

Expert Review

stewmac.com

<https://www.stewmac.com>

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Executive Summary

An expert review was conducted of the stewmac.com website, examining all the pages that comprise the site. The inspection focused on identifying any and all usability issues while also pointing out the strengths of the website that should be maintained.

Due to the number of usability issues found in the section Effective Visual Design, a complete visual redesign of the stewmac.com website is recommended. The review also uncovered a lot of good practices that should be continued in any redesign project.

If, however, a complete visual redesign is not feasible at this time, recommended improvements can be made.

The most significant usability issues identified in this evaluation include:

- **The website design is not responsive.** One of the most significant issues is that the website is not responsive, even though it supports a mobile version. That means that with the number of available devices in the market today, users are increasingly viewing websites at different viewport sizes. Since there are only two available device sizes supported (desktop and mobile) at the moment, there are a lot of viewports that are not supported yet, such as small laptops and tablets. Small laptops and tablets have their own unique parameters that a responsive design can resolve.
- **Page alignment issues affect users' ability to perform tasks.** This is particularly true for the mobile version of the site and affects shopping and the FAQ.
- **Inconsistent use of text color doesn't align with generally accepted guidelines.** The color blue is interpreted automatically as indicating a link, thanks to what users have learned from using the web. When users find text in blue that is not clickable, nor a link, they will be confused, and the user experience will be impacted negatively as a result. Throughout the site, unpredictable colors are used for linking text, warnings, and messages.
- **Some images appear pixelated and blurry on devices with retina displays.** The images on the site have not been optimized for retina resolution, and as a result, some graphics appear blurry when seen on devices with retina displays.

While these issues are among the most pressing usability concerns for the stewmac.com website, a number of additional usability issues that also deserve attention are detailed in the analysis, with recommended solutions.

Terminology & Conventions Used

Different terms are often used when referring to the same part of the browser window or web page. To facilitate understanding of this analysis, one term was used consistently for each browser/web page element. The terms are:

Call to action: Term for an ad, image or text that prompts an immediate user response or encourages a sale. Sometimes abbreviated as CTA.

Click-through rate: Click-through rate is the ratio of the number of clicks on a specific link or call to action to the number of times people were exposed to the link.

Extended font: A font with characters wider than the standard version of the typeface family it belongs to.

Gestalt Principles: Gestalt Principles describe how humans group similar elements, recognize patterns, and simplify complex images. Designers use the principles to organize content on websites and other interfaces so it is aesthetically pleasing and easy to understand. Principles used in this analysis are Proximity, Enclosure, Connection, and Continuity.

Pagination: Breaking large blocks of content into chunks to display on multiple pages allows the user to more easily scan and navigate.

Responsive design: Responsive web design is a web development approach that creates dynamic changes to the appearance of a website, depending on the screen size and orientation of the device being used to view it.

Retina display: A marketing term to refer to devices and monitors that have a resolution and pixel density so high that a person is unable to discern the individual pixels at a normal viewing distance.

Static width layout: Static or "fixed width" layouts use a preset page size and do not change based on the browser width.

Typographic scale: A balanced progression of font sizes, from small to large.

Viewport: The visible zone in a browser window that doesn't require scrolling vertically or horizontally.

Priority Levels

The issues identified in this evaluation are grouped into three levels of priority:

High priority: These issues are likely to impact a large number of users significantly. They should be resolved as quickly as resources allow.

Medium priority: Issues at this priority level are also likely to affect a large number of users but generally are less disruptive to the user experience, relative to the high priority issues. If resources are available to address these issues, they should be addressed.

Low priority: Low priority issues typically impact a small subset of the overall user base, although they may impact a larger group. Regardless of the number of users affected, these issues carry only a minor negative impact. Low priority issues are generally easy to resolve. There is less time pressure to fix low priority issues, compared to medium priority issues and especially high priority issues.

Usability Guidelines

Efficient Navigation

Navigation refers to browsing a website, clicking links to move from page to page. Navigation should be an intuitive experience, so the user doesn't take the wrong path, get lost or disoriented, or have difficulty retracing their steps on a future visit.

Practices to Continue

- **Locate the most-often used actions in the footer.** Grouping routine actions into Customer Service, Shopping, Free Information, Your Account, and About Us help the user get to the relevant section of the website with minimum clicking.
- **Locate product categories in the same place on each page.** Product categories and related information are in a red banner across the entire site. The user can easily shop across product lines and find relevant additional information.

Suggested Changes

High Priority:

- **Display kit instructions on a separate tab.** For example, when a user is on a page for a guitar kit, the breadcrumb navigation begins with "Kits + Projects." When the user clicks on the link for instructions, a new page opens with the breadcrumb trail beginning with "Video + Ideas," which can confuse the user. This behavior is inconsistent with the rest of the website, too. Usually, the breadcrumb trail shows increasing detail as the user navigates for more information in a product category and related links open a separate tab in the browser.

Organizational Clarity

Organization refers to how content is chunked (broken up into sections and discrete units), sequenced and grouped. The quality of an organizational system is dependent on how well content is divided, as well as how easy it is for the user to see and understand the system being used. The modules used by stewmac.com rely heavily on effective organization to ensure their usability.

Practices to Continue

- **Group related information about a product on the product page.** Individual product pages have links to relevant YouTube videos for construction techniques or information about the material itself so users can learn more about them before purchase. The links launch in a separate tab so users can easily go back to the product page for ordering.
- **Group “new” inventory as a separate category on the global navigation dropdown lists.** Product categories for electronics, tools, and supplies have the highest number of items and the potential for technological innovation. A separate “New” category allows users who like to experiment with new brands and technology an easy way to find them.
- **Locate FAQs on the Contact Us email form.** The location offers the opportunity to see if a question has already been answered before writing a lengthy question.

Suggested Changes

Medium Priority:

- **Add a date sort option to the instructional media section of the site.** The instructional content at stewmac.com is broad and deep. While there are multiple ways to filter and sort to narrow search results, adding a "Most recent" sorting option is useful.
- **Standardize labels for newly added products and apply to all global navigation.** A convenient subgrouping for tools and supplies categories directs the user to new products. The labeling, however, varies: “Our Newest Tools + Supplies,” “New Parts + Hardware,” and “New Arrivals” (for Electronics). The label “New Arrivals” works equally well for all. In addition, this grouping could be applied to all the other categories in the global navigation to make it easier for curious shoppers to find new offerings.

Clear Labeling

The choice of labels is vital to website usability. Most online activity involves reading, so the name given to part of a page or a link label is crucial to accurately understanding and using the website. Poorly chosen and/or vague labels confuse users, leading them down the wrong paths on websites or causing them to leave the website because none of the labels appear to represent the desired content. Labeling issues that pertain to other guidelines may be mentioned under that guideline and are therefore not mentioned here.

Practices to Continue

- **Break up a vague category like Tools into more precise groupings.** Navigation category “Luthier Tools + Supplies” opens with tools separated into “Tools by Job” and “Types of Tools” which are distinct from “Supplies.” Subcategories are listed directly below these headings, very useful for less experienced users who are not yet familiar with specific tool names.

Suggested Changes

High Priority:

- **Add date to COVID-19 Statement.** The COVID-19 Statement is at the top of every page throughout the stewmac.com site, so users can reference it at any time during their visit. Adding a date to the banner label would alert the user when there has been a change to company operations.

Consistent Design

Consistency pertains to all aspects of a website: layout, labeling, error messages, whether something is (X)HTML text or graphical text on all pages, even the choice of colors. Widespread (multi-page) inconsistencies are noted here, with an specific issue provided in Detailed Usability Issue: Text Colors.

Suggested Changes

High Priority:

- **Fix broken footer layout in the Your Account > Wishlist page.** The footer on the Wishlist page appears broken. The footer layout breaks free to the left. This layout error gives the impression that the site is not well maintained and could drive users away from the site as a result.
- **Use consistent color for text versus links.** Throughout the stewmac.com site, text color doesn't follow generally accepted website design guidelines. For example, blue is sometimes used for links as well as for informational text like stock/inventory status.

To avoid user confusion, all links should be the same color and have the same style treatment. See Detailed Usability Issue for details and examples.

Medium Priority:

- **Include sorting by newly added content on “Learn By” pages.** Add “Most recent” label in the sorting dropdown menu, to match behavior in the "Trade Secrets!" section of the site. Site sections with long lists of tools and supplies have a category for new arrivals, and this label reinforces that structure.

Matching User Expectations

The Web has been in existence long enough for users to develop consistent, widespread expectations concerning web page behavior, such as what underlining and colors represent. Underlines are interpreted automatically as indicating a link and the color blue is interpreted automatically as indicating a link.

Practices to Continue

- **Continue embracing simplicity and standard e-commerce design guidelines.** The best aspects of the stewmac.com website are the simplicity of the navigation and the placement of the most important calls to action.

For example, calls to action, such as the “Cart” in the top-right of the page and the search box functionality, are both easily visible. The expected placement of these items is a recommended practice to continue in any redesign.

Suggested Changes

High Priority:

- **Use consistent color for text versus links.** Blue is sometimes used for links as well as for in stock/inventory status. Use blue text for links and another color like green for statuses like “In Stock Ready to Ship!” Adding an underline to the blue links further indicate they are clickable. See Detailed Usability Issue for examples.
- **Include a character number countdown in the Contact Us email form.** The field for “Your Comment or Question” has a 500-character limit, but the user doesn’t know how many characters they have used until they hit the limit. They either have to take time to restructure their question or the staff gets incomplete information, making the resolution process even longer. Due to COVID-19 workplace guidelines, communication with customers is exclusively by email through this form.

Medium Priority:

- **Consider privacy issues when populating the user location information in the Reviewer Profile.** Athens, Ohio is the location for stewmac.com headquarters and is currently the default city location in the Reviewer Profile. The user’s location should be blank upon creating a new account. The user can always opt-in by updating the city name at a later time.

Effective Visual Design

Visual design concerns the ‘look and feel’ of the website, specifically how well interface design principles have been applied or followed. Adherence to these principles improves both aesthetics and functionality, because users are able to locate desired information more readily. This section covers widespread (multi-page) interface design issues.

Suggested Changes

High Priority:

- **Complete website redesign.** There are good aspects of the stewmac.com design, but a thorough redesign provides an opportunity to fix a number of issues. Even though there is a mobile version available, standard practices are inconsistently applied and the overall “look and feel” is a bit outdated.
 - **Make the site responsive.** Making the site responsive means that the layout would respond according to the user’s device viewport. This ensures that no matter which device the users are viewing the website on, they can see everything at an appropriate size, improving user readability and usability.
 - **Make better use of white/negative space.** With a redesign comes the opportunity to add negative space to every element on the site, so the user can easily scan and understand each group or piece of information. White space allows the user to process information more effectively, which positively impacts the overall user experience.
 - **Use a typographic scale for larger text sizes.** Starting from scratch is an opportunity to ensure legibility across all viewports, so users have a better experience reading and understanding the content on the website. Modern web design patterns use a larger type size for regular text, at around 15 to 18px, so that no matter what device the user has to read the content on the site, it will be easily read and understood at arm's-length (desktop, tablets, and mobile devices).
 - **Make better use of the available browser space.** One of the advantages of responsive design is that the width of the page does not have to be limited by a static width layout. The elements on the page can fill the width of the browser because the site responds to the viewport width. Because of that, there is an opportunity to display bigger images (and to make them more appealing), make text larger for better readability, and overall to cater to the user’s needs depending on their device preferences.

If a complete visual redesign is not feasible at this time, the following changes are recommended:

- **Redesign the “Get Free Shipping” callout.** On the shopping cart page, there is a call to action "Get Free Shipping Membership" with a checkbox and red arrow. On the desktop version of the site, this is easy to understand. On the mobile version of the site, however, the checkbox appears below the text and not aligned with it, so the user is confused. The mobile version of the site was tested on a viewport size of 414x736 (iPhone 6/7/8 Plus).

- **Improve the layout for the free shipping callout.** Improve the layout of that group of information by making sure it is consistent across all major viewports, and by taking advantage of the Gestalt principles of Proximity, Enclosure, and Connection.
- **Place the checkbox to the left of the callout.** Standard web design guidelines place explanatory text to the right of a checkbox. Using the Gestalt principle of Proximity helps the user make the connection between the act of checking the box and the concept of free shipping for a year.
- **Modify the FAQ layout on mobile version of the site.** On the Contact Us page on the mobile version of the site, the FAQ section uses two columns. The optimal line length for body text should be 50-60 characters per line, including spaces. This layout leaves each question with very little horizontal space for the answer text, breaking each sentence after only one or two words on a single line. Using only one column for text on the mobile version is recommended.
- **Optimize all graphics and images for retina devices.** All graphic files and photos, including the Stewmac logo in the header, are not optimized for retina devices. Retina images are twice the size, in pixels, of an image optimized for standard resolution devices. Most images on the website appear pixelated on retina displays, which make the text inside the graphics harder to read and make the site aesthetically unappealing because they look blurry due to the lower resolution.

Medium Priority:

- **Center-align the search icon inside the search button.** The search icon inside the footer's search box is not properly aligned. That gives the wrong impression to the user, as users have grown used to seeing websites and apps that look very polished and pay attention to even the smallest design details.
- **Left-align the main navigation with the footer.** There are alignment concerns between the header and footer. They should be left-aligned, taking into account the Gestalt principle of Continuity, so that the pages appear well structured and organized.
- **Reduce the number of fonts used in the design.** Reducing the number of fonts used is recommended to achieve a more cohesive look, and to help create a desired sense of simplicity in the overall design of the site. There are some extended fonts used in callouts (below the main navigation) that seem unnecessary.

Supporting Readability & Scannability

Most of the time users spend online is spent reading, and a good portion of that reading is done by scanning through pages, looking for headings and links to follow. The stewmac.com website mostly requires users to scan through content to find the information and products they need. Because of that, the following are a few practices to continue, as well as a few suggested changes.

Practices to Continue

- **Continue the use of the red, black, and white overall color scheme.** The similarity in colors that exists between the user interface and the logo is remarkable, and users can instantly make a connection between the company's logo and the user interface. Red carries a lot of energy and provides good contrast on a white background, as well as against white text in the foreground. There are inconsistencies, however, that need to be addressed. See Detailed Usability Issue for recommendations.

Suggested Changes

High Priority:

- **Increase the background to text color contrast in the filter category titles.** On the product list pages, the filter category titles text is very light, almost unreadable. These "Refine Results" and "More At Stewmac" titles should be darker to improve readability and scannability.
- **Make all clickable text red, underlined, or blue.** The "Learn More" links below the main navigation should be red, to indicate a clickable link, in order to improve readability and scannability, as well as possibly increase click-through rates.
- **Use the same call to action style in the promotional section grid on the homepage.** The four promo tiles below the carousel section on the home page are a bit confusing because the two promos on the left have a clear call to action (red button), while the two promos on the right do not, making it seem that they are not clickable. So, making the call to action style consistent for all four tiles would help alleviate user confusion.
- **Make footer category titles black instead of red.** The footer column titles should be black - not red - so that users don't think they are clickable links, which they are not.
- **Optimize all footer graphics for retina resolution devices.** All graphic links in the footer should be optimized for retina devices. Due to their low resolution, the images look blurry. Updating all graphics will make the site look more appealing for all users regardless of the device they are using.

Medium Priority:

- **Redesign The Fret Calculator link graphic in the footer.** The Fret Calculator link graphic in the footer has several problems: it is too small, the image looks pixelated in retina devices, and the text is hard to read. Redesigning the graphic to have larger text, and optimizing its file size for retina devices would improve readability and scannability.

Facilitating User Tasks

Web users are task-oriented and users of the stewmac.com website are certainly no different in that regard. Websites that support these tasks by facilitating access and reducing the time required for the task are best positioned to keep visitors returning and satisfied with the experience.

Suggested Changes

High Priority:

- **Make the left and right carousel arrows visible at all times.** The carousel arrows below the navigation should be visible at all times to help keep users in full control. The functionality should not be hidden from view, as it hinders the user's ability to understand the functionality of the carousel. It is a recommendation to empower users to have full control of the functionality of the different interactive modules of the site. When the arrows are visible, without having to hover over the edges of the carousel, the user can instantly recognize its functionality and associate its purpose with their previous experience using other carousels on other sites.
- **Simplify the create a new account process.** Creating a new account at stewmac.com is a longer process compared to current convention. New users have to give a lot of information to create a new account. Instead, what users expect nowadays is to enter (only) an email address and a password. The user can enter further details after the account creation. Simplifying the account creation process would increase the number of registered users because the process would be quick and easy, and users would have a hard time declining.
- **Add a "Check Out as a Guest" option in the checkout process.** There are currently two options to check out: "Returning Customers" and "New Customers." With only these two options, users may decide not to purchase because they don't want to create an account, may be in a hurry, or are simply too frustrated by the process to create an account. Adding a "Check Out as a Guest" option would help users complete purchases faster.

Providing Help

Even the most carefully designed website may need a help section, especially if the site functionality is fairly complex and users are expected to step through various processes. Even though there is a Customer Service section on the site, the calls to action to visit those section pages are located only in the footer, at a very small size. The following changes are recommended.

Suggested Changes

High Priority:

- **Add Customer Service calls to action at the top of the page.** Even though there is a Customer Service section on the site, it is only visible in the footer and labeled using a small font size. Customer Service links should be visible at the top of the page near the main navigation so that users can easily find the support they are looking for.
- **Add a phone number at the top of the homepage.** Contact information should be readily available so users can quickly get the help they need. Users typically look for a customer support telephone number at the top of the homepage. Due to COVID-19 workplace safety restrictions, all customer communication is currently by email. As an alternative, a link to the Contact Us page can be used in place of a phone number.

Medium Priority:

- **Add pagination in the “Videos & Ideas” pages.** There is a great section called “Videos & Ideas” with valuable content, providing help with various issues and other subjects. However, the amount of videos and articles is overwhelming; the user has to scroll down to the bottom of the page to view all listed videos with no end in sight, and without pagination, which users have learned to expect. Adding pagination would help users make a selection between the options presented, without feeling overwhelmed.

Detailed Usability Issue: Text Colors

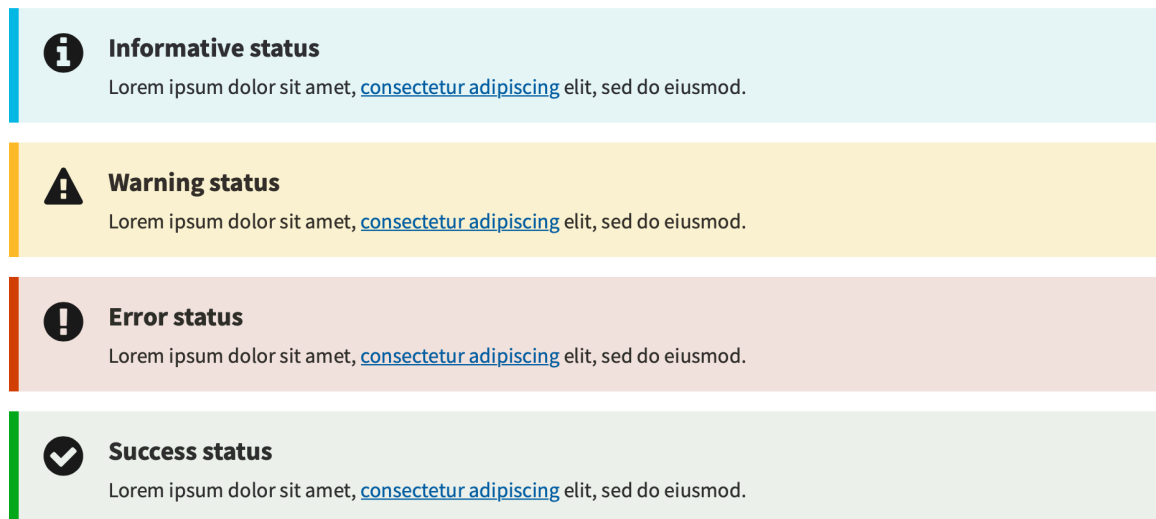
In this section, a product page and the shopping cart page illustrate problems with text formatting and messaging seen throughout the stewmac.com website.

The overall color scheme for the stewmac.com site is red, white, and black, inspired by the company logo. As noted in the executive summary and general analysis, however, the color and styles for text need to be addressed.

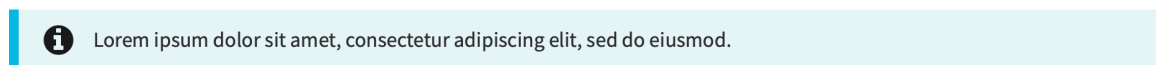
The inconsistent use of text color for calls to action, linking text, warnings and messages doesn't align with generally accepted guidelines.

Guidelines are shown in the following image from the U. S. Web Design System:

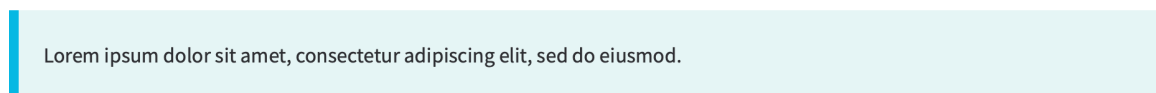
STANDARD ALERTS



SLIM ALERT



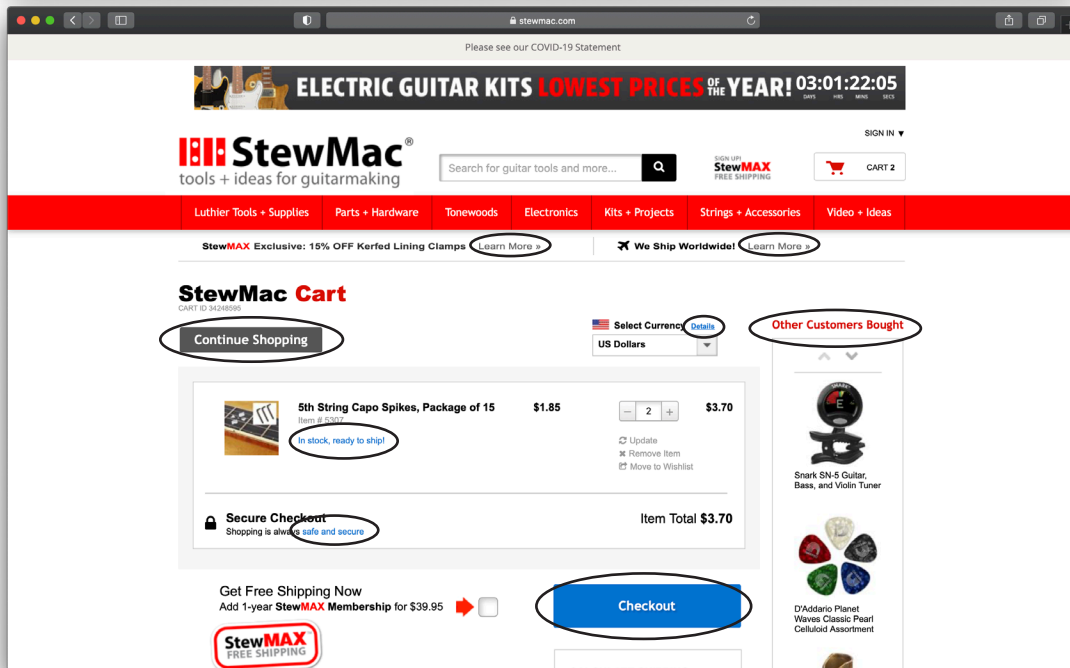
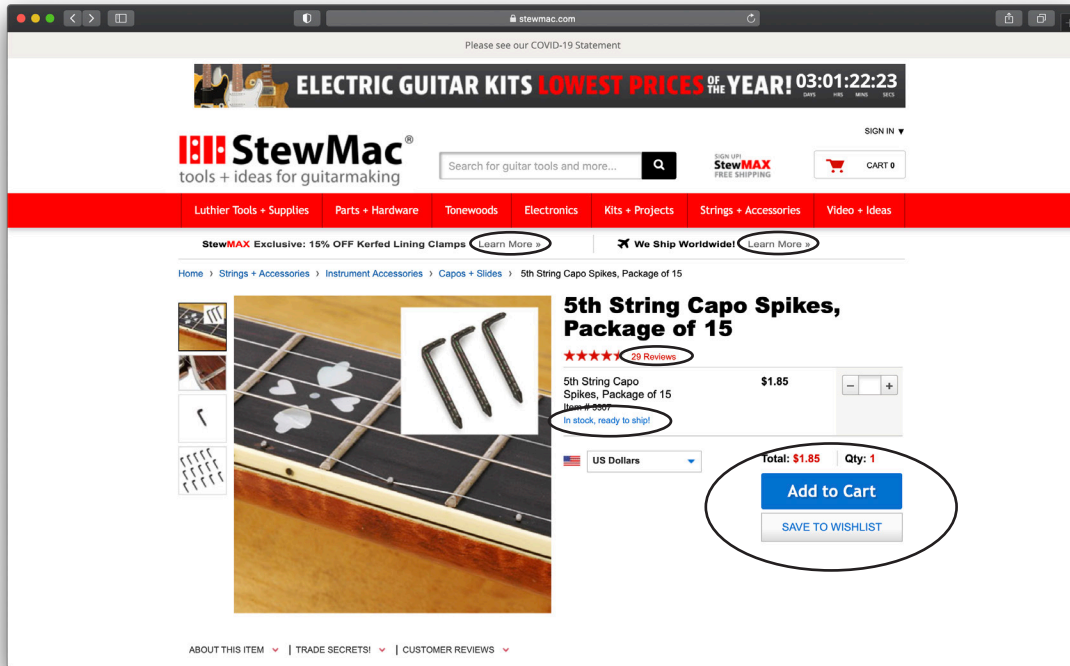
ALERT WITH NO ICON



Source: <https://designsystem.digital.gov/components/alert/>

Note that in every example with a call to action, clickable text is blue and underlined. Extending the color scheme with familiar icons reinforces the message visually.

Compare the recommended colors with the following screenshots from the stewmac.com website:



Our short-term recommendation is to standardize the text colors for all instances of messages and calls to action on the website.

A complete website redesign is still recommended. WEB 213 Associates can collaborate with stewmac.com for a refreshed overall design that retains the company's unique brand and aims to improve the overall user experience.