

The product that we evaluated, Cooking Special, is meant to enable users to find special deals on cooking ingredients at local stores. It also seemed to have cookbook-like elements, such as listing recipes containing an ingredient when the ingredient is searched for. Sometimes these two major goals of the product seemed to be too intertwined and became confusing, though. For instance, a user who searches for an ingredient may not be interested in seeing recipes that contain it, but instead just in which stores sell it at the cheapest price. The group may want to think about ways to separate these aspects of their product so that users can find the information they are interested in with less confusion. Many of the features of the product that were demonstrated seemed very helpful and intuitive - for instance, the ability to search the site before logging in and then being prompted to log in only when it was necessary appeared to be an excellent idea for keeping users engaged. However, there were a few specific decisions about the UI that seemed questionable.

One of these decisions was the layout of the main page of the site - the majority of the page was left blank, with two tabs and a search bar at the top, and a sidebar that allows the user to log in on the right. Since an action must be taken by the user before meaningful information can be displayed, the empty space on each tab might be used for providing instructions to the user, or for explaining features of the site. Another aspect of the UI that could probably be improved on was that there were several points at which terminology was presented to the user but not explained. An example of this is in the account creation process, when the user is asked to provide a "Captcha" and to list some "Specials". When creating an account for the first time, a user is not likely to know what to put in these fields, and so it would be helpful to include a short description. The function of the Specials sidebar is also somewhat confusing - it seems to be meant to keep track of a user's favorite ingredients, and the group did allow users to add Specials at will, but it would be helpful if users could click on a Special in their list to search for it.

One of the tasks given to us by the Cooking Special team was to find a recipe for a meal, without having any specific requirements other than eating inexpensively. This exposed several large areas of functionality that their prototype didn't cover. First of all, there was no support for browsing through recipes. Since I wasn't looking for a recipe with a specific ingredient or theme, I was forced to come up with arbitrary suggestions so I would have something to put in the search box.

Once I had performed a search, I was presented with a list of matching recipes. These were sorted by how many specials each had, but since the search on the "Recipes" tab didn't have a zip code, the system didn't know how close the specials were to me, so it couldn't sort by that. There were no other criteria for choosing between recipes; displaying useful bits of information like cost and time to prepare would have been useful.

Within a recipe, only the ingredients that had specials offered were clickable. I was interested in finding out information about the availability of other ingredients as well, so I was disappointed that they didn't have any information. Also, it was a pain to click each ingredient individually to find out which stores offered it. I was interested in finding one

grocery store that would be the cheapest, so I needed to figure out which stores were offering which specials, and collating that involved a lot of clicking. It would have been very nice if there had been a feature that would have figured that out for me.