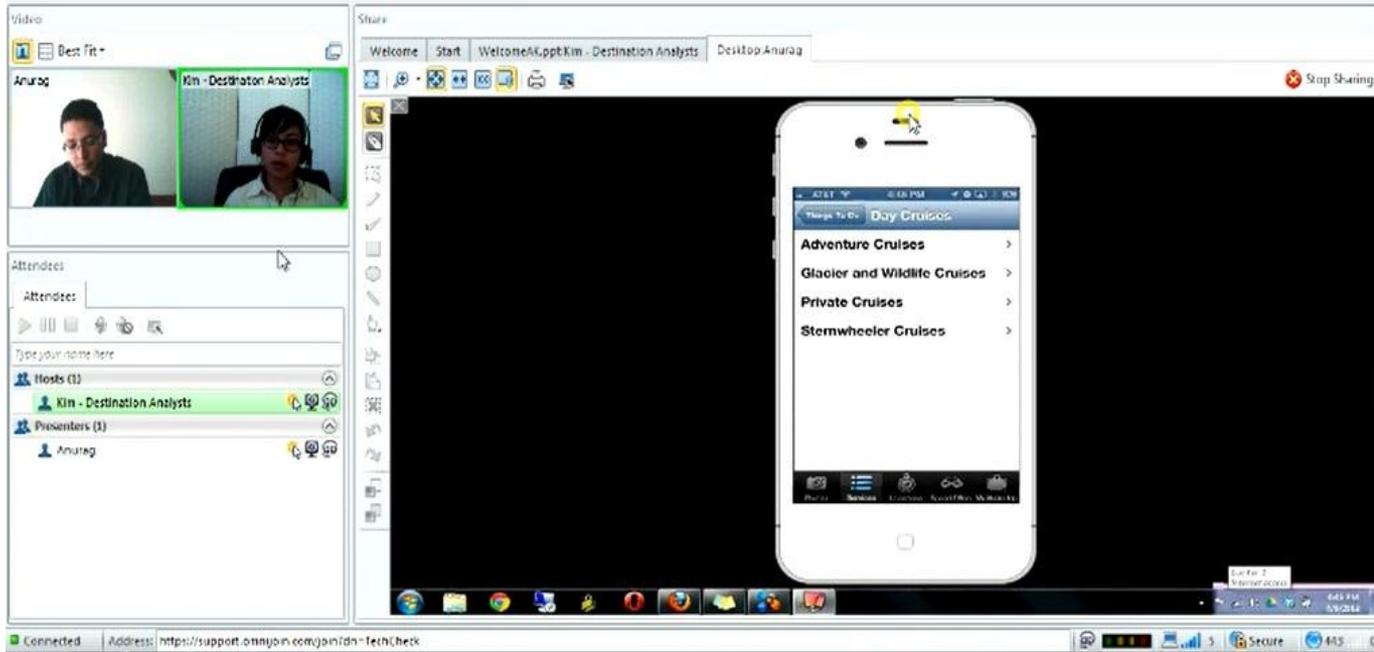


Respondent Profile

- iPhone users
- Regularly use their iPhone to perform travel-related planning tasks
- Interest in downloading mobile apps for trip research
- Household income above \$40,000
- At least some college education
- Range of ages from 25 – 65+
- Majority are married/partnered
- Residents from the following states: AL, CA, CO, FL, GA, IL, MI, MD, MN, MO, NC, OH, OR, NY, TX, WA, WI

The Interview Environment

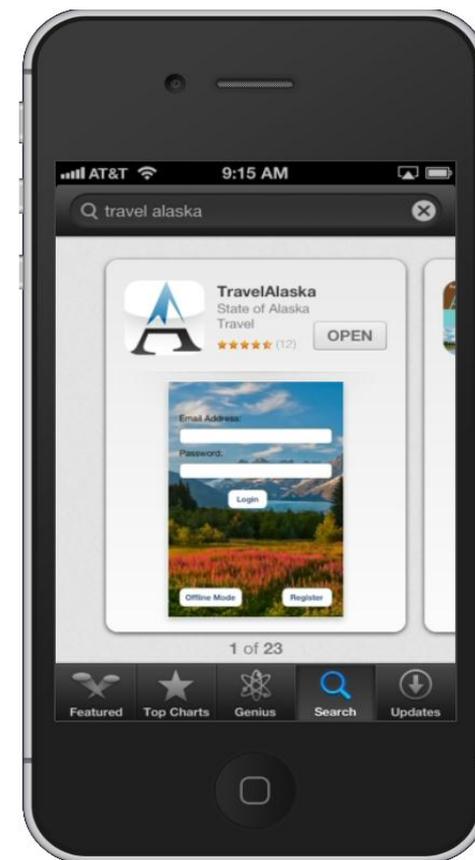
A screenshot of the interview environment from the moderator's perspective is shown below. During the interview, respondents viewed and used the Travel Alaska app from their own iPhone.



Searching for and Downloading the App

Prior to their interviews, each participant was required to complete a technical check of their computer system with Destination Analysts' staff. During the technical check, participants were asked to locate and download the app. Feedback gathered about this process suggests:

- **The app is challenging to find in the App Store.** Test participants were asked to locate and download the app. Most opened the App Store and searched for "Alaska." Unless they were given the specific search phrase "Travel Alaska," participants were not able to quickly find and access the app.
- **The Travel Alaska website is underutilized in driving use of the app.** Co-promotion of the app on the Travel Alaska website will likely be critical in maximizing the value of this asset. The website offers a marvelous opportunity to show users how to download the app, sync it with their My Alaska Trip content, and use it during their Alaska trip.
- **The collection of an e-mail address, even in the App Store environment, is likely to reduce usage.** Participants clearly expressed this to be an off-putting request which would diminish the likelihood of download.





Introduction: Participant Use of Apps in Travel Planning

Interviews began with a general introduction as well as a discussion of how test participants use travel apps. The following findings emerged from this part of the interview:

- **Although destination apps are not widely used by test participants, they are perceived to have tremendous potential value.** Test participants reported using a variety of travel-related apps from larger commercial organizations (e.g., Yelp, Kayak, Expedia, etc.). Despite a lack of experience using destination-specific apps, they were open to and very interested in their potential.
- **Apps are largely considered as tools for in-market execution of their trips.** In the initial stages of trip planning, full-screen computers are generally preferred. The typical participant in this usability test said they anticipated that they would most likely use a destination app after they had arrived in-market, rather than before leaving home. This was particularly apparent later in the interviews as participants expressed interest in the potential of the My Alaska Trip feature, which could be consulted during their Alaska trip.
- **Having a specific app to help with their Alaska trip is an extremely popular concept.** Given the combination of the state's large geographic expanse and travelers' poor understanding of this geography, research participants were excited by the concept of an app that would help them get a handle on traveling within the state. Additionally, participants appeared convinced that they would have connectivity issues when traveling away from urban areas. Thus, it was commonly expressed that an app that worked offline would be an enormous help.

Registration

The registration screen received mixed reviews. Most participants felt the background was attractive and was representative of Alaska. However, the immediate request for an email was off-putting—a feeling driven by fear of being spammed by an organization they don't yet know or trust. Key observations emerging from this exercise include:

- **The registration process is poorly understood.** Many participants attempted to register using the email and password fields.
- **Trust issues arose.** Giving an email address raises concerns, and many participants weren't certain of the app sponsor, not seeing an apparent connection to Travel Alaska.
- **The offline mode was widely considered to be helpful**—especially in Alaska, which is perceived to be a place with limited connectivity.
- **New—and additional—verbiage would be helpful.** Simply changing “Email address” to “Username” would likely reduce user concerns about unwanted email. Providing a brief explanation of the benefits of registering would also ameliorate potential users' concerns.



Content Analysis: Home Screen

The app's introductory screen was popular and its navigation was well-understood by participants. The page generates enthusiasm for using the app, and suggests that the app will be easy to use.

- **Based on this initial screen, users perceived the app to have a high utility based on strong understanding of the navigational options at the bottom of the screen.** The only navigational icons that generated some uncertainty were “Services” and “Locations.” However, those who expressed a level of confusion understood the general types of information to be found within each icon.
- **Services will likely be the most used pathway to content out-of-market, while locations will be most used to find content in-market.** When asked to complete a specific task, participants typically defaulted to using services or locations to navigate to their objective. The strongest initial draw when users first open the app is the Special Offers section.
- **Despite feeling comfortable searching for content, an introductory tutorial would be valued by users.** At times, the app was seen as needing some explanation and the idea of a tutorial was brought up independently by several users.



Content Analysis: Photos

The app allows its users to scroll through an array of striking Alaska imagery. This function was appreciated by research participants, who praised the quality and wow-factor. However, two issues arose in the testing that should be considered.

First, most of the test participants did not realize how to scroll through the images. If one of the app's goals is to inspire this behavior, an icon or message illustrating that users need to swipe right would be helpful.

Second, the images do not provide travel planning value. User feedback suggests that the more impactful the imagery, the more likely it is that app users will want to know what the images represent. The app doesn't offer information on the pictured attractions. Test participants expressed a strong desire for this content, as they wanted to find out how to visit the pictured attractions.



Content Analysis: Services

One of the primary tools many app users will use to access content is the Services section. When asked to complete tasks (such as finding hotels, restaurants, shopping venues or guided tours), participants typically referred to the Services section. To a degree, this approach was appropriate and worked in leading them in the direction of the desired information. However, navigational issues did arise. Before discussing navigation, two general observations merit consideration as background for the discussion.

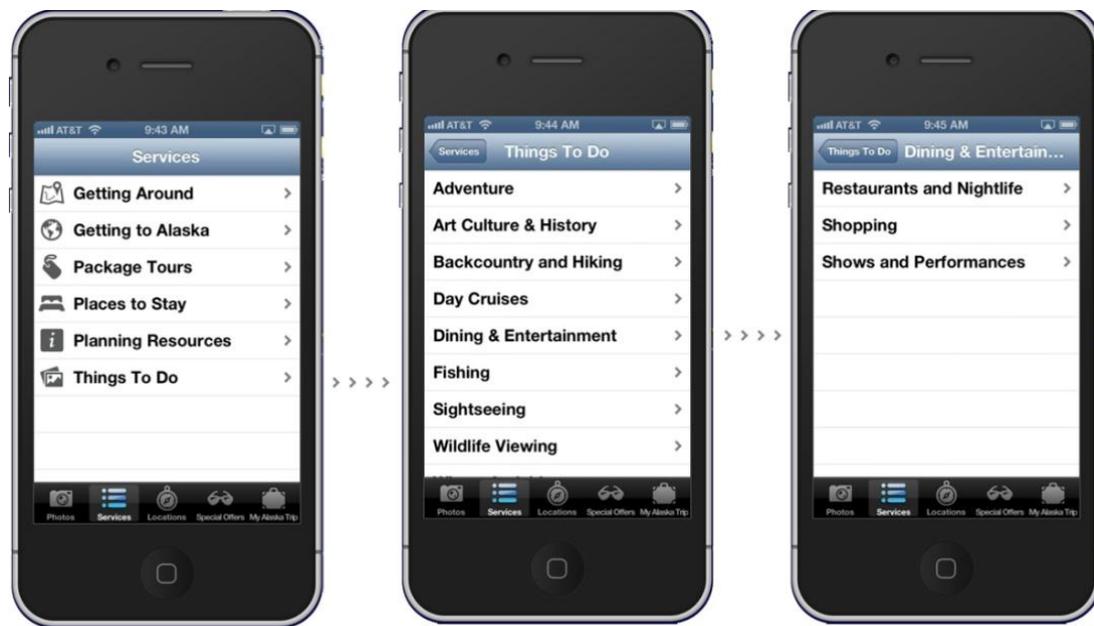
- **Search functionality was frequently requested by participants.** While navigational issues were common, users expressed little serious frustration. However, they did frequently express interest in a search function to assist in locating information, suggesting that users want an easier way to find content on the app.
- **Content expectations are also high.** Participants clearly had high expectations regarding the quantity and quality of travel planning content they would be able to access in the app. This led to a general reluctance to leave the app to find information, as well as a frustration around the limitations of member-only content.



Content Analysis: Services (continued)

Two significant navigational issues were found in these tests. The first occurred when users were asked to find restaurant and shopping information (it should be noted that these business categories are of particular interest to potential users). In the Services navigational hierarchy, these two items are found by clicking on “Things to Do.” Unfortunately, users do not associate restaurants or shopping with this label. It would likely be an improvement to give both items their own section on the Services home screen (the left-most screen in the image at right).

Enigmatically, numerous users had a difficult time locating restaurant information from the second screen. They simply went right past “Dining & Entertainment” and failed to complete their task. It may be a good idea to call this item by a name that starts with the word “Restaurants.”



Content Analysis: Services (continued)

The second navigational issue emerged in exercises directing participants to the business listings (screenshot at far right). The current organization was problematic and reconsidering its design could greatly improve the app's usability.



Once users had arrived at their desired group of business listings they were commonly confused by how the listings were presented. The organization of items on this page was not easily understood by users. Several users simply did not see the light gray font indicating the business location. For these users, the list appeared to be a random assortment of shopping establishments. Seeking alternative designs to quickly and intuitively show the business locations would help users work with this content.

Content Analysis: Business Listings

The app's business listings were the end destination for nearly all tasks completed in this usability test. An examination of these listings generated a considerable amount of conversation and some frustration. The basic consensus amongst participants was that the business listings were useful, but could be greatly improved by a careful standardization of content (discussed on the next page).

While the listings were not a source of significant frustration to participants, they were aware that the content was limited to only commercial content from certain businesses. In the case of restaurants, for example, many users quickly identified that there were only three restaurants listed for Anchorage, which left them concerned as to the overall usefulness of the app's overall content. Users commonly referred to competitive apps (e.g., Yelp, TripAdvisor) as the gold standard in locating desired information.

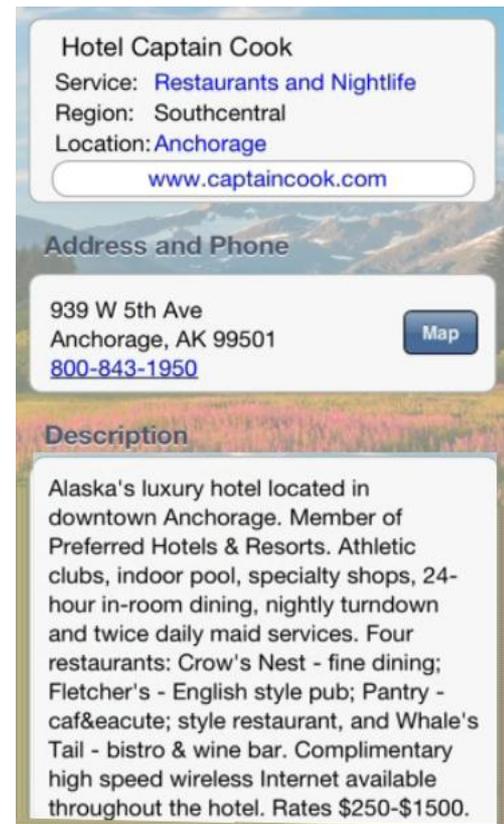


Business Listings: Best Practice Guidelines

Users expressed a need for standardized listings based on information that would be useful in planning their Alaska trip. Specifically, the listings would include:

- Information on seasonality
- Pricing (\$\$-system or price range)
- Reviews (or star ratings)
- Links to discounts or deals
- Content consistency in the category*
- Amenities (in the case of accommodations)
- Type of restaurant (in the case of dining)
- Specific location of attraction (not corporate offices)
- Pictures (to help evaluate the businesses)
- Links to mobile-optimized external content
- Additional white space

* The image at right shows the restaurant listing for the Captain Cook Hotel in Anchorage. This listing was called out by participants as confusing as it is more of a hotel listing than a restaurant listing.



The image shows a screenshot of a listing for the Captain Cook Hotel in Anchorage. The listing is presented as a restaurant listing but contains hotel-related information. The text includes:

- Hotel Captain Cook**
- Service:** Restaurants and Nightlife
- Region:** Southcentral
- Location:** Anchorage
- www.captaincook.com
- Address and Phone**
- 939 W 5th Ave
- Anchorage, AK 99501
- [800-843-1950](tel:800-843-1950)
- Description**
- Alaska's luxury hotel located in downtown Anchorage. Member of Preferred Hotels & Resorts. Athletic clubs, indoor pool, specialty shops, 24-hour in-room dining, nightly turndown and twice daily maid services. Four restaurants: Crow's Nest - fine dining; Fletcher's - English style pub; Pantry - cafe; style restaurant, and Whale's Tail - bistro & wine bar. Complimentary high speed wireless Internet available throughout the hotel. Rates \$250-\$1500.

Content Analysis: Links to Other Websites

The app gives its users many opportunities to explore content on other websites. The limited content available on the app, in fact, appears to encourage users to leave the app and explore external content. Several related items were seen in this usability research.

- In the Special Offers section, links to partner websites is presented as “More Information.” Few users understood that this was a link to external content. Consider using a different naming convention (e.g., “Website”).
- Test participants who left the app were often faced with content not optimized for mobile devices (examples at right). It was reported as being somewhat of a jarring experience that could be confusing. Encouraging partners to submit links to mobile-optimized landing pages should be a top priority.
- Participants expressed a strong preference to stay within the app to look at external sites, instead of having to toggle between their browser and the app.



Content Analysis: Locations

In initial discussions, users had a generally correct notion of the Location section's use. Once accessed, however, some confusion arose. While users quickly understood that they needed to scroll down to find the city they wanted to research, problems arose on the secondary level page, where users had difficulty understanding the organizational hierarchy.

To use this navigation effectively, it appears that users may need a different approach. Two were suggested:

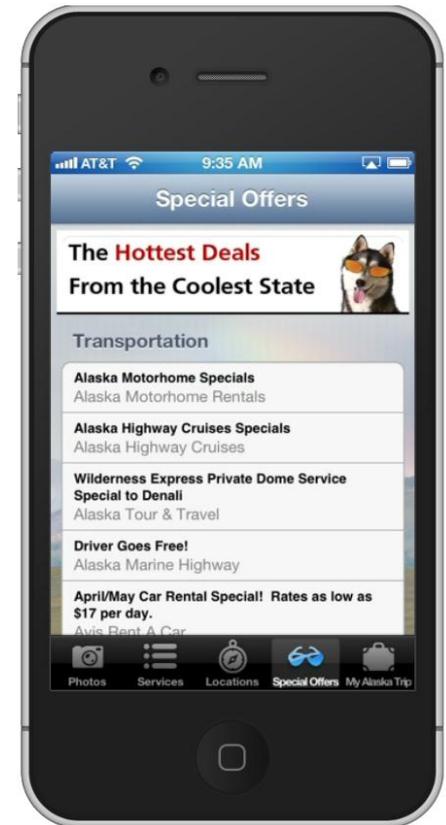
- Pre-sorted content in visually distinct business type categories (similar to the Special Offers section).
- An additional screen to select the type of business they are interested in viewing (similar to the Things to Do section).



Content Analysis: Special Offers

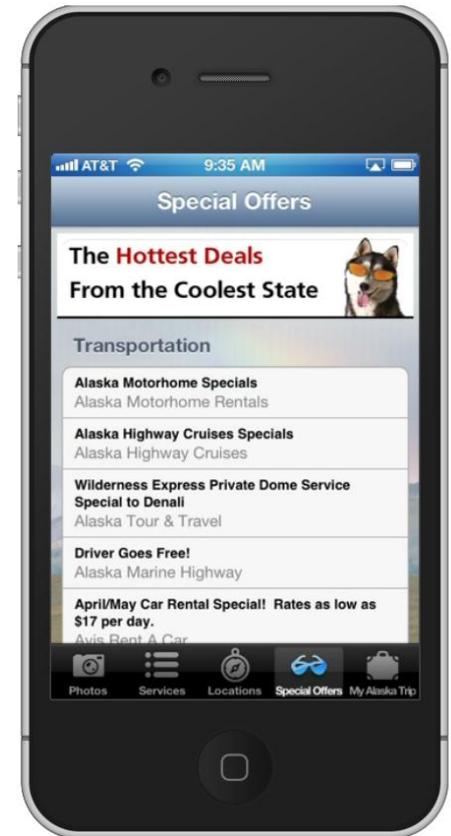
One of the more popular aspects of the Travel Alaska app was the Special Offers section. This content was easy to find and was also considered to be a source of significant potential value. Interview participants were very interested in deals and discounts and expected the app to provide them. The exercises using the app's current Special Offers section yielded the following findings:

- **The Special Offers section has some organizational challenges.** When initially accessed, it generally took participants a moment to orient themselves. The only visible element available to orient the user is the “Transportation” header, which was generally not immediately noticed.
- **Scrolling down allowed participants to orient themselves and figure out the organization of the Special Offers, but issues still existed.** Users questioned the order of sections. The interviews suggest that Activities might be the most intuitive type of offers to have at the top of the page. Several participants suggested a clickable list of categories that would allow them to immediately know what is contained on the screen and quickly navigate to their area of interest.



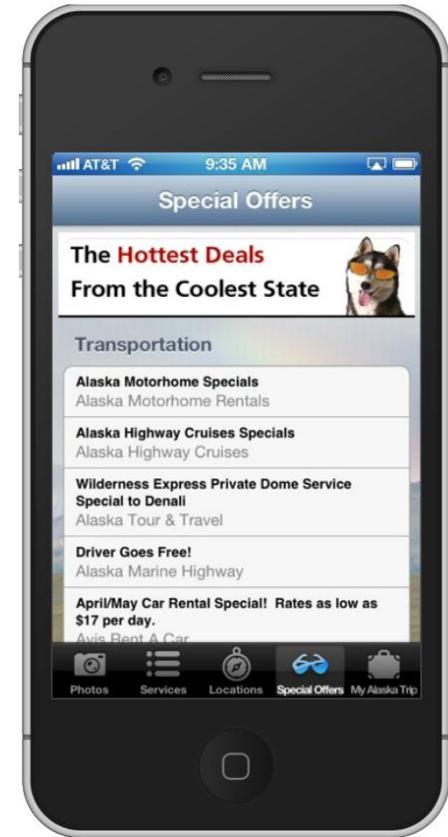
Content Analysis: Special Deals (*Continued*)

- **The organization of offers within the types of offers was unclear.** In fact, several participants did not notice the company names in light gray font below the offer name. This may be problematic for older users who may have visual limitations.
- **Geography is a dominant issue to users.** The offers can not be identified or sorted by geography, an issue that will likely frustrate users. For example, a person in Anchorage looking for activities deals would likely have to click on and read every offer to see what was available nearby.
- **Special Offers content risks being perceived as lacking value.** Modern consumers are both savvy and skeptical. Several participants noted specific offers that looked like they didn't really add value—and complained about a lack of standardization. This risk could likely be abated by standardizing content and instituting best practices requirements for partner businesses. These standards and practices (described on the next page) should answer users' general questions and clearly describe the offer's value.



Content Analysis: Special Deals (*Continued*)

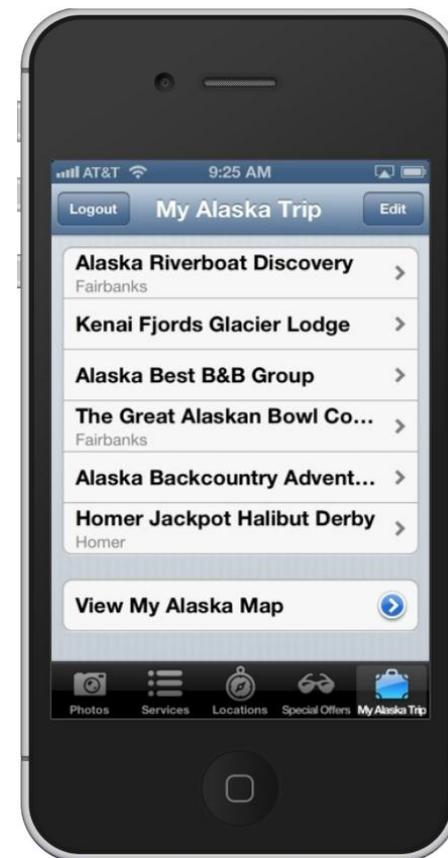
- Several content standardization ideas were requested by test participants. These ideas include:
 - Clearly noting the available dates/seasonality of the offer. Users were concerned that offers currently on the app would not be available when they travel. They did not see an easy way to find this information.
 - Highlighting the geographic location of the offer. Users want the offers to be applicable to their trip and want a quick way to locate items in the areas they plan to visit.
 - Give price points of reference or other information that would allow the user to better evaluate the offer.
- Users often questioned special offers highlighted in red font and did not understand what they signified.
- Users would strongly appreciate the ability to add Special Offers to their My Alaska Trip.



My Alaska Trip

One of the most popular elements of the Travel Alaska app was the My Alaska Trip function. As described earlier, the functionality fits perfectly with users' expectations that the app would be primarily used in-market. It was intuitively understood by almost all users as a trip planning itinerary tool. Nevertheless, some changes could be considered to enhance the app's usability.

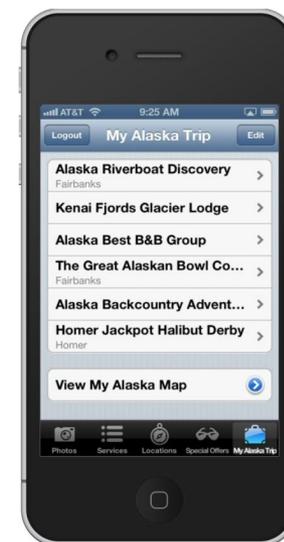
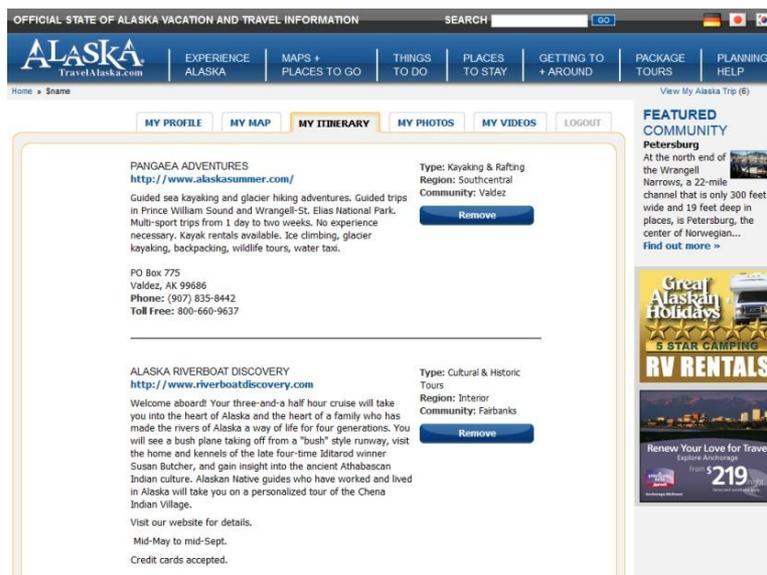
- The button to add items to My Alaska Trip was not seen by many users as they moved throughout the app. Tutorial instruction or design enhancement of the button could easily correct this issue.
- Most users loved the idea of My Alaska Trip, but wanted more functional features, including the ability to:
 - Reorder their items
 - Sort or categorize by type
 - Create an itinerary that would include dates
 - Create custom content (i.e., add items not available on TravelAlaska.com.)
 - Print or email their itinerary from the app





My Alaska Trip: Sync with Website Content

Users were strongly and unanimously in approval of the ability to synchronize the My Alaska Trip content developed on the Travel Alaska website with their iPhone. However, no participants were made aware of this potential without being explicitly informed of it by the interview moderator.

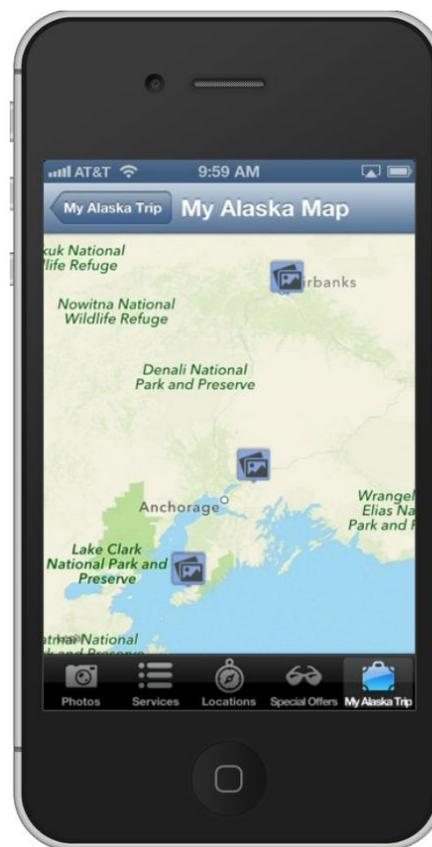


Unless the user was introduced to My Alaska Trip via the TravelAlaska.com website on their computer, it was clear that the connection would not be made. The app would benefit from instructions that explained this to users. Conversely, users of the full website should be sold the idea of synchronizing their content with the Travel Alaska app. Additionally, it appears that some content on a user's online account doesn't always automatically sync to content presented on the app. This could create user confusion if they create an account using their mobile device and can't access it online (or vice versa).

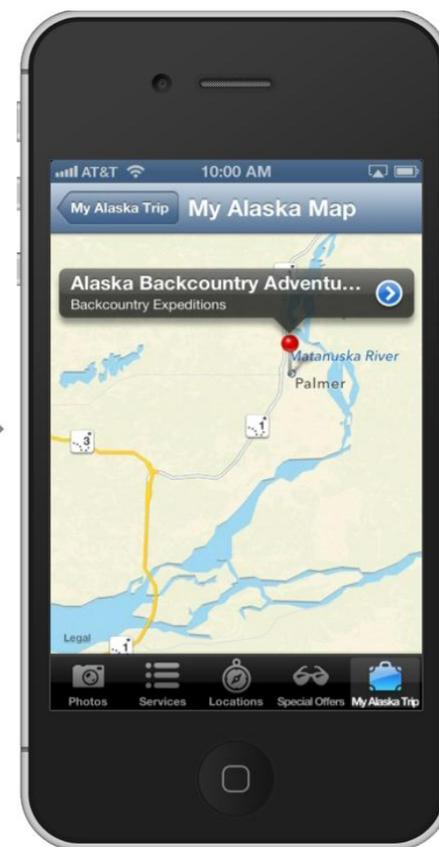
My Alaska Trip: Maps

The map feature of the My Alaska Trip section was praised as useful and important.

- While this may not be something the developers can change, it should be noted that the icons used on the maps to identify businesses (shown immediately right) were not clearly understood. Users would benefit from a map legend or key that explains the icons.
- The map pinpoints did not always represent the location of the activity, but rather they appeared to show the business' corporate office.
- Many users stated that they would appreciate being able to get directions between locations using this feature.
- The white icons used to identify roads were not understood.



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Recommendations: Key Action Items

Derived from users' suggestions , the following list presents immediately actionable ideas for improving the Travel Alaska app:

- Add a tutorial or other type introductory usage instructions content for beginners
- Describe and link photos to travel planning information
- Change the app's registration procedure and provide an explanation of the benefits of registering
- Promote synchronizing My Alaska Trip website content to the mobile app
- Ensure that synchronization between the website and app is working properly
- Explore ways to improve the app's visibility on the App Store
- Allow Special Offer content to be added to My Alaska Trip
- Standardize Special Offers content – Develop and encourage best practices
- Standardize business listing content – Develop and encourage best practices
- Reconsider Restaurant & Shopping menu categorizations
- Explore design alternative to fourth level business listing presentation

Ideas for Future Development

The interviews generated other ideas, likely more appropriate as considerations for longer-term development potential:

- Add a search function to the app
- Add desired features to My Alaska Trip (sort/categorize items, create an itinerary, print/email options, map directions between locations, etc.)
- Offer the ability for members to communicate with travelers based on items added to My Alaska Trip
- Add weather content
- Rethink the design of the “Locations” navigational scheme (i.e., ways for users to easily distinguish sought-after information once they click on a particular city or town)
- Explore developing additional content and features suggested by participants, such as:
 - Trip ideas
 - Editor’s picks
 - Map content expanded beyond just business listings
 - FAQ section