

Finding the Easiest Shipping Option: User Centric Compares Usability of FedEx, UPS, and the US Postal Service

Wendy Yee, PhD, Director, User Centric, Inc

Kirsten Peters, MS, User Experience Specialist, User Centric, Inc.

December has always been the most popular time of year for US consumers to send packages to family and friends. It is also the busiest time for online shipping: the major carriers (FedEx, UPS, US Postal Services) have all reported that the heaviest use of their online shipping sites occurs during December.

Since the holidays are also known for elevating stress levels, our team at User Centric conducted a quick usability comparison of the online process for shipping a pound of fudge from our offices in Chicago to a relative in Herndon, VA. We compared online shipping via FedEx, UPS, and the US Postal Service.

Our goal was to three-fold: (a) **identify which carrier made the process easiest for the casual holiday shipper**, (b) compare two commercial shippers to the less expensive US Postal Service and (c) figure out which carrier we would actually use to ship holiday gifts based on the overall user experience.

Before we start, three notes:

- We excluded DHL from our comparison because DHL will be closing their US domestic operations in January 2009.
- Neither FedEx, UPS or the US Postal Service are clients of User Centric.
- User Centric uses different delivery services but none of our team personally handles the accounts, so we have no prior exposure to registration.

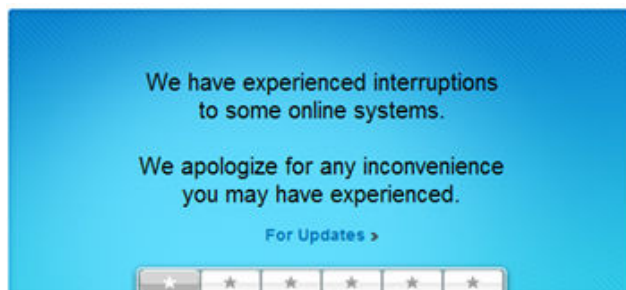


Figure 1: Message on USPS.com home page

We should also mention that during the course of our three-day site usability evaluation (conducted December 9 through December 12), we encountered technical problems with the US Postal Service site. The site posted a prominent warning on its home page (Figure 1) and we assumed these problems would just be minor and transient delays. However, we found that it took at least 5 separate attempts (over the course of three days) to complete a single shipping transaction.

Registration Is Always Required

All three shippers required that we register before starting the shipping process. This was somewhat frustrating because we did not want to invest time in registering until we had a general understanding of shipping costs.

Although the three shippers organized their registration forms differently, they generally requested similar information (user ID and password, address, type of account).

However, FedEx requested more information than the other shippers, such as secret phrase and payment information. Payment information was also a mandatory part of their registration process; we did not find this consumer-friendly or usable. We would have preferred to share our payment information as part of the initial shipping transaction. (In contrast, UPS made payment information an optional part of their registration.) (See Table 1)

Registration	FedEx	UPS	US Postal Service
Can ship without registering?	No		
Payment information required during initial registration?	Yes	No	No
Length of registration process	4 page process	2 page process	6 page process

Table 1: Comparison of Registration Process

Tools for Estimating Shipping Costs

We later learned that we could also use each sites' shipping calculator functions to estimate the shipping costs. The shipping calculators were relatively easy to find on the home pages of the US Postal Service and UPS sites. They were not the first item listed, but presumably the shippers had done their research and determined that repeat customers represent the majority of their site traffic. (Figure 2)

The FedEx calculator was not accessible from the home page but was available from the Ship menu under "Get Rates & Transit Times."



Figure 2: Home Page Access to Cost Calculators

The cost calculators were fairly similar on all three websites, although there were differences in screen layout. All three based their estimates on the sender's zip code, recipient's zip code, and package weight. All three were fairly usable.

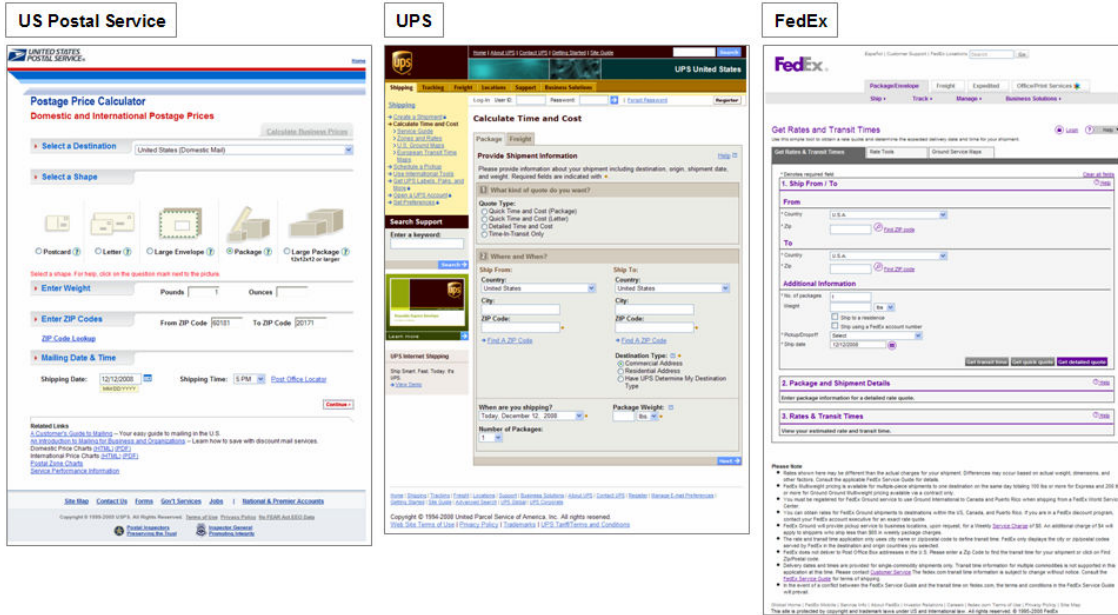


Figure 3: Cost Calculators on the Three Sites

Of the three, the US Postal Service calculator was slightly more streamlined. As seen in Figure 3, the page was broken up into clearly delineated sections and had fewer fields.

The UPS and FedEx sites calculators appeared a bit more involved due to the presence of country fields (which defaulted to United States since we were prompted to select the country when we first visited these sites).

If you're curious, we compared the estimated costs to the final shipping costs at the very end of the process. The final shipping costs from UPS and FedEx were actually **lower** than their estimated costs. We suspect these rates reflected a discount for (a) registered users and (b) an additional discount for newly registered users to attract DHL customers who now must select a new shipper. However, the shipping rates for the US Postal Service were the same regardless of registration status.

Preview of Shipping Rates	FedEx	UPS	US Postal Service
Quick quote tool provided?	Yes - from primary navigation, Shipping > Get Rates and Transit Times	Yes - from home page link, "Calculate Time and Cost"	Yes - from home page button, "Calculate Costs"
Information needed for estimated shipping	Zip codes, package type, weight		
Quick quote price vs. Registered user price	Shipping rates for registered users is lower	Shipping rates for registered users is lower	No difference
Reference chart of shipping rates and transit times available (aka zone charts)	Yes (but hidden under the Ship menu option "Get Rates and Transit Times" and then the secondary tab "Rate Tools")	Yes (as ranges)	Yes (as ranges)

Table 2: Comparison of Cost Calculators

What's the Difference Between "2nd Day" versus "Express Saver" ?

After registered, we went back to the "Ship" area of each site and started filling out shipping forms. We were pleased to see that all shippers used our registration information to pre-fill many fields, especially after we just finished filling out those identical address fields during the registration process.

However, we found ourselves confused by the names of different shipping services. "2nd day" versus "Express Saver"? "Next Day Air Saver" versus "2nd Day Air A.M."? How much faster was one than the other? How much did one cost over the other? The similarity in labels led to a confusing user experience.

At this point, we noticed that the sites did not provide equal access to service descriptions and their relative costs. See Figure 4 which shows each shipping form:

- The US Postal Service listed specific shipping rates, delivery time and a separate "Help" icon leading to a detailed description of how quickly the package would arrive.
- UPS provided a "Compare Service Options" link, which launched a popup window with that displayed a full table of specific arrival times for that package and specific rates for each.
- FedEx provides a general "Help" icon in the "Package and Shipment Details" box but does not provide a "Help" icon for the Service Type field (although other fields such as Weight and Declared Value have "Help" icons)

US Postal Service

Service	Delivery Time	Paid Online	Paid at Post Office
Express Mail® Service	13-Dec-2008	\$15.23	\$15.70

[Express Mail Drop-Off Locations](#)

- Waiver of Signature
- No Delivery on Saturdays
- Hold For Pickup (Availability based on pickup ZIP Code: [Enter pickup ZIP Code](#))
- Insurance No Charge

UPS

How would you like to ship?

Service: Select Service [Compare Service Options](#)

Do you need additional services?

<input type="checkbox"/> Send E-mail Notifications	Free
<input type="checkbox"/> Receive Confirmation of Delivery	Yes
<input type="checkbox"/> Schedule a Pickup	Yes
<input type="checkbox"/> Deliver Without Signature (Shipper Release)	Free
<input type="checkbox"/> Deliver On Saturday	Yes
<input type="checkbox"/> C.O.D.	Yes

Some services may require extra information. You will be able to enter the required information on the next page.

FedEx

3. Package & Shipment Details [Help](#) [Hide](#)

- * Service type: Priority Overnight
- * Package type: Your Packaging
- * No. of packages: 1
- * Weight: lbs

Figure 4: Access to Service Descriptions

The table provided by UPS (Figure 5) facilitated a useful cost-benefit analysis of speed versus costs. (Hmm, maybe there's no reason to use 3-Day Select...)

UPS Internet Shipping: Compare Services - Mozilla Firefox

https://www.ups.com/uis/create?ActionOriginPair=CASCompare...CompareServices&TC_TIME_STAMP=0&loc=en_US&Redi

UPS Service Comparison

Ship From: OAKBROOK TERRACE, 60181 UNITED STATES
 Ship To: HERNDON, 20170 UNITED STATES
 Number of Packages: 1

Service	Estimated Delivery *	Estimated Cost
UPS Next Day Air Early A.M.	8:00 A.M. Thursday, 12/11/2008	63.83 USD
UPS Next Day Air	10:30 A.M. Thursday, 12/11/2008	31.05 USD
UPS Next Day Air Saver	3:00 P.M. Thursday, 12/11/2008	28.23 USD
UPS 2nd Day Air A.M.	10:30 A.M. Friday, 12/12/2008	13.05 USD
UPS 2nd Day Air	End of Day Friday, 12/12/2008	11.21 USD
UPS 3 Day Select	End of Day Monday, 12/15/2008	7.59 USD
UPS Ground Service	End of Day Monday, 12/15/2008	4.76 USD

* Estimated delivery if you get your package to UPS by 12:00 A.M. Wednesday, 12/10/2008

Figure 5: UPS Service Comparison

We then noticed that the FedEx shipping form provides a separate “optional” area for calculating rate and times for a package within the form. (Figure 6)

When we clicked on the “Calculate” link, the tool displayed a table of arrival time and specific rate for this package.

We were puzzled why (a) this was considered optional (and why it wasn’t automatically done) and (b) why this wasn’t placed closer to the “Package and Shipment Details” section.

Relocating the service information to the Package and Shipment Details section would have reduced uncertainty about speed and cost and increased the relevance of this feature.

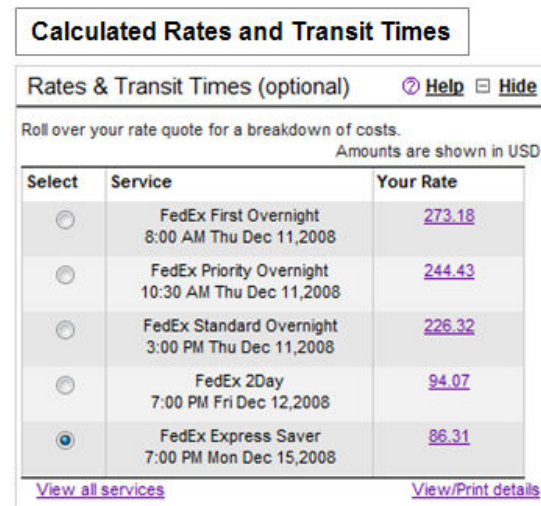
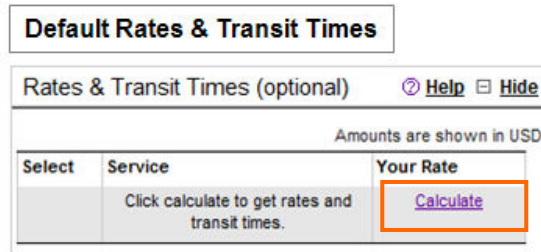


Figure 6: FedEx Rates and Transit Times

Online Scheduling Is Easy, Except When You Have to Call It In

The three shippers vary in their approaches to offering pickup:

- The US Postal Service completely separates the pickup scheduling process from shipping form. Although the US Postal Service home page suggests that requesting the pickup is step 4 of a wizard, it is actually an entirely separate activity.
- UPS includes the option for pickup in the Service box and will then add a “Schedule a Pickup” screen to the end of the process.
- FedEx provides an optional Pickup/Dropoff section of the shipment form.

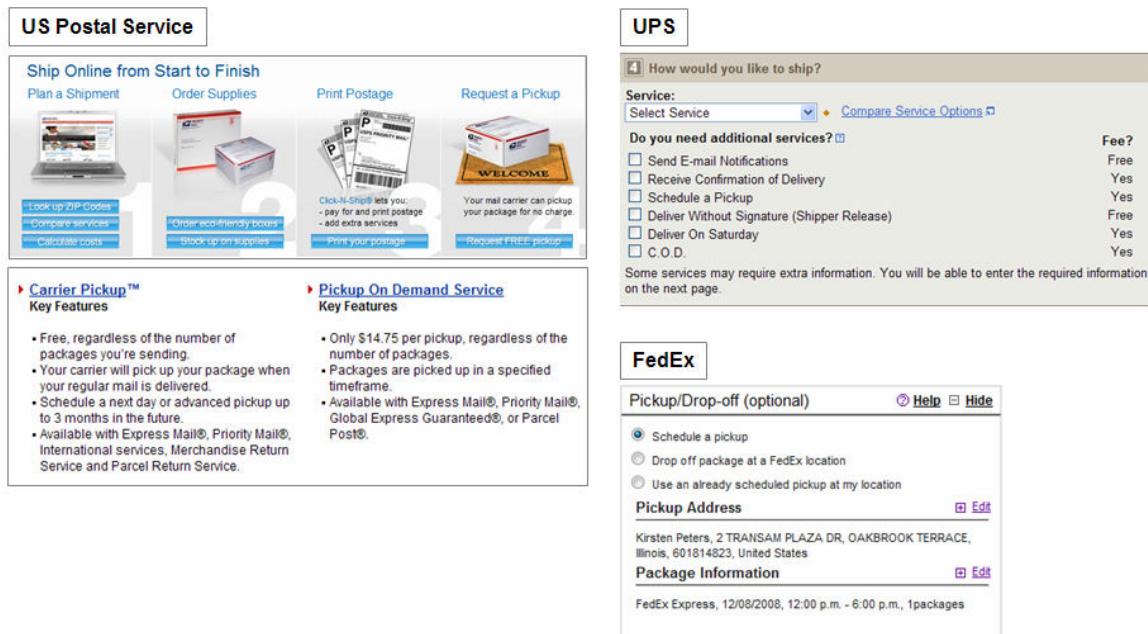


Figure 7: Scheduling a Package Pickup

As it turns out, the free package pickup offered by the US Postal Service is only free for next-day pickup. A request for same-day pickup costs an additional \$14.75 (which was one of the more negative aspects of our experience with the US Postal Service website).

However, the free US Postal Service pickup was easy to schedule - we picked the date (tomorrow or later) and your postal carrier rings your bell asking for your package at your “normal” mail delivery time.

The UPS pickup lets you specify a range of time during the day for your pickup.

The process of requesting a pickup from FedEx puzzled us. Although we selected “Schedule a Pickup” on the shipping form, the confirmation screen displayed the message “Contact FedEx for courier pickup”. (Figure 8)



Figure 8: Message on FedEx confirmation screen

We were expecting to be asked for a “package ready by” time and a “pick up no later than” time. How were we supposed to provide this information online? We repeated the FedEx shipping process more than once, only to be prompted with this message again. (They apparently wanted us to call their toll-free number and wait on hold). The inability to schedule a FedEx pickup online seemed at odds with an otherwise usable website.

Paying to Ship

All three shippers displayed final costs before asking for (or confirming, in the case of FedEx) the method payment and payment information the final shipping costs.

However, pickup costs from the US Postal Service were not shown on the final confirmation screen since package shipping and pickup activities were not integrated. A same-day pickup by the US Postal Service would require a separate transaction and payment.

We also found it curious that the US Postal Service did not provide a final confirmation screen containing the shipper address, recipient address(es), the pickup date, and the final costs before charging the user. Instead, the US Postal Service site had separate confirmation screens for the address and shipping costs/payment information.

Nearest Locations

One final thing we were hoping to see was the location of the nearest drop off locations for situations when (a) we had a last-minute package to send or (b) did not want to pay for pickup.

FedEx and UPS customize the nearest locations and latest hours based on your shipper address and display it in different locations:

- FedEx automatically displays this information on the shipping form if you select the “Dropoff” option
- UPS automatically displays this on the My UPS page that users see when they log into the site again.

The US Postal Service takes a no-frills approach and does not customize this information. Instead, it provides this through “Locate a Post Office” link on the home page.

Shipping Form	FedEx	UPS	US Postal Service
Length of shipping form	1 page (6 sections)	1 page (6 sections)	2 pages (6 sections total)
Access to comparison tool for shipping options and costs for your package?	Yes, with delivery dates/times and costs		
Shipping process automatically calculates specific shipping options and costs?	Yes, on the confirmation screen	Yes, on the confirmation screen	Yes (since based strictly on zip codes)
Can schedule pickup using site?	Unclear (after pickup was requested, screen instructed us to call FedEx to schedule)	Yes, can schedule date and specify range of times for pickup	Yes (can request free pickup)
User can enter payment method after selecting shipping options?	No (need to enter mandatory payment info when registering)	Yes	Yes
Final review of all costs and shipment specifics shown before charging credit card information?	Yes		
Can print shipping label?	Yes (for dropoff or pickup)		
Shows nearest and open latest locations?	Automatically displayed on shipping form (after user selects dropoff option)	Automatically displayed on the personalized My UPS account page (but not on shipping form)	Available after using from the Post Office locator on the home page (not automatically displayed on the form or account page)

Table 3: Comparison of Shipping Forms

Overall Impressions

Since this is an article about user-friendly shipping (and we usually don't need tracking numbers for our holiday fudge), we were initially thrilled to learn that the US Postal Service offered free package pickup.

However, the site's reliability issues clouded our user experience and raised doubts in our minds about the overall competence of the process (Day 4 of the technical issues and counting). We also found it frustrating to be "dropped" by the site's servers multiple times in a multi-step shipping process.

This left UPS and FedEx. The two sites were generally comparable in their overall approach to online shipping and ease of use. However, based on our three-day comparison, **we picked UPS** because it did not force us to enter payment information until we had a chance to see our final shipping costs. UPS also allowed us to schedule a pickup without touching the phone, which is a requirement for a user-friendly online services site.

In contrast, FedEx made payment information mandatory during registration and the site indicated we needed to call and schedule a pickup, which seemed odd since their trucks routinely stop at our offices twice a day.

Some other notes based on our experience:

- **Don't be shocked by the long forms.** All three shippers have long forms simply because they need to collect and confirm 2-3 types of addresses (shipper, recipient, pickup) and information on the package.
- **Figure out the service jargon.** Once you know which shipping service you need (next day, next day AM) the form-filling process goes fairly quickly.
- **Thankfully, registration only happens once.** This is a good thing since registration was more time consuming than we would have liked, especially on the FedEx site.
- **Asterisks are our friends.** It is much easier to spot required fields when the asterisk appears **before** the label. FedEx and the US Postal Service did this, but UPS did not.

Overall Impressions	FedEx	UPS	US Postal Service
General comments	We did not like the way payment information was required as part of registration.	We liked the way we could enter payment information after selecting our shipping options. The frequent use of dynamic fields minimized the fields that we had to look at, but it would have been nice if the site highlighted the "newly added" fields after it refreshed the screen.	Site had repeated issues with "service interruptions" over the course of a three-day period. This made it difficult to get through the entire shipping process and identify shipping options.
Time required to complete online forms - registration	2-3 minutes for mandatory fields (includes payment fields)	1-2 minutes for mandatory fields ("default payment" fields were optional)	1-2 minutes
Time required to complete online forms - shipping form	3-4 minutes (longer if you take the time to compare delivery times and shipping costs)	3-4 minutes (longer if you take the time to compare delivery times and shipping costs)	Unclear, since we had to restart the form many, many times
Will be using to ship holiday packages?	If the US Postal Service site starts working more consistently, we'll use it because nothing beats free pickup. If we run out of time, we'll use UPS because it did not force us to provide payment information during registration and allows us to schedule package pickups just using the web site.		

Table 4: Comparison of Overall Impressions

About the Authors

Wendy Yee, *Director, User Centric, Inc.*

Wendy is a passionate advocate of leveraging user behavior insights to support her clients' research needs and to shape the design of user interfaces. At User Centric, Wendy has led user research and UI design projects for technology, healthcare, finance, and marketing organizations. Her previous roles as a director at Human Factors International and as editor for web-related projects at Science Magazine have provided extensive experience in multiple aspects of user-centered design and research. She has also collaborated with clients on the strategic direction of next-generation UI designs for software applications and has conducted user testing on FDA-regulated biomedical devices.

Interesting Facts: Wendy is very familiar with the chemical structures of caffeine and chocolate. She spends her evenings reading Curious George and Richard Scarry, although her preferred reading material is *Businessweek* and the *Wall Street Journal*.

Qualifications: SB in Cognitive Science from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, PhD in Neuroscience from the Johns Hopkins School of Medicine

Kirsten Peters, *User Experience Specialist, User Centric, Inc.*

While finishing her industrial engineering degree, Kirsten fell in love with human factors and ergonomics. She had discovered that her engineering problem solving skills are perfectly suited for creating interesting research projects, analyzing data, and assisting in the design of unique design solutions. Kirsten especially enjoys working on projects involving motor learning and control and human factors of industrial and manufacturing settings and video games. Prior to joining UC, she worked with Firestone as an Industrial Engineer and also at Caterpillar and Yahoo! as an intern. Kirsten is a member of HFES as well.

Interesting Facts: Kirsten likes to spend her spare time hiking and biking and exploring the outdoors and she enjoys visiting Wildlife Parks and Zoos wherever she travels.

Qualifications: B.S. in Industrial Engineering from Iowa State University, M.S. in Human Factors and Ergonomics from San Jose State University, Certified Associate Ergonomist from Oxford Research Institute

About User Centric, Inc.

User Centric is a global consulting firm that focuses on improving user experience. We apply our expertise to projects involving handhelds, web sites, software, medical devices, print, packaging, and telephony services. Experience, quality, value, global reach and outstanding client services set us apart. Our services include user research, user interface design consulting, information architecture, usability testing, user interface evaluations, eye tracking, and online surveys. Learn more about us at <http://www.UserCentric.com>.