

A legacy of persuasion

An outdated culture of fast wins above coordinated strategy led to a mountain of design debt to scale, and I joined the team right at the beginning of this effort.

MY ROLE

Senior UX Copywriter

TIMELINE

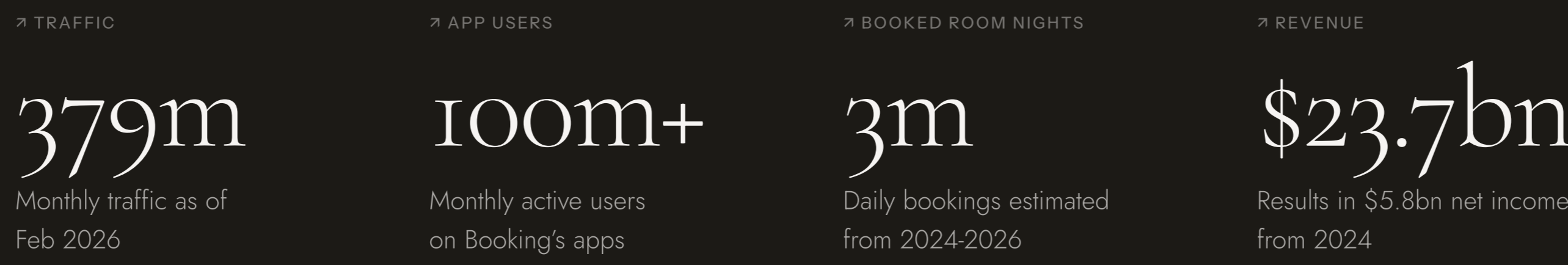
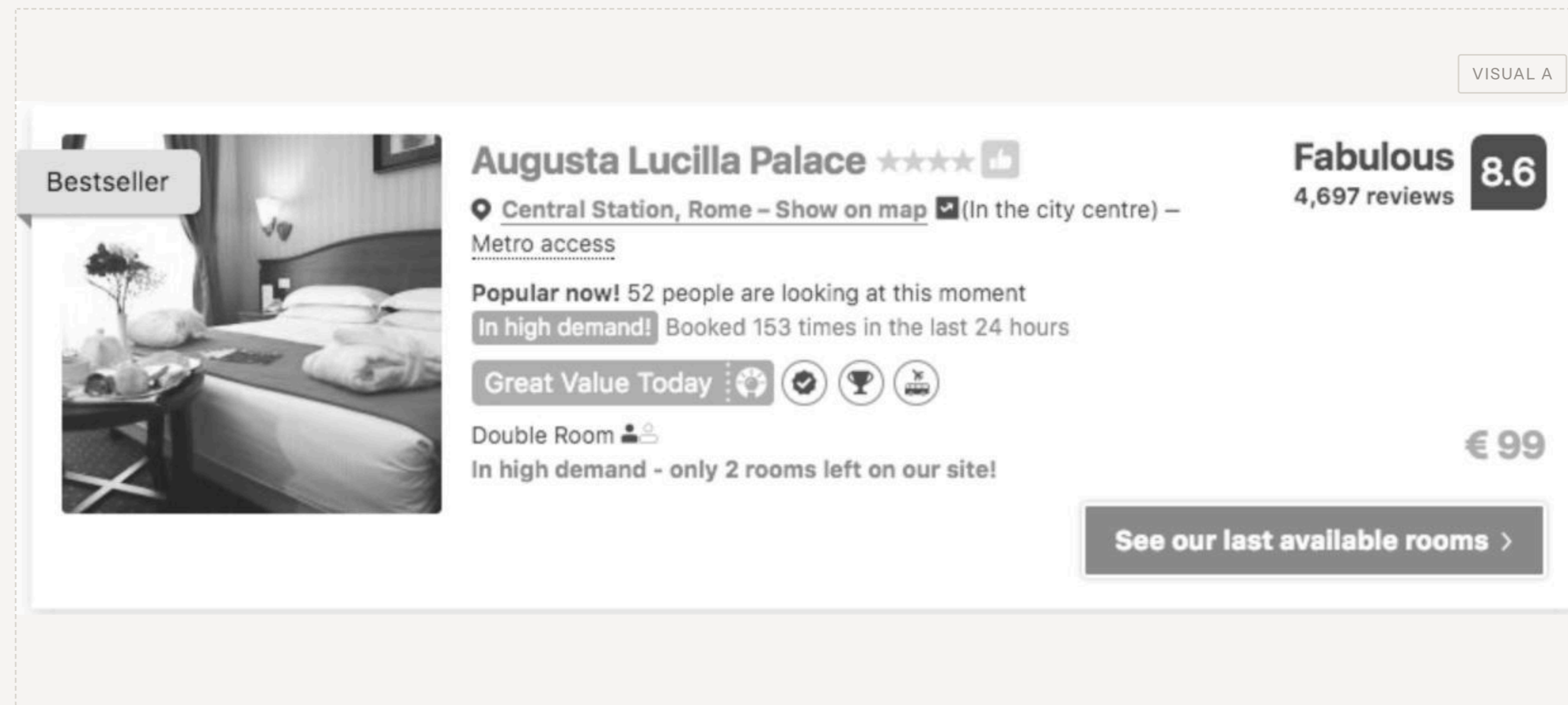
2017-5 months

TEAM

1 UXW · 1 UXD · 2 PO · 2 BE · 1 FE

FOCUS AREAS

- Leadership
- Content strategy
- Systems thinking



01 - CONTEXT

THE COMPANY

Booking.com

Making it easier for everyone to travel the world, they're one of the world's leading online travel agencies offering over 28 million listings worldwide in 43 languages.

MY ROLE

Anti-persuasion taskforce

I joined the persuasion team in 2017. They were challenging a legacy of conversion-dictated content debt, prioritising global changes, centralisation and consolidated ownership, and scalable design.

Working as a Senior, I was prioritising work that'd be responsible, forward-thinking and impactful. Working at the heart of what'd historically annoyed so many people about the company felt perfect.

02 - THE CHALLENGE

When conversion dictates design, debt and damage are (almost) irreparable.

Years of experiments left Booking.com with a persuasion problem, with hundreds of uncoordinated scarcity and urgency messages. Data to prove success needed only look at short-term conversion and quick wins, not long-term risk and design debt.

Legal scrutiny intensified things. Looking into claims of pressure-selling, the UK Competition and Markets Authority (CMA) intended to audit Booking.com's use of persuasion in late 2017. Failing to comply meant getting sued for 10% of the total business revenue.

I took on every persuasion message on the site and led informed solutions to the deadlines and external feedback - messaging that avoided being misunderstood, and didn't harm the business in the transitional experimentation.



Persuasive real estate in the selection process.

Statement	CMA's concerns
Only 2 rooms left on our site	The CMA considers that the statement creates a misleading impression that it refers to the availability of hotels at the selected destination, not just those hotels that are available to the booking website.
rooms left on our site	The CMA is concerned that the statements create the misleading impression that: (i) the number of rooms referred to in the statement represent the total number of rooms available at the hotel rather than the number of rooms available on the hotel booking website; and / or (ii) the number of rooms referred to in the statement represent the total number of rooms available on the hotel booking website that meets consumer's search criteria, not just the availability of the exact room type featured on the search results page.
Only 3 rooms left on our site	The CMA considers that consumers will understand the statement to mean that the hotel inventory is selling quickly, when in fact the claims may refer to other dates or rooms unrelated to the consumer's search.
Only 3 rooms left on our site	Furthermore, where statements refer to a time element such as "right now" the CMA is of the view that consumers are likely to understand that claim is based on real-time data.

Excerpt from CMA's initial report.

03 - THE APPROACH

Approaching the project

The CMA were looking at scarcity messaging only, but this was a chance to challenge all persuasion messaging that went against our design principles of fairness, customer-centricity and avoiding dark patterns.

01 Widening the scope

Even though the investigation targeted a subset of existing persuasion messages, we decided to push the scope to include every one to ensure a unified future vision.

02 Audit existing code

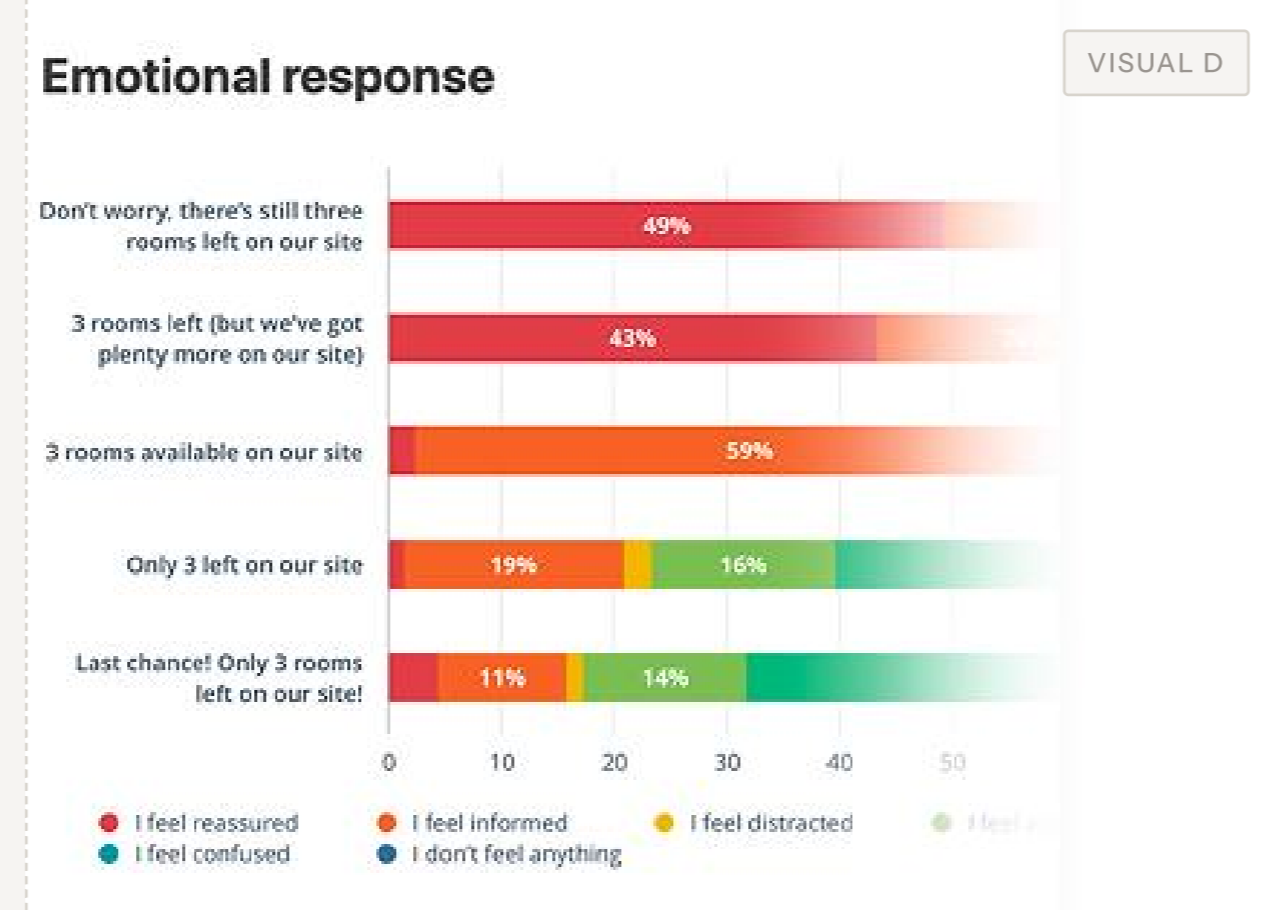
Searching the codebase for affected tags wouldn't show whether they were live. I created a taskforce to prioritise this work as its own business case.

03 Ideate solutions

A message like *In high demand* had over 250 different instances (each of those with up to 45 localisations). New solutions had to be flexible and resistant to metric risk.

04 Backed by research

I carried out targeted language testing for all new ideas, and then drove research into user trust and emotional response to stress-test them, and arrive at informed choices.



Excerpt from user testing.



Excerpt from user testing.

Excerpt from targeted language testing.



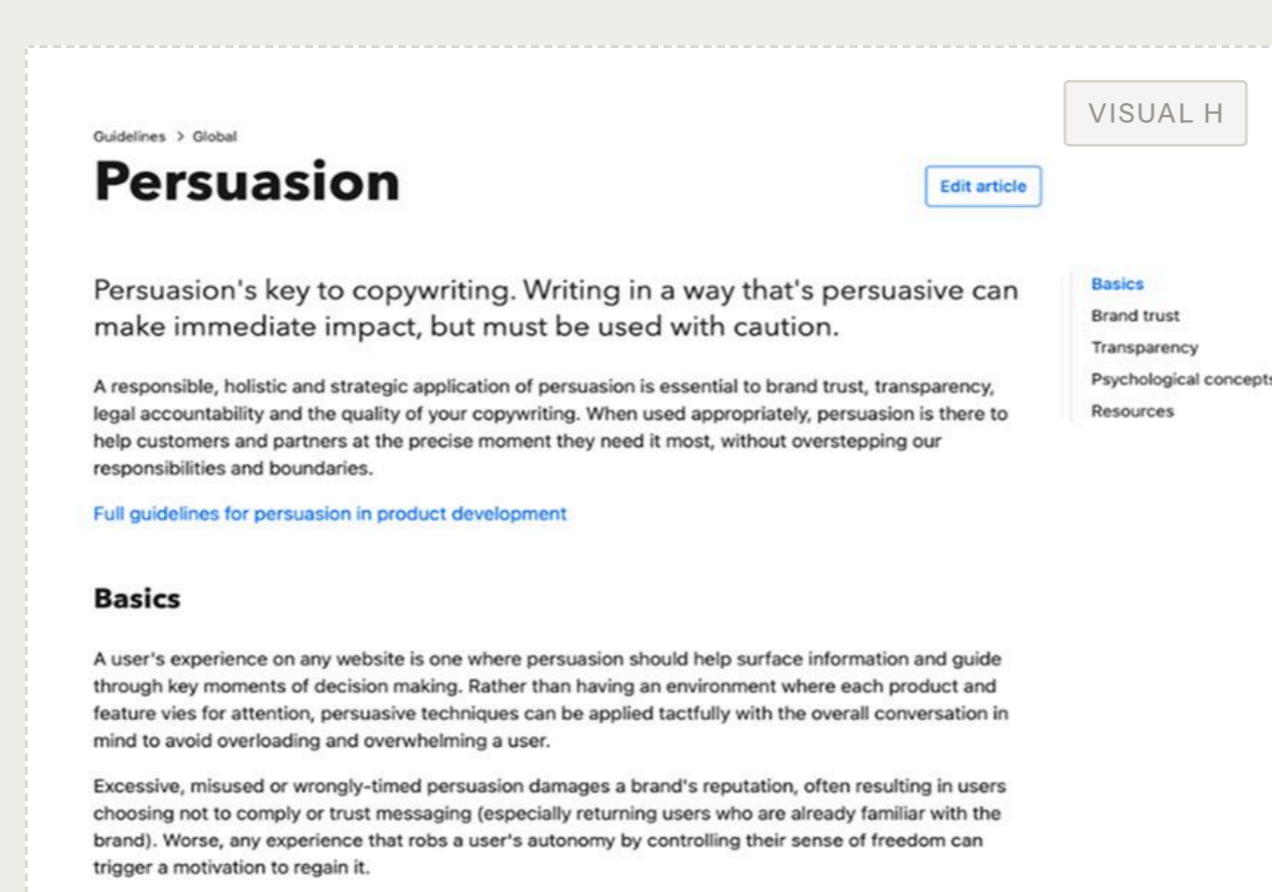
Persuasive real estate during the selection process.

04 - IMPACT

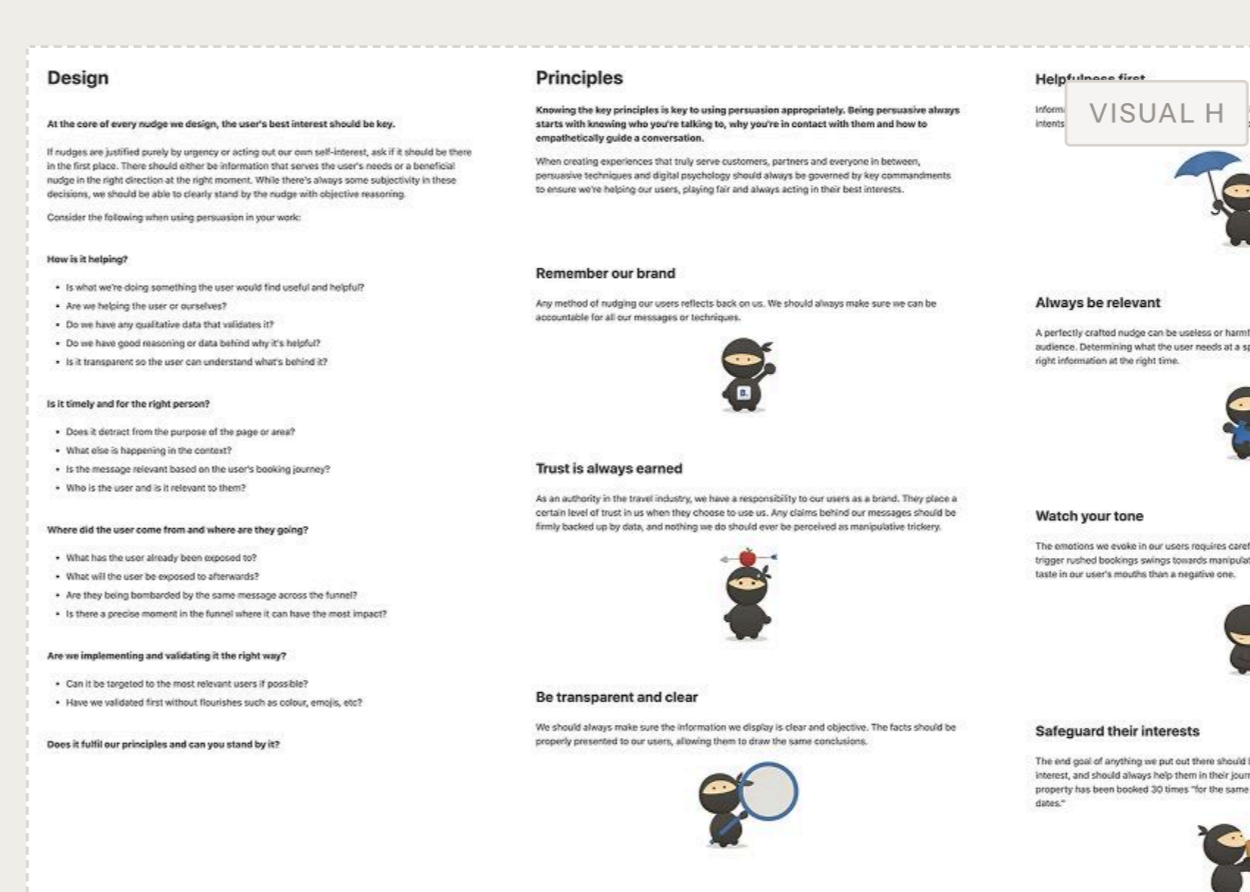
Results and reach

For every message and those within our wider scope, we centralised new solutions or removed over 50% of all persuasion messages without business impact. Each had been researched, challenged, and had gained legislative approval.

All changes went live and stayed live. I then created, released and socialised aligned craft guidelines for working with the new messaging, and our executive-backed approach to persuasion.



Excerpt from business-wide craft guidelines.



Excerpt from business-wide craft guidelines.

05 - REFLECTION

Project thoughts

Ethical design is costly, but only when immediate conversion is the only metric. This work taught me how to challenge that for long-term user benefit and when brand risk's involved, and showed how much good design's actually worth.

I love this kind of work. Wrapping my head around linguistic legacy, standing behind new solutions, and working on future-proofing technical solutions was new to me. It felt like a break from the move fast, break things mantra towards scalability, acceptable business risk for ethical design decision-making.

It taught me how to work directly with legal counsel, and how to speak for UX. I've carried that experience forward in many other assignments, treating the challenge as a creative collaboration. And solutions have felt a ton easier.