



By [Brian Essex, Ph.D.](#)

The retail environment is evolving rapidly. Increasingly, retail stores are leveraging smartphone apps and other digital technology to enhance in-store experiences and to nudge users towards buying products. While this space is challenging to design for, research methods based on observation and analysis of human behavior can help any product team better understand their opportunities. User research methods are well suited to help understand customer needs and challenges, as well as how customers interact with technology in a store environment.

## Digital shopping: Smartphone apps used in stores

To immerse myself in this space, I loaded a number of different apps on my phone and went shopping in downtown Seattle. One app that stood out was [Shopkick](#), which lets you earn points called “kicks” and redeem them for rewards.

As I was walking down the street, I received a notification from Shopkick that I could earn kicks at the nearby Target. I walked into the store and the app popped up showing me that I had just received kicks for simply entering Target and that I could receive more kicks by scanning suggested items in the store. This was interesting; was I shopping or playing a game?

I felt like I was on a scavenger hunt as I searched the store for one of the suggestions – Diet Coke. I found the product and tried scanning the barcode. I usually find the experience of scanning barcodes awkward, because it can be hard to find the barcode and get the phone to read it properly. I received kicks for scanning the item, but not without a little embarrassment that I was pointing my phone at an item on the shelf.

Later, I walked into Macy’s and received another notification from the app – Sale Today, 20% off. This notification really pleased me because I hadn’t known there was a sale before walking into the store. It also was a very effective way to influence my behavior.

The Shopkick app is just one example of the many apps that are bridging the brick and mortar – digital divide in retail.

Here are some ways smartphones are interfacing with the in-store experience:

- Customers can receive **contextually relevant information** about the stores they are in – and nearby items – via Beacon technology.
- Customers can **scan barcodes to receive discounts or to learn more** about products, such as prices and reviews.
- Customers can look at their app to **see what items in the store are on sale**.
- **Stores give customers more opportunities to purchase**. If a shopper does not want to wait in line at the cash register, they can order an item online after scanning a barcode and have it shipped to them.
- Customers can use their phone to **pay for physical items** at the checkout counter.

These are just a few of the many ways retailers can leverage digital technology to help their brick and mortar businesses. However, it isn’t always clear what digital approach will resonate most with customers in a store.

## User experience in brick & mortar

To understand how customers interface with technology in a brick and mortar retail environment, we recommend performing research in the store in addition to or instead of traditional lab-based testing.

Lab-based testing is great for learning about usability and whether users can complete tasks. In a lab environment the moderator and participant can focus deeply without outside distractions. However, a big limitation of the lab-based environment is the large difference in context between the lab and the store. There are many things that a team may miss about in-store behavior if they only perform research in a [usability lab](#), such as how someone feels about using their phone in a public place or what influences someone to purchase items in a physical store. While lab-based studies can help you speculate what users may do in retail environments, performing research in a store can deliver additional insights because of the more realistic scenario.

Research performed in a store can help determine the needs and desires of shoppers while shopping and the store experience is fresh in their minds. It can also help uncover how usable digital technology is in the field while customers are actively engaged in a real shopping task. Customer reactions to an app that interfaces with items in a store, for instance, may be very different when performed in the wild than in a lab. I did not anticipate that I would be embarrassed moving items around in a store to scan the barcodes, even though I had scanned items earlier at our office without feeling any embarrassment.

At Blink we use the following field research methods to understand customers’ in-store experiences:

- **Shop-alongs.** With this approach, the researcher walks with a customer as they shop in a store so they can observe the customer's behavior. Because the researcher is with the shopper, they have the opportunity to ask the customer questions as they come up. Participants are generally recruited beforehand. This makes it easy to recruit according to specific sampling characteristics and makes it easy to schedule an adequate amount of time with a participant.
- **Intercept Interviews.** Intercepts are a quick method for finding customers in the field as they are shopping. Typically, customers are approached immediately after making a purchase in a store. They are then asked to participate in a short interview or survey about their shopping experience. One advantage is that customers are approached who visited the store on their own, without a researcher present or a design team asking them to visit it.
- **Unobtrusive Observation.** With unobtrusive observation, researchers observe customers in the store as they shop on their own by using surveillance cameras or by observing customers in the physical area around them. This method is often followed up with [intercept interviews](#) and can help researchers target customers who exhibit specific behaviors (e.g. scanning barcodes with a phone).

Do you have any questions about how Blink can help you learn more about your customers' experience in a retail environment? Please feel free to get in touch with us at [hello@blinkux.com](mailto:hello@blinkux.com).

*Brian Essex works in user research at Blink UX, joining the team after attaining a Ph.D. in Cognition and Cognitive Neuroscience from Vanderbilt University. He is passionate about uncovering insights from user research and brainstorming design solutions that address user needs.*