PORTLAND, OR

UX Design I: Case Study

POWELLS.COM

Recommended improvements to website navigation, design, and layout for desktop and mobile.

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User Experience (UX) Design I
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POWELL'S
EST. 1971
CITY *of* BOOKS

Introduction

Powell's bookstores are a chain of independent bookstores based in the Portland, Oregon metro area. The main store in downtown Portland is also called 'The City of Books' and takes up an entire city block.

The City of Books, founded in 1971

Along with the moniker of 'City of Books', Powell's also claims to be one of the largest independent new & used bookstores in the world by bibliophiles. It is widely considered a tourist destination and also beloved by locals.

The 'City of Books' has nine color-coded rooms and over 3,500 different sections. Visiting the downtown store, each large room that makes up the city block store, is organized into color-coded rooms (*See figure 1.1,*) each with specific categories per room that fit within a theme. The store itself smells delightfully of books and wooden bookshelves, much like an old library. (This smell you can purchase even as an eau de perfume! *See figure 1.2*)

Powell's was officially founded in 1971, and in 1980 they found the location that eventually became the headquarters (aka the 'City of Books') in downtown Portland on W Burnside & NW 10th Avenue. Multiple stores within the metro area were sequentially opened and a website was created in the years following.

Powell's City of Books Store Map. Figure 1.1

Powell's Eau de Bookstore Figure 1.2

About Powells.com

Powell's bookstores launched their own website well before Amazon.com became a household name for online shopping. The focus was purely on technical books until it was expanded to an entire online presence.

Launched before Amazon in 1994!

Powell's launched an email newsletter and FTP access to their technical bookstore in 1993. In 1994, a fully curated website was created and established with a traditional ecommerce area to handle online sales. This was months before Amazon was started (Amazon launched in July of 1994.)

The Powell's website layout has remained the same since December of 2018 according to archive.org. (*See Figure 1.3*) In 2020, layoffs of staff and retail workers after stores were closed due to the pandemic may have caused the site to be only updated as needed.

Above the fold information includes the logo, search, login, navigation bar, the image of the famous sign outside the 'City of Books' headquarter location, picks of the month, and featured bestsellers. It is a pretty standard bookstore website and generally easy to navigate as an online ecommerce store.

Search has a very prominent position in the middle of the navigation area next to the logo. It sits in-between the login for the account area and the logo at the top left. Other bookstores of comparable size follow a similar layout.

Rounding out the online presence of Powell's bookstores, includes social media accounts such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Pinterest and the links for these are located within the footer.
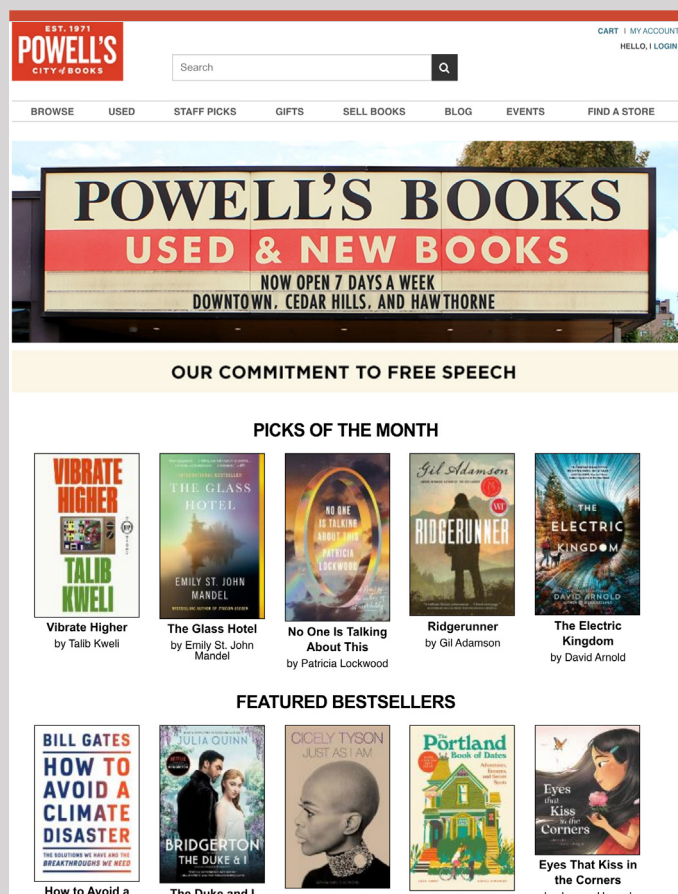
Powells.com as of February 2021. Figure 1.3

Purpose + Audience

Powells.com's purpose is to provide book lovers and shoppers the same experience as one would visiting the physical store. The website offers both Used and New books, but also Rare books and staff picks online.

Book lovers, tourists, and locals love Powell's

As a tourist destination, Powell's Bookstore (the 'City of Books' location) is a must see when visiting Portland's downtown. It is well organized, categorized, and easy to navigate. One could literally get lost in the sheer amount of stacks and rooms. The website is equally organized, categorized, and you could get lost in it as well. The audience the website attempts to attract are the same type of people who visit the physical stores and those who are seeking a local option compared to Amazon. They also have a strong presence on social media.

Within Instagram, Powell's is described as "keeping ideas in circulation since 1971."

And within Facebook, they describe themselves in this way (after repeating the "keeping ideas in circulation since 1971" phrase:) "From humble storefront beginnings in 1971 on a derelict corner of northwest Portland, Oregon, Powell's Books has grown into one of the world's great bookstores. Powell's distinctive synergy today underpins four full-service bookstores (Powell's City of Books, Powell's at Cedar Hills Crossing, Powell's on Hawthorne, and Powell's at PDX), two specialty stores (Powell's Technical Books and Powell's Books for Home and Garden), and Powells.com."
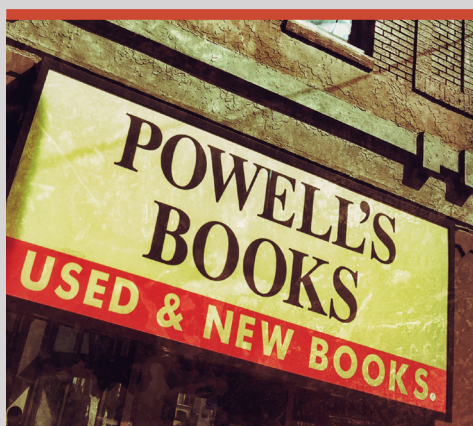
Competitive Research: Half Price Books

A local Texas bookstore of comparable size and audience to powells.com is Half Price Books (hpb.com.) Their website is organized much in the same way as powells.com with top level navigation, categories, and a centralized search bar. The differences are quite apparent though with the strategic use of common metaphors at the top of the navigation and placement of categories outside of the top navigation. Users may also feel comfortable using the site because it looks and behaves like other sites they frequent like Amazon and Barnes & Noble. (Jakob's Law.)
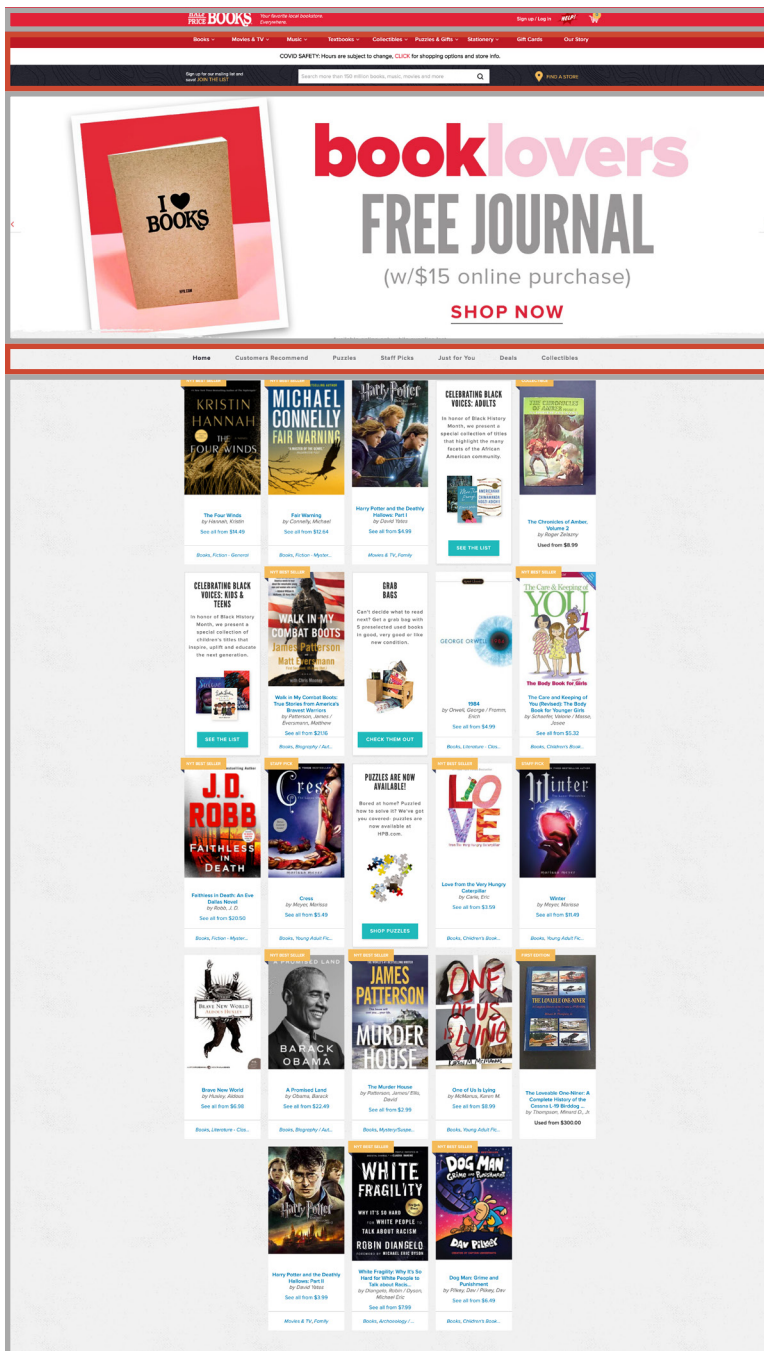
The top navigation includes the logo and also uses metaphors to help users navigate to the cart, getting help, and signing in.

The main navigation features top level selections and a prominent search bar.

Large header showcases interesting sale items that may entice and engage the user, it also moves on a carousel so it is interesting to view.

Filtered categories for the books are near the top and easy to find.

Main level books are tiled and contrasted from the background giving each their own section on the "shelf." The books are also within a nicely constrained area that mirrors the width of the category navigation and the main navigation. These areas do not deviate page to page.
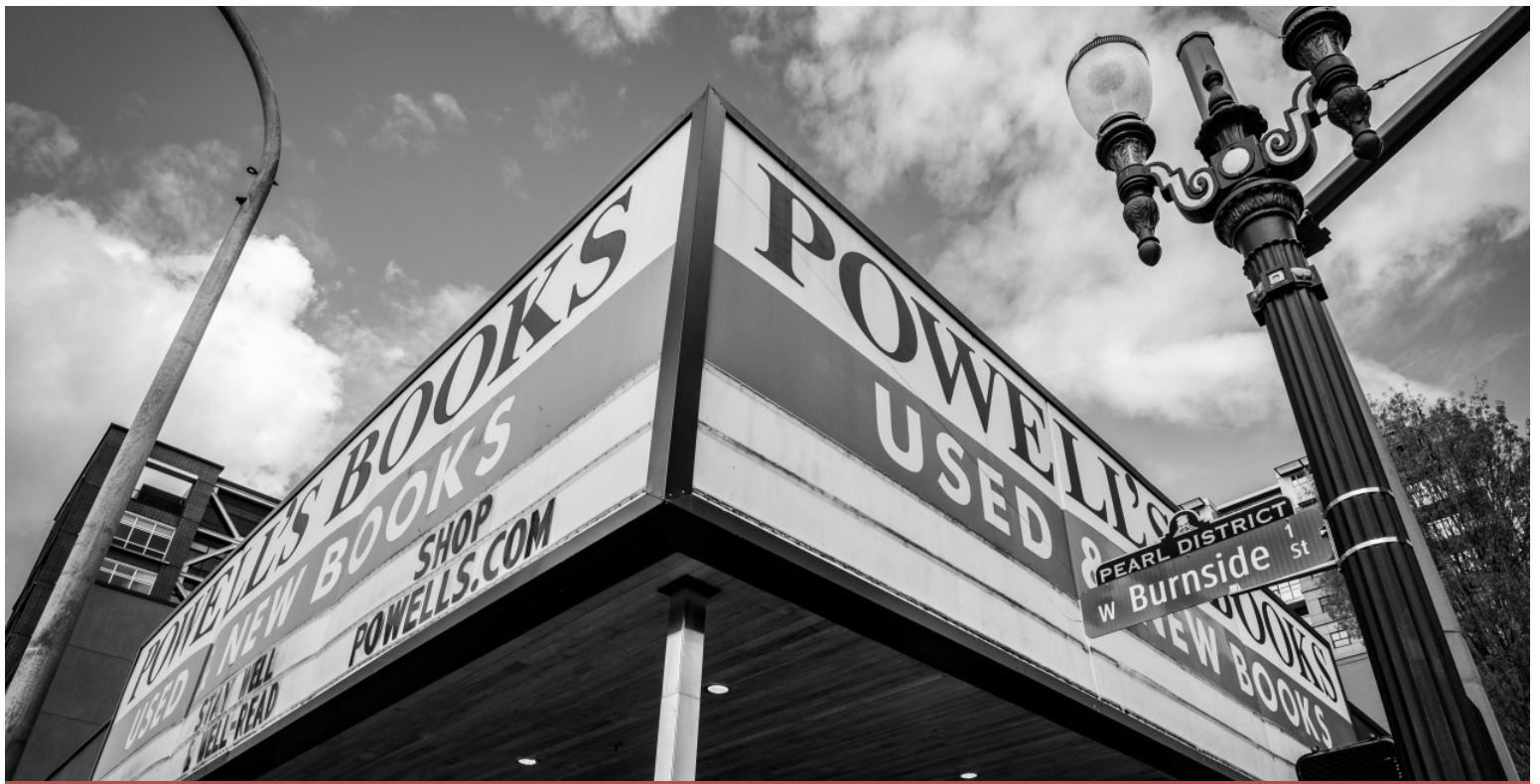
User Research + Testing

Six users were asked to take a survey where they were tasked with exploring the powells.com website, follow a couple directions, and report their findings.

User Questions included:

What do you like about Powells.com?

What are some missed opportunities? How could your experience with the site be improved?

Did you have specific expectations of this website before visiting? What were they? (Please be specific)

Can you find where to make an account? Write out your process.

Is the location of creating an account in an expected place?

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There's a ton on the main page, and I don't tend to scroll down. I'd personally remove the blog entirely from the main page as very few will pick it up, and move the events way up in terms of order of appearance, but that may just be my own preference.
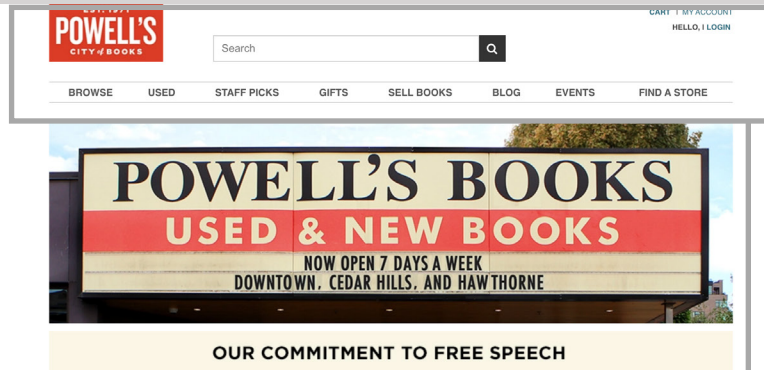
— Beth M.
Survey Response

The Green Room - Problem 1: Navigation

There are some major and minor inaccuracies with the main navigation. It jumps from a smaller mid page navigation on the front page to full page navigation when clicking a couple of the pages within the site. The font size used throughout the navigation is also very small and difficult to read.

Small Navigation centered on the home page.

Clicking on Browse > New Arrivals, the Navigation expands.
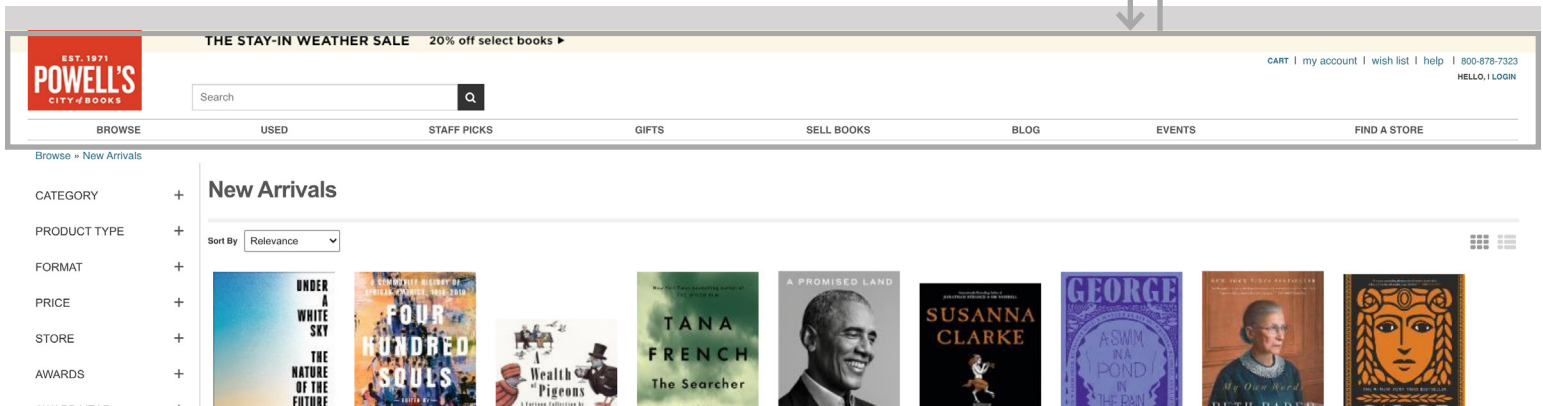
Background

Powells.com is a very simple ecommerce website with a very robust database driving it. Searching the site for specific rarities and books is incredibly satisfying. Not only gives you a quick run down of available titles, it also provides you with new and used offerings. However, the site layout hasn't changed much over the last couple of years and there are definite user experience improvements that could be made to enhance and engage the customer. A lot of these improvements are focused on redesigning the very top of the site, the main navigation and header area.

Problem

There are a couple inaccuracies with the main navigation. It jumps from a smaller mid page navigation on the front page to full page navigation when clicking a couple of the pages within the site. It isn't consistent on what pages are full page and which are not. The drop down menus also utilize very small font size and no metaphors are used other than the search icon above the navigation bar.

To create an account, you will need to click on login and there isn't any indication that this is where to create an account, this option is also very small in the upper right corner. Even though it is in an expected place in the nav, it doesn't use a metaphor for 'Login' nor 'Cart.' Once in the account area, the navigation opens up to include more options above just 'Login.' Why aren't these options available on every page including the home?

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I like some frames, borders, boxes. More defined areas, to make it easier to know what I'm looking at/to navigate. The same look on each page would help.
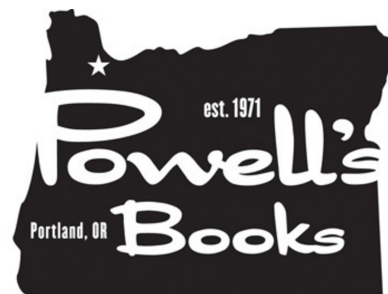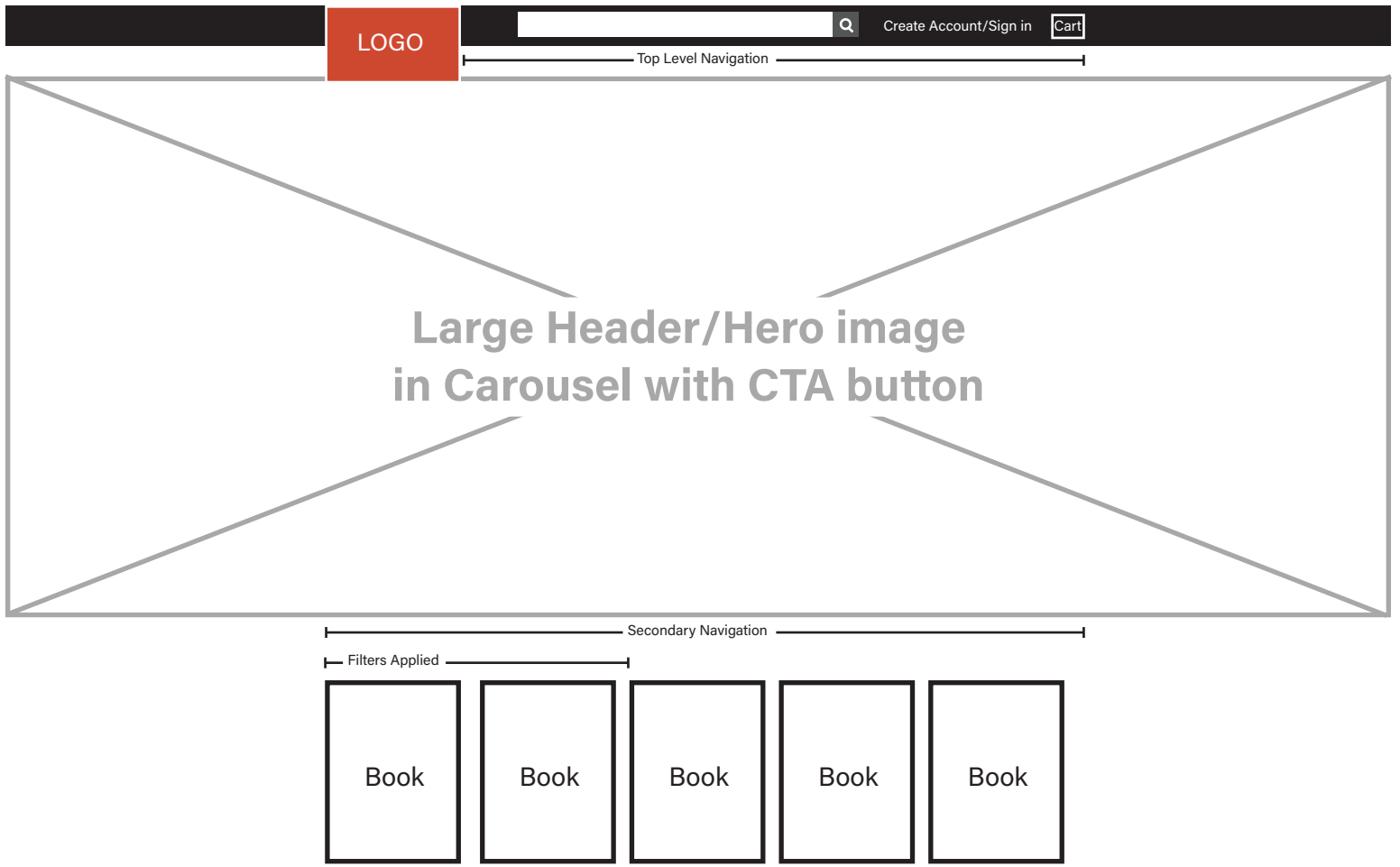
— Kristin F.
Survey Response

Why is this a problem?

The navigation of this site while it is consistent as far as what is included within the nav bar itself, it is considered "unstable" in its inconsistent size between pages. This can potentially be a problem with Google SEO when Core Web Vitals begin ranking sites based on speed, interactivity, and stability.

The amount of information provided to the user in the navigation can also be overwhelming because of how many options are available. Most of this is likely to be forgotten and the user may experience some frustration due to being overwhelmed.

The font size within the navigation is also so small that folks and potential customers who have eyesight problems will probably move onto another site to purchase their books and literary materials.

Create Account/Sign in | Cart

Top Level Navigation

**Large Header/Hero image
in Carousel with CTA button**

Secondary Navigation

Filters Applied

| Book | Book | Book | Book | Book |

Solution + Wireframe

Redesign the Navigation and strategically use metaphors to help users navigate the site better. This would also include making the navigation one consistent size and adjust the account sign in area.

Another change would be to also include additional metaphors to help with accessibility and understanding of the navigation. Increasing the font size throughout the navigation and combining information into logical categories to make it less confusing and overwhelming.

Here is a list of navigation and before the fold improvements that would increase engagement and help with overall layout.

1. Logo in a prominent location, most often best placed in the upper left.

2. Keep the Search bar next to the logo and between the sign in area and the logo.

3. Change the login area to include 'create account' alongside 'login.'

4. Limit Top Level Navigation to high level pages including: Books, Events, About, Locations, and Support. Keep at a consistent size and location throughout the site.

5. Utilize Mega Menus to allow for accessibility and larger font sizes.

6. Introduce new products within a highly visible revolving header with CTAs.

7. Add a Secondary Navigation and Filterable content.

Justification of the Solution

By redesigning the main navigation, adding a large animated header, and including a secondary nav, this will help lead the user to figure out what they want and where to get it quickly. Placing importance on how the user interacts with the site by understanding where they are struggling with the site, paying attention to upcoming Google's SEO and Core Web Vital changes, and staying on top of the user needs should be something they strive to do (especially during the ongoing pandemic.)

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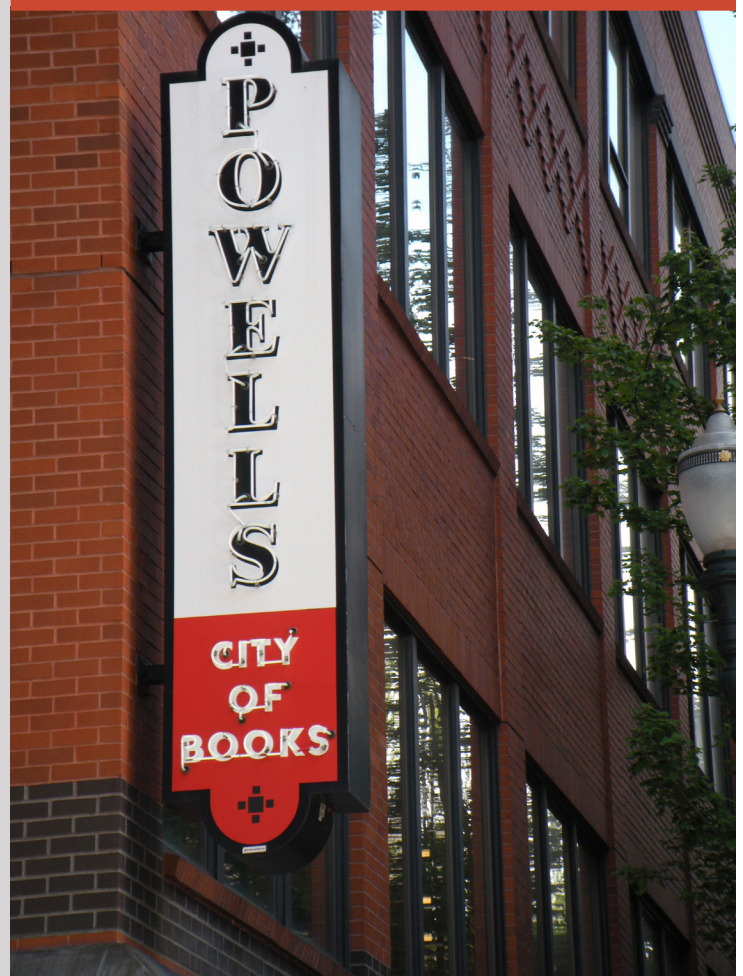
If using mobile I'd switch to PC to complete the order, and just use the phone to browse at most.
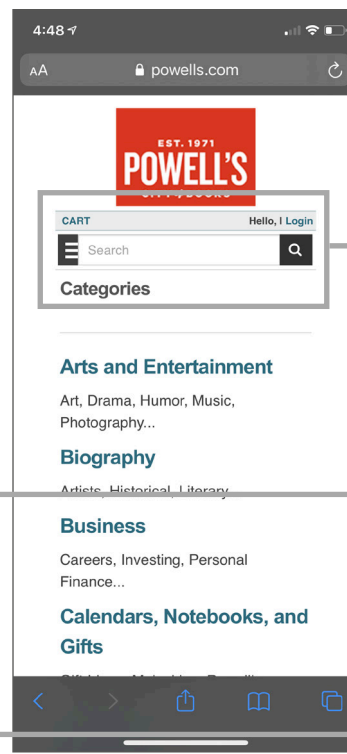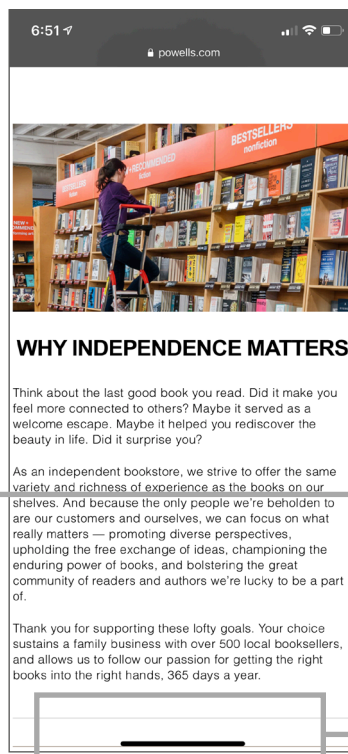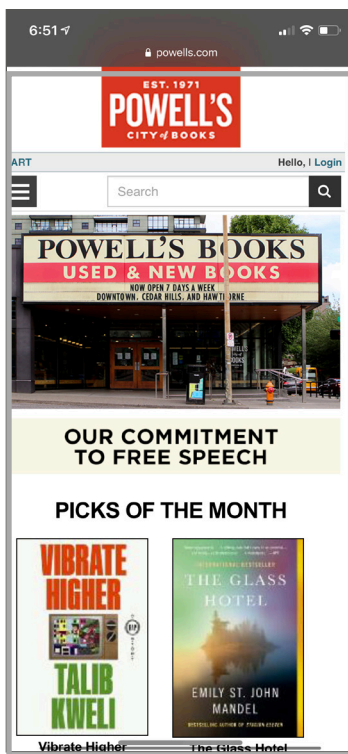
— Beth M.
Survey Response
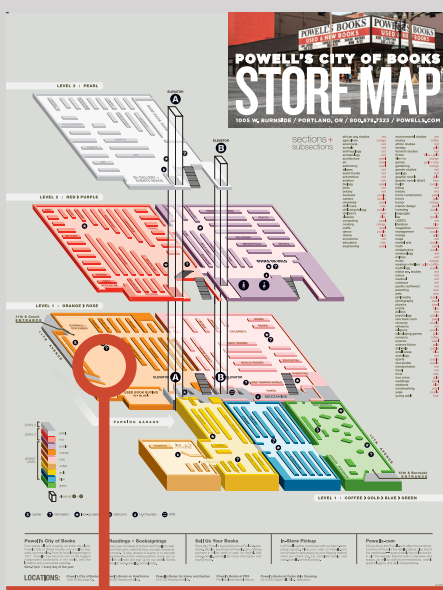
The Pearl Room - Problem 2: Mobile issues

Viewing the site via a mobile device, the site doesn't sit tightly within the viewport. It also floats around horizontally and is evident while scrolling the site. The footer isn't always visible via mobile devices on some pages and the hamburger menu is problematic on some pages.

Hamburger menu on mobile is overlapped by another page element.

Page doesn't fit within the mobile viewport.

Footer missing on mobile.

Background

Powells.com is technically responsive on most mobile devices and works rather well within most common viewports. However, there are definitely some improvements could be made to provide the user a better experience while on the go.

Problem

Viewing the site via a mobile device, the site doesn't sit tightly within the viewport. It can float around horizontally. While scrolling this is incredibly evident. The footer isn't always visible via mobile devices especially iPhone users. It does show up on a couple pages but, it isn't consistent which page it is shown. It is not shown on the home page upon initial observation.

Small text in the hamburger menus can also be an issue. When tapping on a menu item, it will take you to the page requested, however, if you just want to close the menu, there isn't an X to close it out. Once the page is loaded, the hamburger menu gets smaller, it sits next to the Search bar (looks like underneath it,) and the Search bar can be accidentally tapped because the entire page within the viewport becomes smaller. This does not occur when viewing the same page via desktop.

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Help & contact can usually be found at the bottom of websites, but I would have liked there to be an option at the top right corner on the mobile version too.
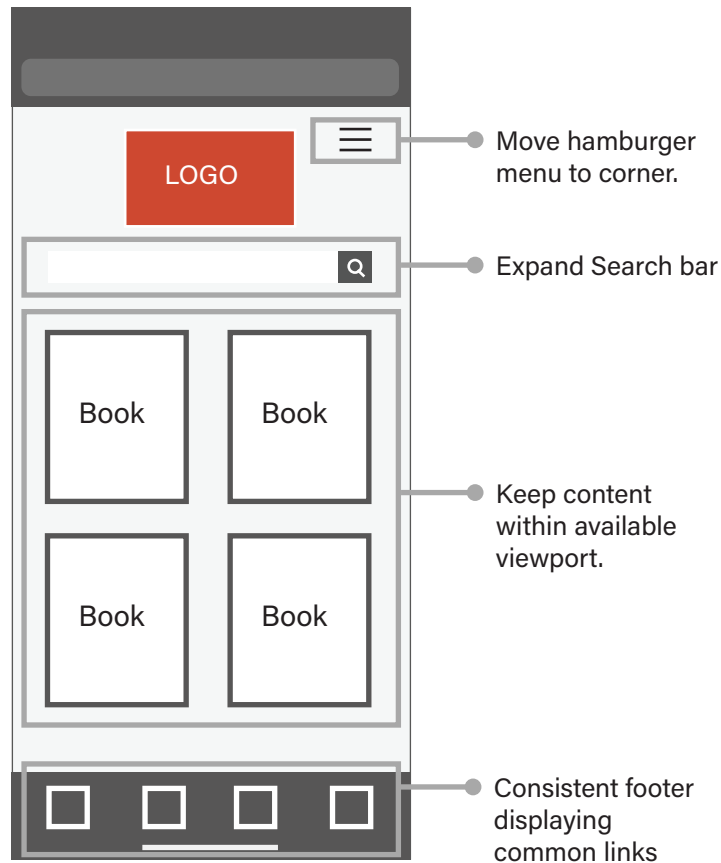
— Kristin F.
Survey Response

These unstable elements on a page can have a potentially frustrating experience for the customer/user and also be detrimental to the website's overall SEO ranking when Core Web Vitals is adapted by Google. Not having a way to reach the footer (for help and customer service) can make the page seem unfinished and the user left without a way to reach out for help. It's almost expected website behavior to have it available at the bottom of every page of a site to provide information about the company, offer help, and link to other resources (like social media.)

Move hamburger menu to corner.

Expand Search bar

Keep content within available viewport.

Consistent footer displaying common links

Solution + Wireframe

Ensure the media queries are set up for the viewports for the majority of mobile devices. Make sure page elements do not exceed the available space provided to each viewport. But also make sure pieces of the page fit well, including the navigation and page elements. Make the footer visible on all pages and double check they are visible especially for iPhone users. (iPhone users account for 45% of total smartphones used.)

Here is an additional list of mobile based improvements that would help with navigating the site on any mobile device.

1. Move hamburger menu to the corner. This will help with overlapping page elements.

2. Move cart and account related items into the mobile hamburger menu.

3. Arrange content so it does not slip out of the available viewport. This includes carousels, gallery items, text blocks, etc.

4. Display the footer on all pages for all mobile devices.

5. Utilize metaphors in strategic areas. Combine categories and use filtering.

Justification of the Solution

Changing how the mobile version of the website behaves would help users find what they want to purchase while on the go. The mobile site doesn't work well if a user is forced to find what they want and feel as though they need to use the desktop version to complete their shopping. By addressing how a user can interact with the website and keeping them en-gaged within the mobile site, we can eliminate multiple steps the user would have to make while enjoying the site and making a purchase.

"

If using mobile I'd switch to PC to complete the order, and just use the phone to browse at most. It was intuitive to add something to my cart, and I'd want to support local in these times when going to the store and browsing is so much harder.
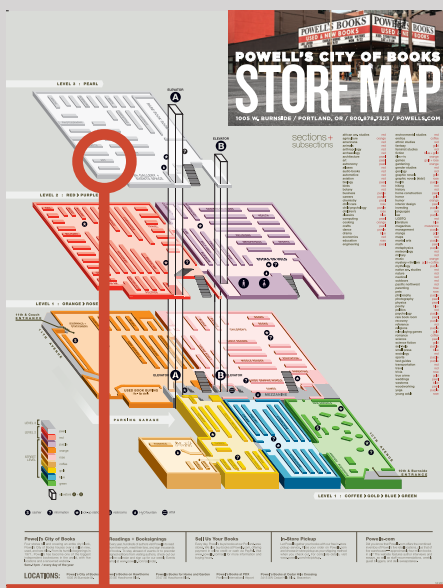
— Beth M.
Survey Response

The Orange Room - Problem 3: Dated Design

The site design overall has a dated and unfinished look that may turn away some users and potential customers. The long scroll of most pages is overwhelming without a sticky header and a back to top button isn't an option that is available.
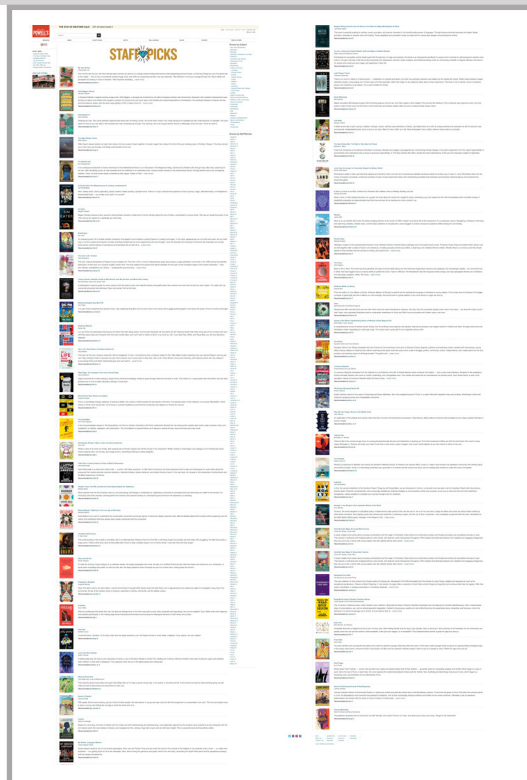
Incredibly long scroll without a way back to the top.

Overall design needs a newer look to make it look more updated and interactive. Employing a flat design would work to make the site look polished and professional.

Very small footer with very little amount of information and links.

Background

Powells.com as an online presence has been around since 1994, proudly exclaiming they arrived online months before Amazon. While Amazon certainly changed the way we shop online, powells.com focused more on the available content and how it is tied to the physical stores. This is not a bad thing however, they were able to truly enhance the in store experience in the years since, their website looks like an afterthought comparatively.

Problem

The site design overall has a dated and unfinished look that may turn away some users and potential customers. The long scroll (on both desktop and mobile) of most pages is over-whelming without a sticky header and a back to top button isn't available. Having too many options can be frustrating because of how much is offered to the user all at once.

The sidebars are also inconsistent page to page and the site doesn't seem to have a cohesive layout page to page. Social media links seem like an afterthought on most pages.

“

It looks very basic. Like geocities basic. You're the premiere book dealer in the Pacific Northwest? Seriously wow me with a really well designed site. Show me that you care about my visit, as opposed to the overly minimalist approach.

— John H.
Survey Response
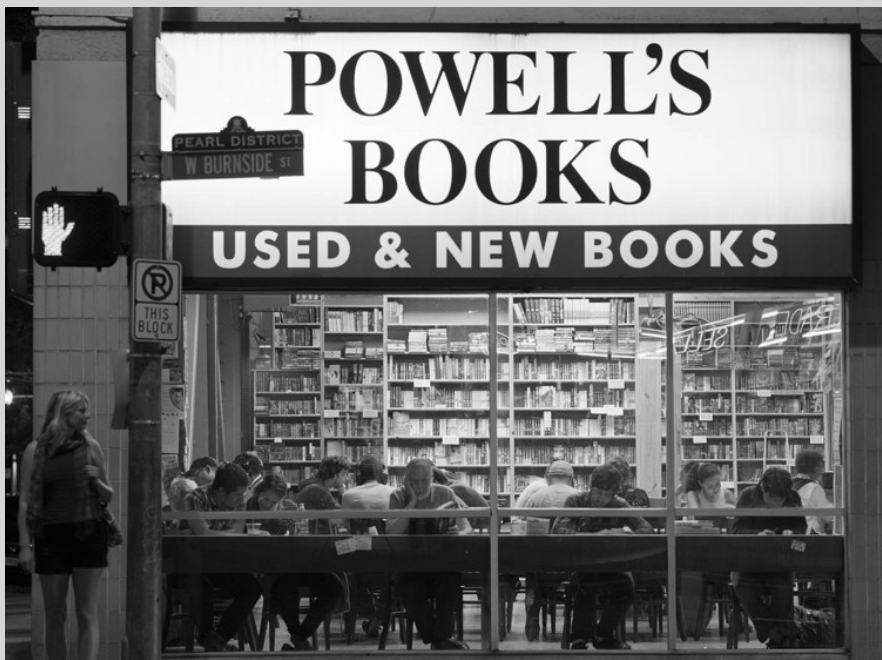
Why is this a problem?

The site looks stale and it is tough to see what is being consistently updated. The long scroll can be frustrating especially if someone is trying to reach the footer for customer service or getting help.

Being aware that a slick and overly designed website that is a detriment to the end user isn't always going to provide a great experience either, but making strategic and determined changes that will change how the user interacts with the site for the better should be the ultimate goal with updating the website.

LOGO

Create Account/Sign in   Cart

Top Level Navigation

Large Header/Hero image
in Carousel with CTA button

Secondary Navigation

Filters Applied

Book   Book   Book   Book   Book

Make a sticky header on both mobile and desktop.

Add social icons to navigation.

Enable a back to top button for the longer pages.
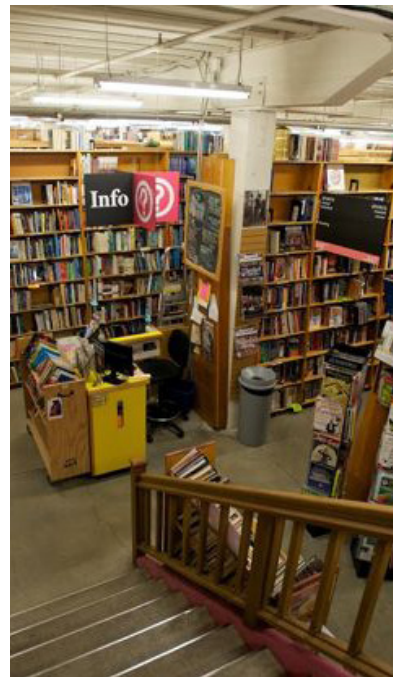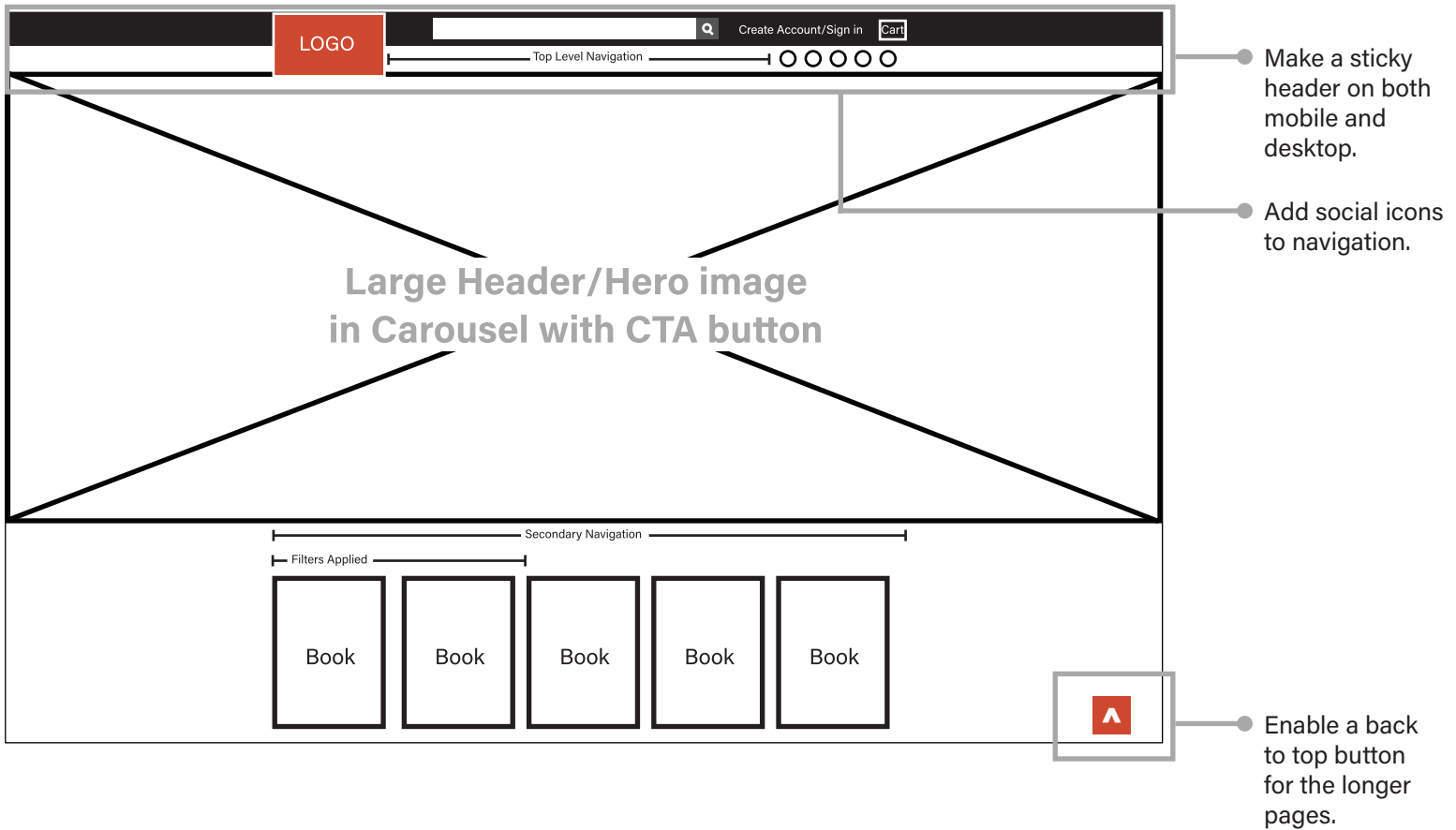
Solution + Wireframe

There are multiple ways to address the dated look of this website, along with updating the navigation and header areas, also updating the page layout can have positive outcomes.

Enable a sticky header so the user can Immediately access the navigation if they need to. Implement a back to top button to easily access the very top of the site. Use side-bars that scroll or follow the user while scroll-ing. Implement and consolidate data within categories within the page that employs gallery scrolls or moves onto another page.

Use the blog content as a way to encourage customers to return to the site by showcasing new blog posts. Use this space as a way to advertise Staff Picks and new releases.

1. **Employ a sticky header on both mobile and desktop.**

2. **Use a back to top button for easier access to top of the page when scrolling.**

3. **Add social links to the navigation and also keep them in the footer.**

4. **Use the left and right sidebars strategically and provide links that will help the user, not distract them.**

5. **Update and maintain the blog as a way to encourage users to return to the site.**

Justification of the Solution

Did you know powells.com had a perfume? (Yes it was mentioned before,) but would it have been advantageous to showcase it within a scrolling or animated header? It very well could have, especially if there were a limited amount available for sale. This could have driven users and customers to the site to purchase this item. How does this factor into the dated design of the site though? A well designed site could create a level of hype and promotion to encourage return visits that could also increase return visits and in turn increase sales.

Additionally, a sticky header and a return to top button would further allow the user to recover their position on the website instead of feeling as though they are constantly scrolling.

Addressing this and a couple other improvements could make this site appear as the premier online bookstore it deserves to be.

"

I'd say the things that bothered me the most were the long scroll on the mobile page, and inaccessible help, the cart not having an easily findable option to remove something from the cart, and the sidebar when creating an account or logging in. The rest is mostly personal preference. All the most important things work as they should and I wouldn't think twice about using this site to shop.

— Beth M.
Survey Response

POWELL'S BOOKS

Conclusion

Powells.com works very well as a simple ecommerce site. Users are able to search for and find rare books online and even order the smell of a bookstore in a perfume!

While the site does work well, there are a couple missed opportunities that could enhance the overall user experience and provide users an updated and engaging website to visit.

Addressing the navigation would help with encouraging users to visit and stay on the site. Updating the dated design and adjusting where the categories are could help the page layout could organize the information better on the page. The website on mobile could fit better within common viewports and all pages should include a footer.

Adjusting these for the end user could truly place powells.com in a legendary category much like the physical stores.

"

I feel like they've been working to improve the website. I remember ordering from them at the beginning of the pandemic and I felt like it was more difficult to navigate and just really old fashioned. It needs to be modernized a little bit.

— *Shannon D.*
Survey Responses