



The Feel Factor[®]

Last Updated: 29 May 2026, 10:44

Prepared for TravAI Solutions
Project TravAI App

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Introduction

TravAI came to us with impressive technology and a fundamental problem. Their AI could plan an entire trip in minutes, but something was missing. The platform functioned perfectly yet failed to make anyone actually want to go anywhere. Users arrived looking for relief from travel planning stress and left feeling like they'd encountered another search engine wearing a chatbot costume.

The Feel Factor Framework emerged from our workshop sessions with the TravAI team, where we explored what happens when powerful technology forgets to consider how it makes people feel. Through exercises like The Identity Shift and The First 60 Seconds, we discovered that TravAI's users weren't just looking for efficiency. They needed the app to understand the emotional weight of planning a trip when you're already burnt out, the anxiety of trusting AI with something as personal as a holiday, and the deep desire to feel genuinely cared for rather than processed.

This framework maps the emotional choices that will determine whether TravAI becomes a tool people trust with their precious time away, or remains functionally impressive but emotionally forgettable. We examine three critical layers where feelings are made or broken. First, those crucial opening seconds when a user decides whether this app understands them or will demand more work. Second, the journey through the product where trust either builds through genuine conversation or crumbles through generic responses. Third, the lasting transformation where someone moves from feeling overwhelmed by travel planning to feeling genuinely excited about their upcoming adventure.

What Currently Feels Like

TravAI's designs demonstrate sophisticated technical capability whilst revealing a product that has not yet discovered its emotional core. The interface functions smoothly and the AI delivers on its promise to generate comprehensive travel plans within minutes. However, something fundamental is missing from the user experience. The technology works, but it has forgotten to make anyone actually want to use it.

Layer	Current Experience	Emotional Quality
First Impression	Overwhelmed by directory-style layout, uncertain about AI's role, hunting for guidance	Underserved, confused
The Journey	Doing research work while AI observes, receiving generic recommendations without personal connection	Burdened, disconnected
Identity Transformation	Feeling insufficient and drained after completing tasks that should have relieved stress	Defeated, unchanged

The workshops revealed a clear pattern through The First 60 Seconds and Aspiration Gap exercises. Users open TravAI expecting to meet an AI that understands their exhaustion with travel planning. Instead, they encounter what feels like a traditional booking platform with AI happening somewhere in the background. The Heartbreak Scale showed trust levels at just 2 out of 10, with users unable to locate the promised relief from decision-making burden.

People arrive curious but hesitant, hoping this app might finally take the cognitive load off their shoulders. The current experience forces them to work harder, not smarter. They leave feeling like they've engaged with another comparison site rather than a personal travel guide. The AI exists but remains invisible when users need it most, creating the worst possible outcome. All the stress of traditional trip planning, now with the added confusion of wondering whether the technology is actually helping them at all.

The Three Layers

The three layers of emotional design build like a conversation that either creates connection or leaves someone feeling misunderstood. Each layer represents a different moment where TravAI can demonstrate that it genuinely cares about the person using it, not just the task they're trying to complete.

First Impression governs what happens in those critical opening seconds. For TravAI, this layer determines whether someone feels immediately guided by a knowledgeable travel companion or abandoned in yet another overwhelming directory of options. The workshops showed users arriving burnt out and desperate for relief, only to encounter screens that demanded they do research work themselves. This layer requires design decisions about how the AI introduces itself, what questions it asks first, and how quickly it demonstrates understanding rather than intelligence.

The Journey tracks how that initial feeling evolves as someone moves through the product. Through The Identity Shift exercise, we discovered that trust builds when the AI acts more like a concierge who listens before suggesting, rather than a sales engine that assumes what you want. This layer determines whether users feel increasingly supported as they share their preferences, or progressively more frustrated as they realise they're still doing all the cognitive work. The design decisions here centre on transparency, conversation flow, and how recommendations reveal their thinking rather than simply appearing.

Identity Transformation captures how someone feels about themselves after the interaction ends. The Aspiration Gap revealed that people don't just want a booked trip. They want to feel like someone who can trust AI to genuinely improve their life, who deserves to have their holiday planning handled with care, and who can finally look forward to travelling without the accompanying stress. This layer requires the most fundamental design choices because it determines whether TravAI creates lasting behaviour change or remains another app that promises more than it delivers.

These layers compound rather than simply connect. A confused first impression makes building trust exponentially harder. A journey that feels impersonal undermines any possibility of meaningful transformation. The workshops through The Dinner Party and Day One/Day 90 exercises revealed that each layer must earn the right to the next one. TravAI's opportunity lies not just in getting each layer right, but in designing them to reinforce each other until the user's relationship with travel planning itself begins to shift.

Layer 1 — First Impression

Layer 1: First Impression

Current state

Users arrive at TravAI expecting to meet an AI that understands their exhaustion with travel planning. Instead, they encounter what The First 60 Seconds exercise revealed feels like "booking.com with tabs and options on options." People feel overwhelmed and underserved simultaneously, carrying all the burden of decision-making whilst wondering where the promised AI assistance actually lives. The current first impression generates what participants described as feeling "like they need to hunt for the support and AI to get insight, and even the insights feel generic and unfounded."

The Heartbreak Scale showed users rating their trust level at just 2 out of 10 within those opening moments. The confusion level hit 4 out of 10, with people asking fundamental questions like "how do they use the AI?" and "when is the burden removed from them?" Rather than feeling guided toward their ideal trip, users described being "hit with a large wall of decisions and options as opposed to guidance."

Desired feeling

Users should feel immediately welcomed and understood, like they've just walked into the hands of a knowledgeable concierge who genuinely wants to help them find exactly what they need. The workshops through The Dinner Party exercise painted a picture of how TravAI should greet people, someone who "waits and watches and sees where the opportunity arises to help" rather than imposing a predetermined process.

The first 60 seconds should create the feeling of relief that comes when someone else finally takes responsibility for understanding your situation. Not the hollow relief of finding another comparison tool, but the genuine ease that comes when you realise you can stop managing the process yourself because something else has genuinely got it handled.

What the workshops told us

The Identity Shift exercise revealed the emotional trajectory users desperately want. They arrive "burnt out, feeling like they are wasting money and opportunities due to the inconvenience of all the research needed." The workshops showed they should feel "curious as they open the app" but

currently experience "hesitancy as they add information" because there's no evidence the app is actually listening.

The Anti-Principles work highlighted what users encounter now versus what they need. Currently, TravAI "assumes the users intent and disregards their input." The principle that emerged from inverting this was "always ensure the users insight guides our recommendations." Participants were clear that this principle gets tested immediately, in those first moments when suggestions appear.

Through The First 60 Seconds, users compared their current experience to Claude, which "understood what I needed from it and spoke to me in a very helpful manner. I felt catered for, understood. It wanted me to find what I was looking for rather than leaving me alone to figure it out."

Design decisions required

Conversation before directory. Open with the AI introducing itself through questions that demonstrate immediate understanding of why someone might need help with travel planning, rather than presenting a wall of destinations and filters. The Read It Aloud exercise showed the power of questions like "Planning a trip shouldn't feel like a second job, should it?" This acknowledges the user's existing frustration whilst positioning TravAI as the solution.

Input fields as primary navigation. Replace browsing-focused layouts with conversation starters that invite users to express what they actually want rather than forcing them to hunt through categories. The workshops revealed that "input fields reduce railroading and give the user the impression of openness and the ability to go where they please."

Transparent thinking from the start. When the AI does make its first suggestions, show the reasoning in human language rather than presenting results as if they emerged from a black box. The Heartbreak Scale revealed that anxiety drops significantly when users can see "the outcomes and thinking of answers" because it feels like being shown the working in a maths test.

Breathing room over information density. Design screens that focus on one decision at a time rather than overwhelming users with comprehensive options. The First 60 Seconds work was clear that "low density screens and breathing room" reduce overwhelm and let users "focus on only the things they find necessary."

Human language throughout. Write every piece of interface copy as if a knowledgeable travel companion is speaking directly to the user, not as if a system is processing their request. The Write It Wrong exercise established that the voice must be "calm, friendly, assured, confident" whilst avoiding anything "techy, technical, or overly elaborate."

Guided exploration, not forced paths. Provide clear next steps whilst making it obvious that users can deviate whenever they choose. The workshops showed that "users want guided but not led, they need to be able to deviate to truly embrace the guidance."

Layer 2 — The Journey

The journey through TravAI currently mirrors the experience users were trying to escape. The Identity Shift exercise revealed that people begin "curious as they open the app" but quickly become "hesitant as they add information" because the AI feels more like an observer than a guide. As users progress, they encounter what participants described as "doing all the work while the AI observes" rather than experiencing the promised relief from decision-making burden.

The Aspiration Gap workshop showed a clear pattern of emotional deterioration. Users start hoping for guidance but find themselves managing the same research process they would face on any booking site. By the midpoint of their journey, the Heartbreak Scale revealed anxiety levels hitting 4 out of 10, with people worried they're "following generic advice like it's for them personally" whilst experiencing "double decision paralysis."

The workshops highlighted that the current journey breaks down when users realise they're still carrying the cognitive load. Rather than feeling increasingly supported, people report feeling "overwhelmed and underserved" as they move through screens that demand filtering, comparing, and decision-making without offering the promised AI insight.

Desired feeling

The emotional trajectory should mirror what users described in The Dinner Party exercise. Someone who "waits and watches and sees where the opportunity arises to help" rather than demanding immediate decisions. Users should feel increasingly understood as they share preferences, with each interaction building confidence that the AI genuinely comprehends their situation and priorities.

The journey should create what The Identity Shift called "elation as they see the suggestions and options" followed by feeling "relaxed and chill when they are catered for." This progression requires users to experience genuine partnership rather than the current pattern of working harder whilst an AI watches from the sidelines.

What the workshops told us

The Anti-Principles work revealed the core issue. The current experience "assumes the users intent and disregards their input" when it should "always ensure the users insight guides our recommendations." This principle gets tested throughout the journey, not just in the final recommendations.

Day One/Day 90 showed what prevents users from reaching the transformative experience they seek. Currently, users "feel the same issues as other apps, they still have to find the holidays themselves to see if they suit." The workshop was explicit that TravAI's current approach is "a roundabout way of doing the same as the manual sites, just with positive messaging."

The Identity Shift exercise traced the desired emotional arc clearly: "Curious as they open the app. Hesitant as they add information. Elated as they see the suggestions and options. Relaxed and chill when they are catered for." The current experience never reaches the elation stage because users never feel their input has been truly understood and acted upon.

Through The First 60 Seconds, users explained that "the emotional experience breaks down as the user moves through the product" when "they begin to feel like they are doing all the work and the AI is just observing them, not guidance and more observation."

Design decisions required

Progressive revelation based on conversation. Rather than front-loading all questions or presenting complete interfaces, reveal options and features as the conversation deepens. The workshops showed that trust builds when users can "visually see how their thinking has been met" through incremental responses that prove the AI is genuinely processing their input.

Transparent AI reasoning at each step. When the AI makes any suggestion or asks any follow-up question, show the human-readable logic behind it. The Heartbreak Scale work was clear that anxiety reduces dramatically when users can see "the underlying working" rather than receiving recommendations from a black box.

Adaptive questioning that responds to answers. Design conversations that branch intelligently based on what users reveal, rather than following predetermined scripts. The Identity Shift established that "the AI needs to ask the right questions, have a good conversation and understand what the user wants" rather than processing inputs through rigid frameworks.

Visual progress indicators that reflect understanding. Show users not just how far through the process they are, but evidence of what the AI has learned about them. The workshops revealed that people need to "see progression after their input visually to give them a feeling of progress/importance or impact with the actions they take."

Recommendation justification that references user input. When presenting options, explicitly connect suggestions back to specific things the user shared, using their language rather than system categories. The Design Principles Builder work emphasized that recommendations must feel "personal and justification" with users able to "visually see how their thinking has been met."

Permission-based exploration that maintains the conversation thread. Allow users to deviate and browse whilst keeping the AI conversation active, so exploration feels supported rather than abandoned. The workshops showed that the "ideal progression" happens when "the user should feel guided, decide to deviate and the guide will either subtly suggest a clean way back onto the path or understand the deviation and pivot to adapt with it."

Layer 3 — Identity Transformation

The workshops revealed users experiencing what The Identity Shift described as feeling "defeated and unchanged" after using TravAI. People arrive hoping to transform from someone who finds travel planning overwhelming into someone who feels confident and supported. Instead, they leave questioning their own competence. The Day One/Day 90 exercise showed users feeling "overwhelmed and a little insufficient, overworked, stressed, drained" after interactions that were meant to relieve burden.

This represents the deepest failure of the current experience. Users don't just complete tasks unsuccessfully; they begin to doubt whether they're capable of using AI tools effectively. The Identity Shift work revealed people wondering "is AI trustworthy?" and "how will AI know the best options for me?" When the app fails to demonstrate understanding, users internalize this as personal inadequacy rather than poor design.

Desired feeling

The transformation TravAI should enable moves people from feeling "burnt out" and questioning their travel planning abilities to feeling "relaxed and confident." The Identity Shift exercise captured this beautifully. Users should become someone who can "just find the best deal for them to make the most out of all their free time" and feel "rejuvenated and don't feel burnt out or stressed."

The Day One/Day 90 work painted a clear picture of the desired endpoint. On Day 90, users should feel "relieved, catered for, relaxed, insightful, excited, anticipating something special, attached to the app and the experience correlated to it." Most importantly, they should know "that AI is a useful tool that can improve their lives and help them if they use it in the right way."

What the workshops told us

The Identity Shift exercise provided the clearest evidence about transformation. Currently, users complete the sentence "This product turns someone who feels stressed and overwhelmed into someone who feels..." but never actually experience that shift. The gap exists because "they are hit with a directory. It doesn't provide solutions or suggestions. It backs up their own searches and browsing rather than guiding them."

The Aspiration Gap revealed the new belief system TravAI should create. Users should think "I can do this. This is manageable. This holiday will be so relaxing I can finally switch off and go with the flow. I don't need to manage my whole holiday I just need to enjoy it." Currently, they're developing the opposite belief that AI tools add complexity rather than reducing it.

Day One/Day 90 showed what knowledge transformation looks like. By Day 90, users should understand "that AI is a useful tool that can improve their lives and help them if they use it in the right way. It's not evil or good its a tool to allow them to do special things and experience special things with less hassle and reduce the cognitive load of decision making."

The Dinner Party exercise revealed how this transformation should feel interpersonally. Users should become someone who gravitates towards "stories, people talking about their dream trips, their amazing journeys" rather than avoiding travel conversations because planning feels overwhelming.

Design decisions required

Demonstrate AI competence through conversation quality rather than speed. The Identity Shift emphasized that "trust is built with conversation and understanding." Design the AI to ask increasingly sophisticated questions that prove it understands travel planning psychology, not just travel logistics. Users need to experience the AI getting smarter about them specifically, not just processing their requests faster.

Reflect user preferences back in their own language. When making recommendations, use phrases and priorities the user shared rather than system-generated descriptions. The Identity Shift noted that experiences should feel "personal and curated" because this "adds to the relaxed state of the user as they feel they are being actioned for rather than just a generic sales pitch."

Show the AI learning and adapting in real-time. Make it visible when user input changes the AI's approach or suggestions. The workshops emphasized that "seeing the journey and interactions caused by their answers removes the hesitancy and distrust" because users can observe the AI becoming more useful as it understands them better.

Create moments of genuine surprise that exceed expectations. Design the AI to occasionally surface options or insights that feel thoughtfully beyond what the user requested. The Aspiration Gap showed transformation happens when users realize "this holiday will be so relaxing I can finally switch off and go with the flow" rather than managing every detail themselves.

Position the user as the expert on their own preferences. Never override user input or suggest the AI knows better than they do about what they want. The Anti-Principles work established that experiences must "always ensure the users insight guides our recommendations" rather than pushing users toward predetermined options.

Build in post-booking experiences that maintain the relationship. Design follow-up interactions that continue demonstrating care rather than treating booking as the end of the experience. The workshops showed that lasting transformation requires users to feel "attached to the app and the experience correlated to it" rather than viewing TravAI as a one-time tool.

The Emotional Arc

The emotional arc that emerged from the workshops tells a single, clear story. Someone begins feeling overwhelmed by the burden of travel planning, encounters an AI that genuinely understands their exhaustion, and transforms into someone who can finally look forward to their holidays without the accompanying stress. This arc moves from "overwhelmed and underserved" to "understood and valued," as The First 60 Seconds exercise crystallised.

The Identity Shift work revealed the complete transformation TravAI should enable. Users start "burnt out, feeling like they are wasting money and opportunities due to the inconvenience of all the research needed." Through genuine conversation with an AI that demonstrates understanding rather than processing power, they become someone "relaxed and confident" who knows they "can just find the best deal for them to make the most out of all their free time." Most importantly, they develop a new relationship with AI itself, learning "that AI is a useful tool that can improve their lives and help them if they use it in the right way."

The Aspiration Gap exercise traced this journey through specific emotional waypoints. Curiosity when they first open the app. Relief when they realise the AI is actually listening to their answers rather than following a script. Elation when suggestions appear that feel genuinely personal rather than algorithmically generated. Finally, a deep sense of being cared for when they complete their booking without the usual exhaustion that accompanies travel planning. The Day One/Day 90 work showed this progression continuing beyond the immediate interaction, with users feeling "attached to the app and the experience correlated to it" because it proved that technology can reduce rather than increase their cognitive burden.

This emotional arc should function as the primary decision-making tool for every design choice in TravAI. When considering any feature, interaction pattern, or piece of interface copy, the question becomes simple. Does this choice move someone further along the arc from overwhelmed to understood? If a design decision doesn't contribute to this progression, it dilutes the experience regardless of how functionally sophisticated it might be. The workshops were unambiguous about this. Users don't need more features or faster processing. They need to feel genuinely supported by technology that demonstrates it understands the emotional reality of planning something as personal as a holiday.

What This Means In Practice

The three layers and the emotional arc that connects them produce a specific, concrete design brief for TravAI. Every decision during design and build should be tested against whether it moves users further along the journey from overwhelmed to understood. This is not a philosophical framework but a practical tool for daily development choices.

Layer	The Test
First Impression	Does this make someone feel immediately guided rather than abandoned with more decisions to make?
The Journey	Does this prove the AI is genuinely listening and learning, or just processing inputs through predetermined logic?
Identity Transformation	Does this help someone feel more capable and supported, or more uncertain about their own judgment?

Layer	The Test
Emotional Arc	Does this choice move someone from feeling overwhelmed and underserved to feeling understood and valued?

For TravAI to succeed emotionally, it must pass all four tests at every moment of interaction. A feature that efficiently processes travel preferences but makes someone question whether they've shared the right information fails the arc test. An interface that looks sophisticated but leaves users hunting for guidance fails the first impression test. A recommendation engine that produces accurate results but doesn't explain its reasoning fails the journey test. A booking flow that completes transactions but leaves people feeling drained rather than excited fails the transformation test. The product works when someone can move through every interaction feeling increasingly confident that they've found something that genuinely understands both travel planning and human psychology.