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Throughout 2006, Blink conducted usability studies almost weekly in our downtown Seattle labs, at client sites, and in the field. While observing hundreds of participants, we noted some interesting behaviors and themes that we'd like to share...

1. Web 2.0 features are not always discoverable

We tested numerous web pages and applications in 2006 that included Web 2.0 features and interactivity. Unfortunately, some pages and features relied solely on users discovering application functionality such as right-click menus, the ability to drag objects, or content appearing only after a cursor rolls over an object. Because no alternative methods such as navigation menus or visible control sets were provided, task failures rates were often high.

2. Applications, not platforms, drive user expectations about how to interact

Increasingly, we see study participants use the same behavior regardless of whether they are using a desktop application, web application, or application on a handheld device. As we observed while field testing web-based calendars and appointment systems, users expected to directly manipulate objects on the screen, such as dragging and dropping appointments, because they were used to doing so in desktop calendaring systems that looked similar to the application at hand. In some contexts and applications, the more direct manipulation, the better.

3. Simplicity and elegant design rule the day

Our study participants at all levels have become more discriminating about positive and negative user experiences. Whether testing new software, hardware devices, or web applications, users appreciate it when actions and options are obvious and they are rewarded with simple, positive outcomes. Regardless of whether they are trying to network home computers together, find a wireless hotspot, communicate in a social networking environment, or use advanced scientific visualization tools, participants increasingly expect their technology projects and services to “just work” and be easy to use on their terms. Tolerance for a poor user experience is getting low.

4. Participants are feeling “Registered to Death”

When required to register to complete a process on a site such as making a purchase or even downloading a promotional brochure or video, we have observed many people reluctantly accepting registration as part of the web experience (with a big sigh). They don't like it, but say “that's just the way it is now.” While a small proportion of users don't seem to mind registering, we've seen some become very annoyed or even outraged, especially when email verification is part of the sequence. Their response: “Why make it so difficult for me to give you my money?”

5. “They should already know who I am”

Along the same lines as having to register on sites too often, we observed study participants become upset when a single company requires multiple accounts for different service offerings due to the way its business or technology operations are organized. Users have little tolerance for poor account integration behind the scenes. They also have much higher expectations of member pages that many sites and services fail to deliver on.

6. When subtle is too subtle

Low contrast web page text and interactive elements are common and are commonly difficult for users to see and use. We discovered in competitive tests of vacation travel-oriented sites that designers or producers frequently do not understand the visual needs of one of their key user segments: older users with the time and resources to travel. We observed study participants squinting or leaning in to read pages written in small fonts in gray on a white background. Participants became lost or hit dead ends when sites contained links that were not obvious, search forms or results were too complex to use easily, and tools such as room finders did not link to key information such as “how far will I need to walk to eat?” On other types of web sites and applications, we observed users of all ages and experience levels miss important feedback such as error messages or confirmations because they did not stand out enough on the page, or they missed action buttons in applications that were designed in low contrast color pairs.

7. Device experience is rarely a hardware-only proposition

The handheld and stationary hardware devices we tested this past year often contained hardware, software, and sometimes service components. Usability issues frequently occurred

because these components were poorly integrated. When discussing usability issues with product teams, we sometimes heard responsibility or blame shifted to others: “we can’t fix that—it’s a <<insert firmware, hardware, or provider>> problem.” While it is a challenge to fix problems across development teams or across companies (sometimes spanning continents), users expect a seamless, integrated experience when using a device, and they rarely do detective work about who or what is to blame when they encounter a problem—they simply vote with their feet.

8. Drop-down menus on forms can be a problem

We observed people of all ages and experience levels last year having difficulty finding and clicking on items in long drop-down menus. There are often easier and less error-prone alternatives to long drop-downs. In a related issue, participants often carefully hunted for and selected something in a drop-down and then used the mouse scroll roller to move down the page. Unfortunately, the result was that their selection in the menu scrolled and changed, not the page. Many participants did not notice this until after submitting forms and receiving errors, or worse yet they submitted without receiving an error and did not notice the selection had changed at all.

9. People do not like identifying their “user type” before entering a site

Some sites still require visitors to self-identify a user type or characteristics about themselves before presenting content with the good intention of delivering a more customized experience for different users. We thought this practice had pretty much gone by the wayside, but there are still some laggards. We have observed that people frequently don’t know how to identify themselves, or they don’t fit just right into the categories, and they are not sure what they will miss if they choose the wrong category. They just close their eyes and take a guess. Not the best way to elicit confidence among site visitors.

10. Users sometimes make excuses for poor online experiences from brands they like—up to a point

In competitive studies across several different subject domains last year, we noticed that study participants sometimes tolerated or made excuses for questionable user experiences if they previously had a positive association with a company, brand, or a physical store. This “usability goodwill” wears thin quickly, however; we heard participants complain about sliding quality in new applications and reluctantly rate competitors more favorably when an application or online service from a favorite company did not measure up to their past experiences.