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By [Nika Smith](#)

2011 brought a number of changes for the Blink user research team. Not only did we bring on some great new talent, but we also moved into a gorgeous custom-designed space overlooking Puget Sound with fully updated usability labs and client meeting rooms. It has been a pleasure for all of us to settle into our new surroundings as we continue working with great clients.

As always, it is challenging to summarize the key takeaways from such a productive year. Here are a few of the research team's favorite moments that make us proud to work at Blink.

Digital media consumption habits

Smart TVs, set-top boxes, and mobile devices are all starting to come with sophisticated features for streaming and interacting with digital content in new ways. The past year brought Blink a number of usability projects related to digital media consumption on these devices. Through our research, we have helped clients identify and design solutions for a number of challenges related to engaging with digital content.

- For the most part, users simply want to **find and watch entertaining content**. It is important that additional features like web browsers, games, or supplemental information not interfere with users achieving this goal.
- A number of digital streaming and download services currently exist, such as Netflix, Amazon, and Hulu. Many users subscribe to more than one service, but find it inconvenient to have to use separate user interfaces for each. A better experience is one where **all available content is aggregated into a single interface** with clear options for sorting and filtering.
- Some digital content services provide unlimited access to select content for a fixed

monthly fee, while other services follow a pay-as-you-go model for a wider and newer selection of content. For users who have access to both models, **pay-as-you-go is often seen as a last resort** and unlimited or "free" content is preferred. As a result, users expect digital content browsing interfaces to help them find this "free" content first before turning to pay-as-you-go content.

Powerful mobile devices

Mobile devices have made their way into our usability labs numerous times in the past few years. Previous work also included a usability study comparing text entry methods across multiple smartphones, the resulting white paper and a presentation at the 2010 Design 4 Mobile Conference. Since then, we have experienced a surge of interest from clients seeking to evaluate their mobile devices or interfaces for ease of use, effectiveness and overall value. Some of our top findings from the 2011 mobile usability studies were concerned with using advanced features and making financial transactions.

- Mobile app developers are starting to pack **more advanced functionality** into their interfaces. While this brings smartphones and tablets closer to providing capabilities similar to desktop and laptop computers, it also requires closer attention to user-centered design principles. For example, several mobile apps that we tested in the past year suffered from insufficient visual cues to help users understand the steps involved in using features, available navigation options, and the current status of the device.
- Users are becoming more comfortable with **completing financial transactions** using smartphones and tablets. When interviewing users about their most common activities on smartphones and tablets, we heard many talk about the convenience of using a mobile device to view their checking account balance, place food delivery orders, and purchase digital and physical items. That said, security is still a valid concern for these users; most of the financial transactions that users told us about were completed using proprietary apps that users had deemed trustworthy, and they placed a high value on being able to choose whether or not to save sensitive data (such as credit card numbers) for future transactions in each app.

Cloud-based services go mainstream

In the past few years we have tested a number of cloud-based services aimed at the consumer market. Although these file storage and application solutions were previously focused on the business or enterprise market and came with a steep price tag, many cloud-based services are now available with little or no cost to everyone with a mobile or desktop computing device and an Internet connection. One of the greatest benefits of these offerings is the ability to sync local content to the cloud, which enables consumers to have access to their documents, music, photos, e-books, and other file types in both online and offline settings. While this is a great perk, participants in our usability lab have expressed confusion about interfaces that make them choose between online and offline content. Ideally, the interfaces should do the thinking for users by intelligently deciding which content to serve up based on the availability of an Internet connection.

In the future, Internet connectivity may become so pervasive that it is completely unnecessary to store anything locally. For the time being, however, there are still many day-to-day scenarios where consumers need to access their content in an offline state. Cloud-based services must make it easy for consumers to download and interact with local versions of their content to support these scenarios. Similarly, services must provide seamless syncing back to the cloud without users having to worry about losing any changes they made to their content.

Looking forward

The Blink research team is excited to see what 2012 will bring our way. We are especially looking forward to conducting more in-depth user research into the growing fields of digital media, mobile and cloud.