

# Critiquing IA

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## Introduction

The purpose of this document is to analyze and critique the organization schemes and structures of the following two websites:

- [steepster.com](http://steepster.com)
- [ratetea.com](http://ratetea.com)

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**Editor's note:** Text *italicized and highlighted in gray* are terms found in chapters 6-8 of "Information Architecture For the Web and Beyond."

# steepster.com

- Identifying Organization Schemes — <http://steepster.com/teas>

**1**

**2**

**3**

**4**

Focusing specifically on the “Teas” — also labeled “Best Teas” — section of [steepster.com](http://steepster.com), we can identify several organization schemes at work for the various teas found on the website.

### Organization schemes:

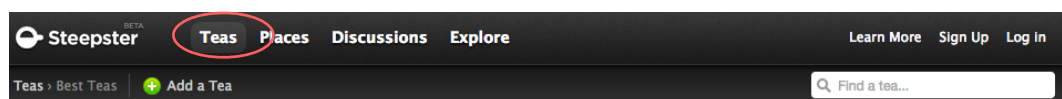
- 1 The *global navigation* is made up of separate organization schemes:

- The upper right section of the global navigation which displays labels “Learn More,” “Sign Up” and “Log In” comprise a *task-oriented* organization scheme which asks for specific customer — user — interaction. It also offers a *search system*.
  - “Teas,” “Place,” “Discussion” and “Explore” are a mix of *topical* and *task-oriented* organization schemes. This is a *hybrid organization scheme* — “Place,” “Teas” and “Discussion” are *topical* menu items while “Explore” is a *task-oriented* menu item.
  - There also is a separate *local navigation* item which is found within in the *global navigation* on the “Teas” page — “Add a Tea” is a menu label which allows users to add content to the website. This is another *task-oriented* scheme.
- 2 The *local navigation* on the “Teas” page offers four different organization schemes for users to filter the types of teas found on the website:
1. An *alphabetical scheme*, which offers users the option to sort the teas by brand. “Tea Name” represents another *alphabetical scheme* at work which allows users to sort each tea by its name, starting with numeric names.
  2. There is use of *social classification* of the teas, which allows users to sort the teas based on other users’ input, — “Highest Rated” and “Most Popular.”
  3. A *chronological scheme* allows users to view “Newly Added” teas in the order by the date the content was added to the site.
  4. The “Tea Type” *topical organization* scheme allows users to filter teas based on specific, pre-determined types — topics.
- 3 This *navigation system* is a type of *embedded navigation* which offers users another way to navigate through the pages of tea. This is less of an organization scheme, but it is a tool used in the organization schemes listed above which allows users to browse.
- 4 The footer displays more *global navigation* which includes another *hybrid organization scheme* comprised of a mix of *topical* and *task-oriented* menu items.

- **Strengths and weaknesses of identified organization schemes**  
— <http://steepster.com/teas>

### Strengths

- The *global navigation* offers users a clear way to access the Teas page and informs the user that he or she is in that *top-level* section of the website by highlighting the selected label while the user is on that page, as depicted in the following screenshot:

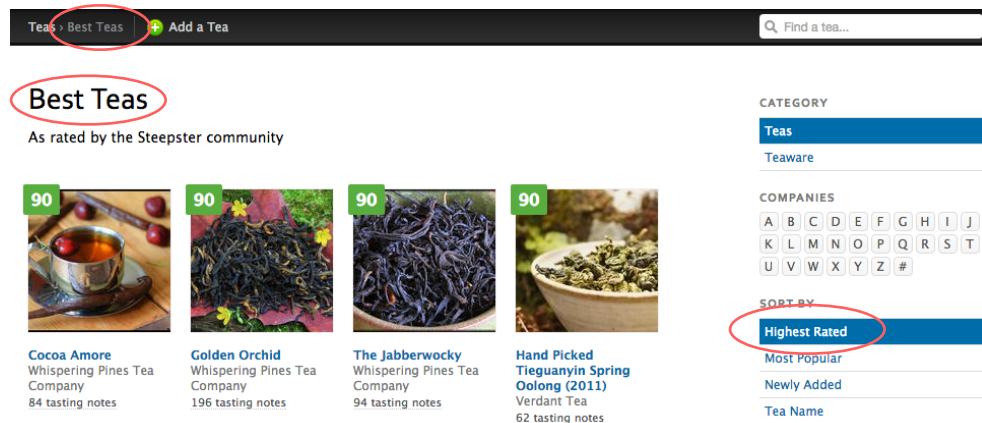


- The *search system* is in a prominent spot in the *global navigation*, making it easy for users to search for a specific item — “Find a tea ... .”

- There is an ample amount of different organization schemes offered for users to filter through the types of tea on this website. Having many different ways for content to be sorted can help users find items.
- There are clear labels on the site which ask users to perform tasks such as “Sign Up,” “Log In” and “Add a Tea.” This type of design can lead to opportunities for *personalized* and *customized* navigation systems and *audience-specific organization schemes*.

**Weaknesses**

- There is some confusion of the Teas page labeling — it’s referred to as both “Teas” and “Best Teas” section. Which is it? Upon further review, the “Best Teas” label in the top local navigation is the equivalent of the “Highest Rated” label in the right side local navigation. This labeling problem exists for all of the organization scheme labels. These labels need to match. This issue is pointed out in the following screenshot:



- There are too many organization schemes available to users. Is it really necessary to have four different organization schemes, plus a search system, for one type of content — tea? This could be overwhelming for users who won’t know where to begin their search for tea. What should they be using? The design team needs to research which scheme is best and decide which to cut and which to keep.
- The embedded navigation which allows users to browse through each filtered list of content — chronologically or alphabetically — has 2,253 pages. That’s way too many pages. No one will ever scroll through that many pages. It’s both intimidating to the user and unrealistic. It would be better to cap this at some point.

[ratetea.com](http://ratetea.com)

• Identifying Organization Schemes — [ratetea.com](http://ratetea.com)

The screenshot shows the homepage of RateTea.com with the following numbered callouts:

- 1:** The top navigation bar with links for Styles, Brands, Regions, People, Places, Articles, News, Contact, and About.
- 2:** The 'Sign Up To Rate Teas' form on the right side of the page.
- 3:** The 'Most Often-Rated Teas — Highest Rated Teas' section.
- 4:** The 'Recent Reviews - browse' section listing user reviews.
- 5:** The 'New & Recently Updated Articles' section.
- 6:** The 'Styles, Types, & Varieties of Tea' section.
- 7:** The 'Site News & Updates' section.
- 8:** The 'Tea Producing Countries and Regions' section.
- 9:** The footer navigation and social media links.

Organization schemes:

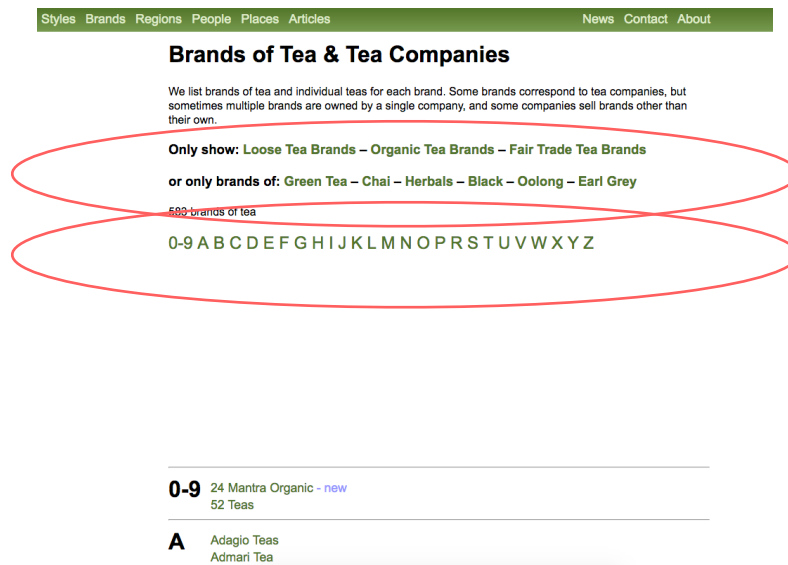
- 1 The *global navigation* offers three different organization schemes:
  1. The top-level navigation labels such as “Styles,” “Regions,” “News” make up a *topical organization scheme* which allows users to sort tea by a specific topic or subject on the website.
  2. “Sign Up” and “Log In” comprise a *task-oriented organization scheme* which asks for specific customer — user — interaction.
  3. It also offers a *search system*, which allows the user to search and browse by a specific term he or she enters into the search box.
- 2 This *embedded navigation* allows users to perform specific tasks in a *task-oriented scheme*.
- 3 Two navigation labels — “Most Often-Rated Teas” and “Highest Rated Teas” — allow users to do just that. These are examples of *social classification* which is the use of user-generated content/data to create an organization structure.
- 4 The “Recent Reviews” *local navigation* is another use of *social classification*, which allows users to view, and browse, a *chronological organization scheme* of tea reviews by other users.

- 5 The "New & Recently Updated Articles" *local navigation* module offers users the three most recently updated tea articles on the website. This is a *chronological organization scheme*.
- 6 The "Styles, Types, & Varieties of Tea" *local navigation* module offers users the three most recently updated tea pages on the website. This is another *chronological organization scheme*.
- 7 "Site News & Updates" is another *local navigation* module, but it's unclear what it's displaying. The items are displayed in chronological order, however, meaning this is another *chronological organization scheme*.
- 8 The "Tea Producing Countries and Regions" *local navigation* module offers users the three most recently updated tea regions and/or countries on the website. This is a *chronological organization scheme*.
- 9 The *fat footer* offers a *site map* of what the editor or designer believes are the most important pages on the site. These labels are displayed in a *topical organization scheme*.

- Strengths and weaknesses of identified organization schemes — [ratetea.com](http://ratetea.com)

**Strengths**

- Overall, [ratetea.com](http://ratetea.com) offers users several different organization schemes which allow them options for seeking content. There also is an emphasis on search. This is a positive start.
- The "Styles," "Brands," "Regions," "People," "Places" and "Articles" labels in the *global navigation* all offer specific organization schemes. For example, the "Brands" page offers a *topical organization scheme* and a *chronological scheme* for brands of tea — take a look:



- There are specific task-oriented labels in at least two different organization schemes on the homepage — the *global navigation's* “Sign Up” and “Log In” section — this can lead to *audience-specific schemes* after learning about users — and the *local navigation* toward the top of the page with three specific task labels:



**RateTea** is a website where anyone can rate and review teas. We have a wealth of carefully-researched information about tea, including an extensive database of teas, classified by brand, style, and region of production.

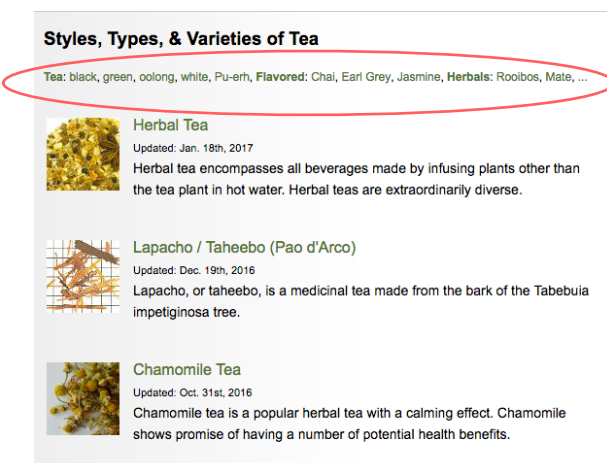
8191 teas, 4658 ratings and reviews, 583 brands, 167 styles of tea.

**Most Often-Rated Teas — Highest Rated Teas**

- The site makes use of user-generated content and data by turning it into *social classifications* which can be turned into *personalized* and *customized* navigation systems. The “most often-rated” and “highest rated” labels circled in the previous screenshot are examples of this.
- The “Recent Reviews” is another good use of user-generated content. This enables users to help keep the homepage content updated.

**Weaknesses**

- The *global navigation* does not indicated the labels are all links to different organization schemes. It would be useful for these to be drop-downs.
- All of the *local navigation* modules named above have similar flaws — tags and categories are found at the top of the lists without any organization to them — here’s one example:



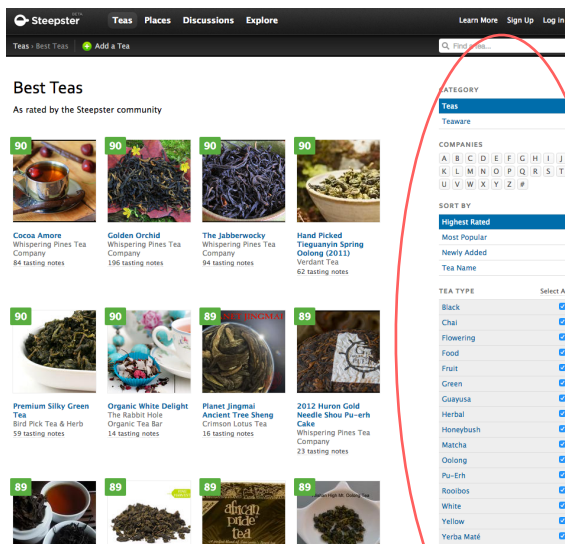


Are those in any specific order? Why are those the tags which are being populated to that position? How can these be ordered in way that makes sense and is useful to the user? These questions need to be answered to better the information architecture of the site.

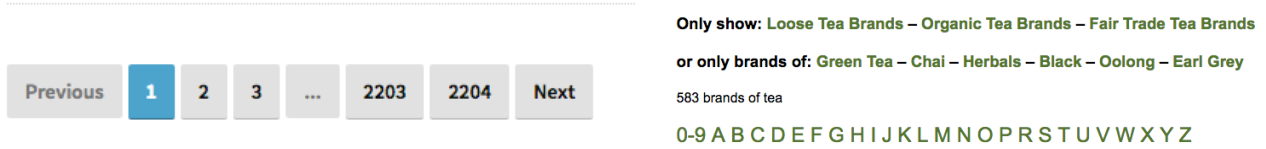
- There is, as with [steepster.com](http://steepster.com), an over-abundance of organization schemes. The design team needs to know, based on research, which schemes are the most effective and which to keep and which to cut.

## Comparing the two websites

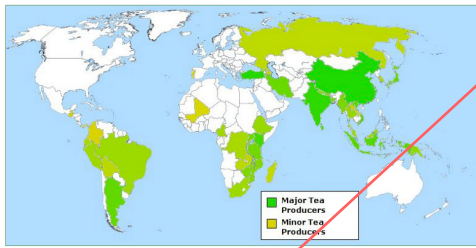
- **SHARED STRENGTH:** Both [steepster.com](http://steepster.com) and [ratetea.com](http://ratetea.com) offer several different organization schemes for tea types, news, brands (companies), places, ratings, reviews and popularity (based on user-generated content and data). This is the primary function of both websites.
- **SHARED STRENGTH:** Both websites also offer options for customized and personalized navigation once a user is logged in.
- **SHARED STRENGTH:** Both websites offer clear search systems.
- **SHARED STRENGTH:** Both websites offer task-oriented organization systems.
- **SHARED WEAKNESS:** Both websites offer an overwhelming variety of organization schemes that are poorly displayed or built — these examples show how many organization schemes are crammed on each websites:



- **SHARED WEAKNESS:** These websites are struggling to organize a high volume of content, which is illustrated by navigation guides with enormous numbers:



- [ratetea.com](http://ratetea.com) does a better job overall of organizing its content. The [ratetea.com/region](http://ratetea.com/region) page is one example:



Notice the *alphabetical scheme* found below the map on the region page. This allows users to zero in on a region he or she is looking for.

This type of organization can be found on the site’s “Brands” page and “Places” page.

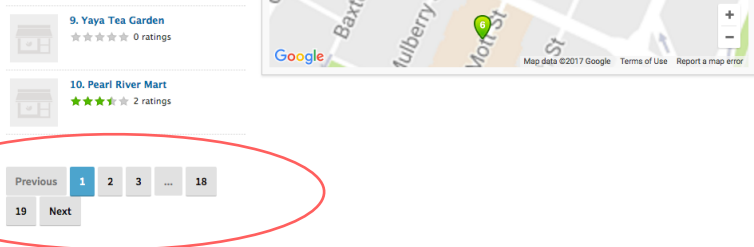
**Browse All Countries Producing Tea and Herbs for Herbal Teas**

You can also read about blends of teas from different regions, and teas of unknown origin.

A B C E F G I J K M N P R S T U V Z

- A** Albania  
Argentina  
Australia
- B** Bangladesh  
Bolivia  
Brazil  
Burkina Faso  
Burma (Myanmar)
- C** Chile  
China  
Colombia

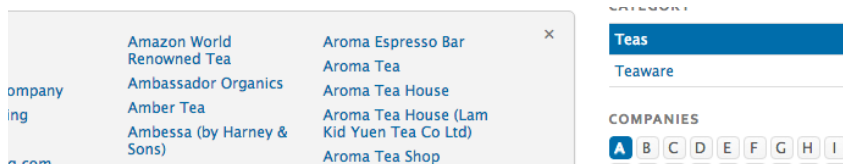
[steepster.com](http://steepster.com) lacks this type of organization. User are left to browse through many, many pages of content to get to the item he or she wants — such as this on the “Places” page:



It’s obvious this method is inferior to the *alphabetical schemes* found on [ratetea.com](http://ratetea.com).

[steepster.com](http://steepster.com) needs to consider creating *alphabetical schemes* for many of its content categories such as “Highest Rated,” “Most Popular” and the tea types found listed on the tea page. There may even be a need to cut many of the filtered results. A good site audit and content inventory is needed to determine where to start.

[steepster.com](http://steepster.com) does offer an *alphabetical scheme* for “Companies” — take a look:



This pop-up feature may not be the best interaction for the user, but it at least offers a coherent and clear *alphabetical scheme* for the companies category.

## Conclusion

These are two websites in need of identities. While both are striving to be a community of tea lovers and sellers, neither is making that goal clear. Both website design teams and editors need to learn about their users more. The excessive and half-built organization schemes on these websites scream “we don’t know our users, and we don’t know what they want.”

That means user research is the next step. But first, both websites need to identify specific **user research goals**. I suggest the following:

- Understand who the users are
- Understand what users come to the website for
- Learn where users go once they are on the site
- Learn where users spend the majority of their time on the site
- Understand where users are finding problems on the website
- Understand users’ overall view and opinion of the website

Once this knowledge is gained, specific questions can be answered such as: Are we offering the service we want to offer or are we way off the mark?