



# Upgrading the pre-booking experience

2020 case study by Winnie Abodo Alinga

*Busbud is a worldwide e-commerce marketplace for inter-city bus tickets based in Montreal, Canada. They aim at making bus travel easier for people visiting foreign countries to find the transportation they need, in their language and currency.*

## The problem

The number of **support tickets received by Busbud surged** as the company expanded to new markets because customers were facing more **issues with locating the bus station** for the departures in these newer markets. The previous experience relied on external sites to provide travellers with this info, such as Google Maps or the station's company's websites. But with language barriers even on the web, the lack of info available on Busbud's website created real-life hassles during travel for its customers.

## The solution

In countries where station information may not be as readily available on the web, Busbud saw an opportunity to become a more centralized information center and truly put the "buddy" in Busbud by **providing customers with actionable information that would inform their entire journey, prior to them booking a bus ticket.**

## My role

From Fall 2019 to Early Spring 2020, I lead the redesign efforts for the pre-travel experience on desktop and mobile web formats. My responsibilities involved **strategic planning**, aligning stakeholders on a unified goal, user research, concept ideation and visual design, incorporating learnings from user tests and quality assurance. I also **coordinated efforts with engineers and paid marketing specialists** to plan and execute the rollout strategy and development cycles related to the project.

## Goals & expectations

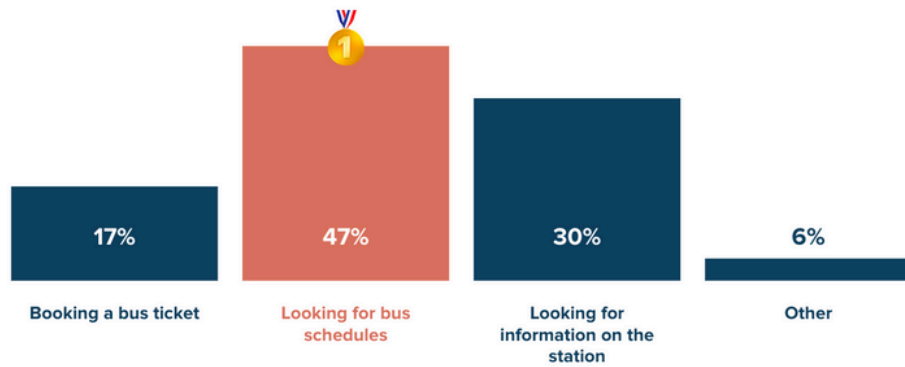
- Increased engagement with the content on the page
- Increased bookings that stick (less cancellations)
- Decrease of in-travel support tickets and company resources

## The design process

As the 3rd most visited landing page type on the platform, it was surprising to find that **bus station-specific pages were converting users the least** and had **very low user engagement**.

### Research

Customers were **primarily looking for bus schedules** and **information about the station itself**. These expectations our customers had were not fulfilled by the current experience and created confusion with the actual purpose of the page.



*Around 4k customers answered a 3-week-long intent survey that uncovered their expectations of the content they were hoping to find landing on this page.*

### **Understanding the problem**

This gap in expectations was most likely caused by missing information specifically on the **departures and arrivals**, as well as **physical location and details** such as the nature of the place (is it a bus stop or a building?), the address, access maps or opening hours and amenities.



### Voyager en bus au départ de Port Authority, New York City

| Trajet                           | Prochain départ | Fréquence       | Compagnie de bus                      | Horaires et tarifs                |
|----------------------------------|-----------------|-----------------|---------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| De New York City à Washington    | 20h05           | 31 départs/jour | Greyhound, BestBus, FlixBus           | <a href="#">Voir les horaires</a> |
| De New York City à Boston        | 18h40           | 14 départs/jour | Greyhound, Go Buses, BoltBus          | <a href="#">Voir les horaires</a> |
| De New York City à Philadelphie  | 0h05            | 13 départs/jour | Greyhound, Peter Pan, BoltBus         | <a href="#">Voir les horaires</a> |
| De New York City à Buffalo       | 18h45           | 5 départs/jour  | Greyhound, New York Trailways, OurBus | <a href="#">Voir les horaires</a> |
| De New York City à Atlantic City | 11h30 *         | 3 départs/jour  | Greyhound                             | <a href="#">Voir les horaires</a> |

\* Ce départ est programmé pour demain  
Profitez d'une expérience de voyage sans accroc en partant de New York City à bord de l'un des bus de nos partenaires de confiance. Pour un trajet au départ de New York City Port Authority, vous pouvez voyager avec Greyhound, Peter Pan, FlixBus, Go Buses, CoachRun. Avec 125 départs quotidiens à partir de Port Authority, vous trouverez facilement le trajet qui correspond le mieux à votre programme et votre budget.  
Vous avez un budget serré ou recherchez simplement la meilleure affaire? Vous trouverez des billets de bus pour ce jour à partir de 1 \$, pour des trajets au départ de New York City Port Authority.

*Original layout of the bus station landing page*

Furthermore, only a few call-to-action buttons were present. The two that were, did not answer users' intent and caused dissatisfaction with the results that followed.



*The search engine at the time was very open-ended and not as performant as it became in the last few years. It was prone to creating irrelevant search results or empty results because it would not acknowledge the actual stations yet.*

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*“See schedules” buttons in the calendar open a list of schedules for different bus operators that often did not present the departure time users could see in that table.*

This confusing experience pre-travel translated itself into real-life hassle once the customers were travelling abroad. Customers were less likely to:

1. Properly plan out their trip itinerary
2. Confidently purchase a bus ticket
3. Reduce anxiety and hassle once they start their travels

### Ideation

I took inspiration from departure boards existing in bus stations or airports. These boards give a quick portrait of the activity in one given place. It was natural to explore this avenue as familiarity plays a role in user engagement.

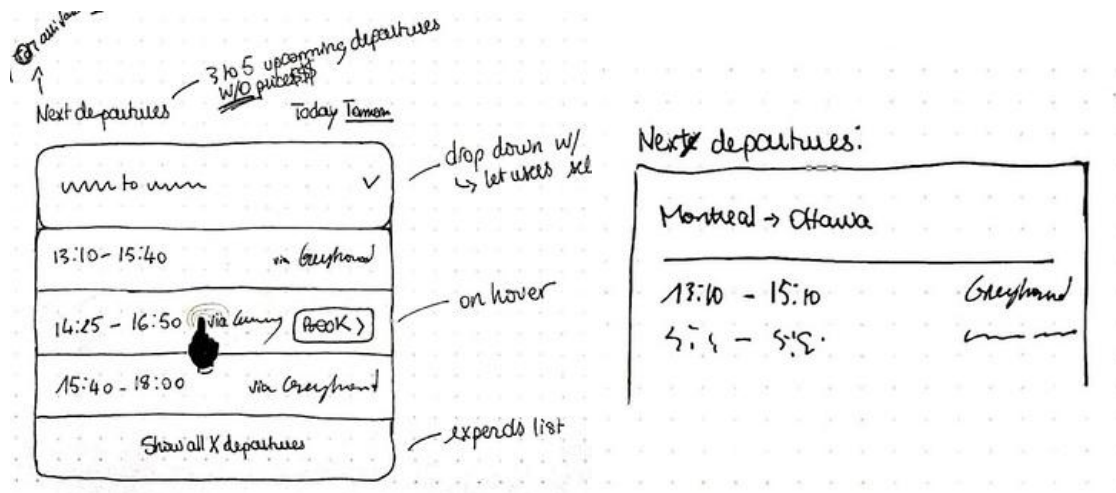


*An example of a departure board in Montreal's Gare d'autocars, representing gates and stops.*

In Busbud's context, some information was not consistently available across all locations, stations and bus operators via their APIs. Gates and arrival times for example were subject to change while access to real-time data about them was not reliable.

I decided to focus the new schedule design around the key elements common to every operator on the platform and **make it actionable**:

- Date of departure
- Time of departure
- Origin/Destination city
- Bus Operator/Company
- Drop-off point or station
- Duration of trip

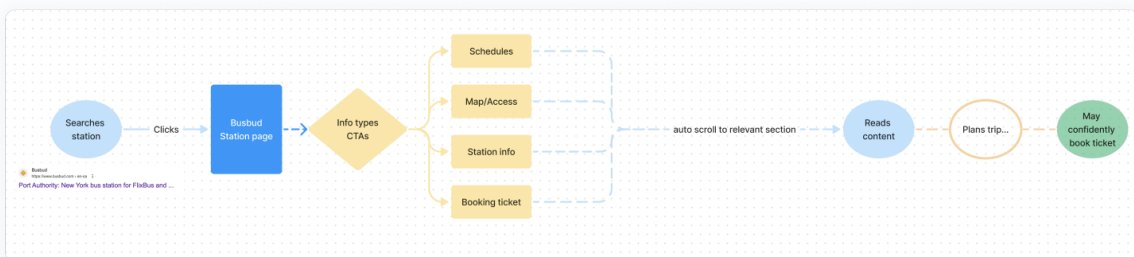


Exploration of possible interactions on the schedule component to be developed.  
 Nested departure times per route (city A to city B) in a 12-hour window.

To increase the chances of success of the interactions users would make on the page, I reimagined the content hierarchy and flow to support users' journeys.

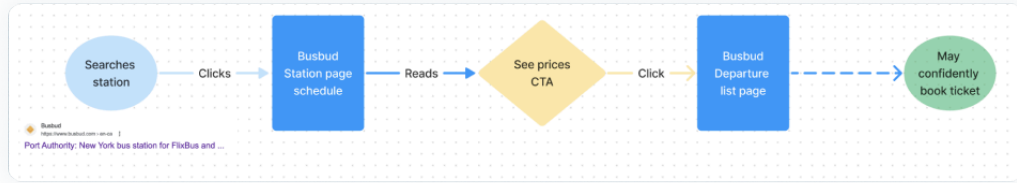
- **Use case #1**

*"I would like to get information on NYC's Port Authority station"*



- **Use case #2**

*"I would like to purchase a ticket from Port Authority to Washington D.C for this evening."*

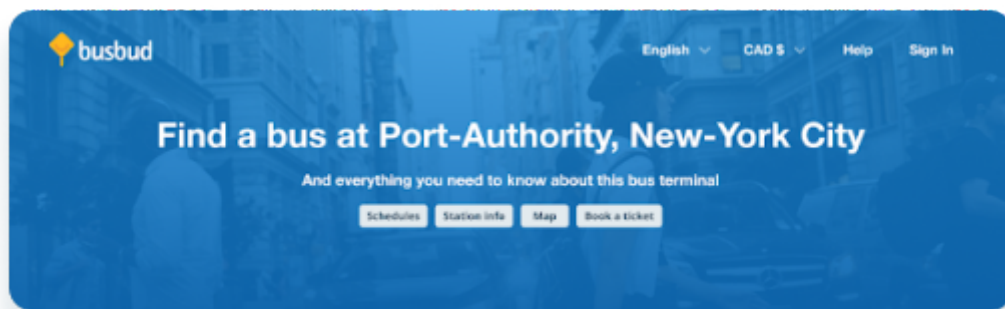


## Design

Bringing these new paths to life included making significant updates to the current experience. I was working on projects at the time, and took into account their future impact once implemented.

- **Hypothesis #1 – Tailored messaging to address user’s expectations**

For the page to be aligned with user’s queries, and increase the visibility of their content, new keywords placed strategically at the top of the page could appeal more to users looking for this info, but also be picked up by SEO bots pushing these pages up on Google.



*“Find a bus at [station], [city] and everything you need to know about this bus terminal  
(Schedules, Station info, Map, Book a ticket)”*










- **Hypothesis #2 – Real-time schedule**

Surfacing the data we already have in a real-time schedule that could also be displayed on Google’s results page, boosting our visibility and satisfying SEO.



This component already existed on another page type, but needed to be adapted to the station-specific context.

### Scheduled bus departures from Port Authority, New York City

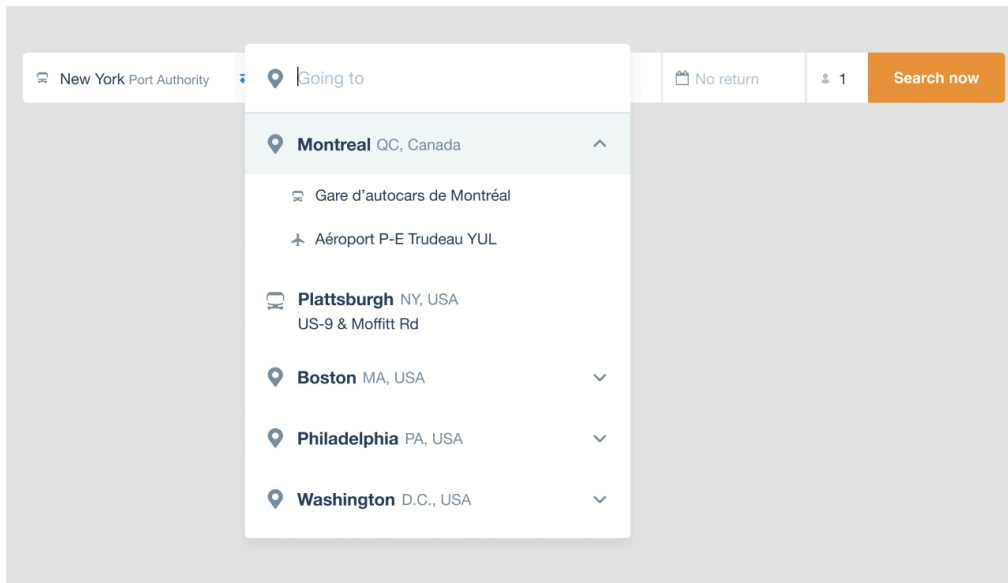
| Today                      | Tomorrow | Fri. 27                    | Sat. 29 | Sun. 29  | Mon. 30   | Tue. 31 |
|----------------------------|----------|----------------------------|---------|----------|---|---------|
| Top routes                 | Next     | Drop-off location          |         | Duration | Operator  |         |
| New York → Washington D.C. | 17:00    | Chinatown                  |         | 4h30     |    | >       |
| New York → Boston          | 17:00    | BOS Airport                |         | 4h30     |    | >       |
| New York → Philadelphia    | 19:00    | Bus Station                |         | 4h20     |    | >       |
| New York → Baltimore       | 16:10    | Station Bus Terminal       |         | 1h30     | <a href="#">See prices</a>  | >       |
| New York → Toronto         | 21:15    | Toronto Coach Terminal     |         | 5h55     |    | >       |
| New York → Atlantic City   | 21:15    | Bus Terminal               |         | 5h55     |    | >       |
| New York → Buffalo         | 21:15    | Bus Station                |         | 5h55     |    | >       |
| New York → Montreal        | 21:15    | Gare d'autocars            |         | 5h55     |    | >       |
| New York → Miami           | 21:15    | MIA Airport Terminal       |         | 5h55     |    | >       |
| New York → Niagara Falls   | 21:15    | Niagara Falls Bus Terminal |         | 5h55     |  | >       |

*Top 10 destinations, 7-day visibility window, contextual call-to-action to only target departures users are actively interacting with.*

Making it visible a few steps further posed performance issues, but as this system could potentially be scaled to other landing pages, this was an engineering cost the team invested in at the time.

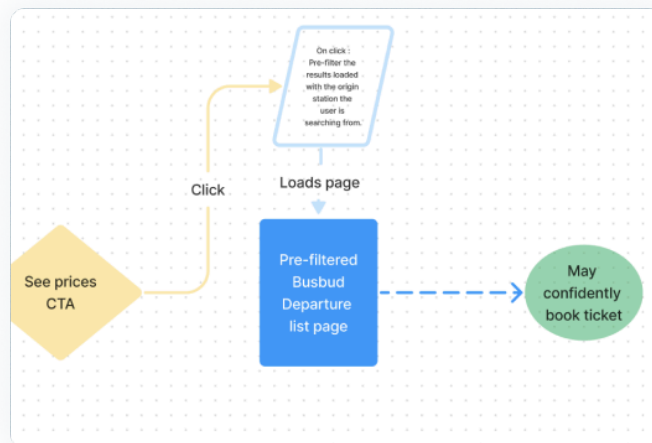
- **Hypothesis #3 - Location-based search engine experience.**

Searching by location would provide users with a smarter pairing of station-to-station routes, based on the most likely destinations from the origin point.



*"Search by location" initially planned design*

Due to the high engineering cost of implementing this solution in the short term, I decided to validate my hypothesis by pre-setting a station on any ticket search from a given station page, so that they remain relevant to users ready to make a purchase.



*New flow with automatic pre-filter that narrows down simplifies the booking process*

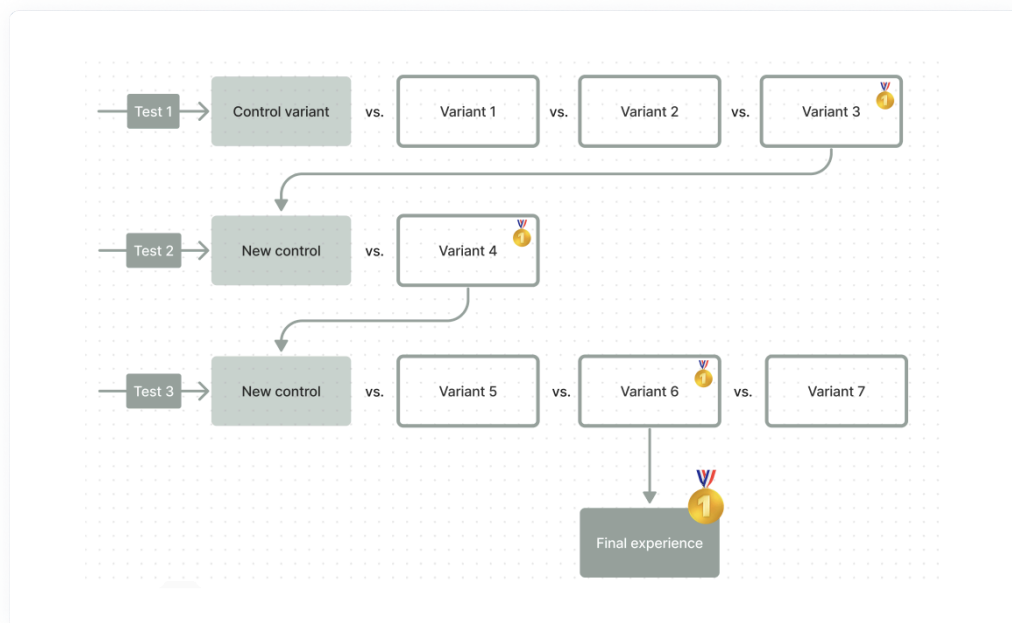
I also conceived two more hypotheses that would wrap up the page experience and be a part of the upcoming rebranding of the website and design system creation. The first one involved deprioritizing the open search box on the page layout to boost focus on the

primary content (schedules and info). The second one was a visual redesign of the station info section.

## Feedback

Due to the high earning potential of this project, monitoring engagement and conversion was a key contributing factor in the design process. I prepared the experimentation framework that would guide my decision making by validating each hypothesis with a dual track agile implementation method, in order to :

- Ensure the changes tested had a positive impact on company metrics
- Build the next design experiment upon the learnings from the previous one
- Compound the benefits of the new experience over time
- Scale the learnings from the tests to other areas of the platform

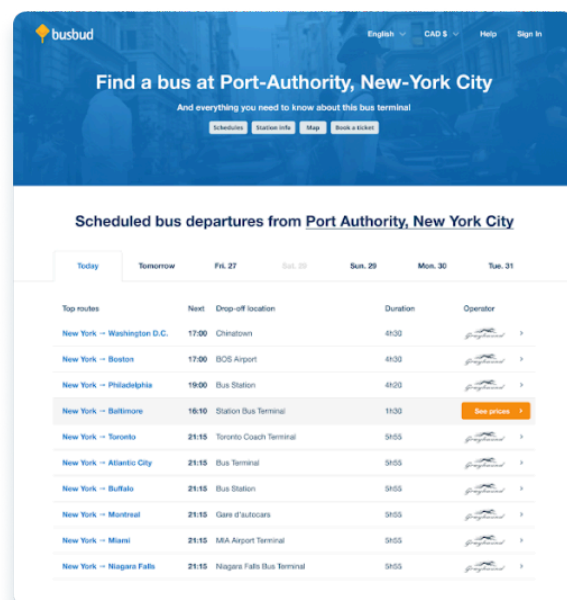
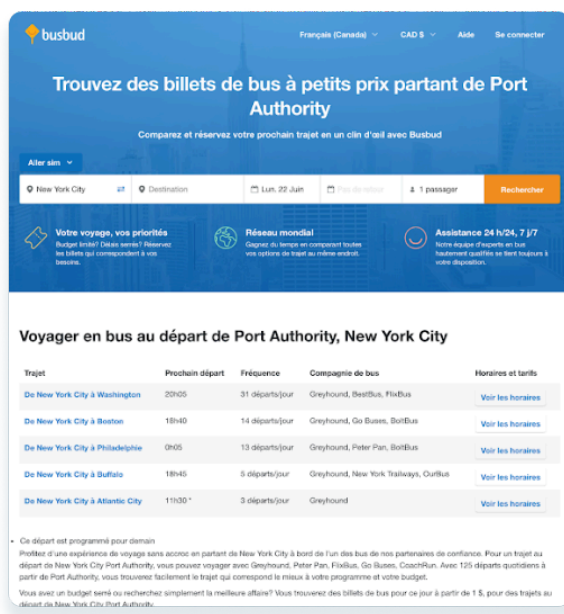


*Each winning variant as a result of the A/B testing experiments would serve as the new control for the following experiment. All experiments test different aspects of the designed solution.*

By March 2020, the engineering team had successfully implemented two of these experiments. I was actively working on the third one when all activities were halted, due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

## Final design

The final design brought some much-needed interactivity into the experience, making an otherwise static content page come alive in the interest of the customers.



*"Before" on the left, "After" on the right.*

The company may or may not have implemented the presented strategy to its full extent after I departed from the team. They went through a global rebranding in 2021 and some of my design decisions still live on the current experience. [See the live page for Port Authority, NYC on Busbud.com](#)

## Outcomes

Even though the COVID-19 pandemic heavily impacted the travel industry and sales of Busbud, we saw very encouraging shifts in the company metrics as the project and validation were happening.

- Increased visibility opportunity on Google's SERP (+ CTR)
- Better qualified users down the sales funnel (+ CR~6% on page)
- Reduced bounce rate on the page (by ~3%)
- Reduced support ticket requests for in-travel users
- Brand reinforcement as a trustable travel buddy
- Reusable component and data infrastructure
- Valuable validated and tested learnings for future projects



### CREDITS

Product Design Lead: Winnie Abodo Alinga

SEO Manager: Dimitri Tacita

Digital Marketing Manager : Charbel Farrah

Engineering Lead: Alexander Pustomelnyk

*All information in this case study is my own and does not necessarily reflect the views of Busbud.*