

Blink Digital's Steven Chester

Developing a unified authoring workflow that spans Hi Def DVDs to mobile media

By Frank Moldstad



Blink Digital's expanded team. From left are Steven Chester, Dan Post, Allie Rosenzweig and Jeffrey Eagle.

HD DVD or Blu-Ray? While marketers wrestle with that question, production houses are taking an agnostic approach, offering DVD authoring and creative services for whatever their clients want. But these days, clients are likely to ask about a variety of other interactive media formats as well, including Video-on-Demand (VOD), mobile devices and games.

Being ready for all this emerging media requires a good strategic plan, which is what Blink Digital, a Santa Monica, CA-based DVD production facility, has put into place. "The idea is to figure out how to put all the pieces together in one workflow so that we can do all those formats simultaneously," says Steven Chester, General Manager, Worldwide at Blink Digital. "That's really where the market is going."

The goal is to offer one-stop shopping to Blink Digital's customers, who include major players in the movie, TV, music and advertising industries. Content that can be distributed via everything from a Blu-ray disc to a mobile phone can be kept on the company's secure

servers for reauthoring to whatever format is required. And as part of the Ascent Media Group, Blink Digital can access assets from its sister divisions via the company's proprietary black fiber network.

"The challenges include having the right infrastructure, finding the talent, and having the ability to author on all those multiple formats," Chester says. Talent is an especially key ingredient, he notes. Blink has just hired several new creative executives charged with designing custom content for client projects.

Jeffrey Eagle, Executive Producer, Original Programming, joined Blink from Herzog-Cowen Entertainment, where as Creative Director he worked on DVD titles such as *Ray*, *Pirates of the Caribbean*, and "Desperate Housewives." Allie Rosenzweig, Producer, Original Programming comes to Blink from Sony Pictures Studios, where she was Director, DVD Content & Programming. She previously directed value-added material production at MGM Studios, working on such projects as the James Bond Collection DVD series. They are joined by new Art Director Dan Post, whose background includes New Wave Entertainment, Deluxe and B1 Media, and who is now overseeing DVD design and animation as well as other creative projects at Blink Digital.

"In hiring these people, the idea was to elevate our ability to provide out-of-the-box creative concepts for our clients, to offer a one-stop shop," Chester says. "With the pressures that the entire market is feeling, what's going on is that clients are really looking for a one-stop shop that can offer not only menu design but can also provide original programming," Chester says. "What we try to do is by having all of that in-house, provide them not only with great creative solutions but also provide them with financial incentives that make it worth their while."

Chester says the extra storage capacities of HD-DVD and Blu-ray are allowing the company to create some innovative features for titles currently in production, although specifics can't be divulged until the titles are released. "But the goal is to give consumers something different that validates their decision to go out and buy these new devices. Ideas that are being played around with are really new and unique, and I think what you are going to see is some cool features that have never been done before on standard DVDs," he says.

Some of the Blu-ray titles Blink is working on are destined for Sony's PlayStation 3 game consoles, which are coming out

Blink Digital's Steven Chester cont'd

with Blu-ray players in them. "You're going to see some of these Blu-ray releases with special features that will enhance the capabilities of the PlayStation 3, maybe with unique previews games, or things that you can do to showcase the film franchise or the game from that franchise," Chester notes.

For original programming and features, the earlier Blink is brought into the process, the better, Chester says. "That's where you get to the raw ideas, versus if someone hands you the material, you're limited to what you have."

For clients, the one-stop shopping approach solves not only logistical issues, but financial ones as well. "As corporations maximize the revenue, they're looking at ways to streamline the creative or production process," Chester notes. "That includes creating multiple elements that can be repurposed across the variety of formats and the media outlets that they're going to go to in the end."

Branding consistency is another important issue where a unified approach helps when authoring to multiple platforms. After all, a DVD has more a lot more screen space than a mobile phone.

"We're working with content owners to maintain their style guides across all formats, so there's a consistency in that brand," Chester says. "Whether you're seeing material on a Blu-ray disc, whether you're watching a 'mobisode' on that disc, or whether it's a broadband clip, the idea is consistency of the brand over all platforms."

The types of value-added content or original programming possible for various media formats depends on storage capacity, which could range from 1 GB on a mobile phone to potentially 100 GB on future multi-layer Blu-ray discs.

"For me this question is defined by storage, the type of device, and subjectively by the content. For example, I was looking at a movie based off of a videogame, which is a franchise property. There are many options that we could work with, from the commentary footage, to maybe an avatar, to a teaser for the videogame that might tie in to the movie. So it depends on the content and what the client wants to be introduced. And storage is really the constraint that you have."

Looking ahead, Chester sees a lot of potential in VOD with sporting events, concerts, location-based entertainment and premieres of major releases – or even original programming. "I think what you're starting to see now is there is certain content that works perfectly for VOD," he says.

"It will be interesting to see how our clients decide to promote to the consumer these VOD elements as they come, or these titles as they come forward. Will they be promotional at first and tied to commercials, as a way to get consumers to start actually watching these clips? I think that will determine a lot how quickly you are going to see consumers engaging in this content."

Even with all these emerging media formats, DVD is the majority of Blink's work, and probably will remain so for some time – in addition to the new Hi Def DVD formats, there's still a lot of life left in standard DVDs. "But with the addition of original programming, it has opened up some other areas for us, which are all the other formats we're talking about," says Chester.

"It's that term 'convergence' that people used in 2000 or 2001 when they were talking theoretically how everything was coming together. What you're seeing now is a lot of our clients focused on that. It's being put into practice, and the next piece of that will be financially figuring out how that works so that it can be profitable and so therefore it can grow."

In the end, it all comes down to consumer preference. And whatever that is, Blink will be ready. "The question is, in what way do consumers want to, for lack of a better term, consume their media? And right now, they're being offered all these options," Chester notes. "It's going to shake out in the end, but we're agnostic. What we're doing every day is meeting our clients' needs for the projects they have and what they want to do, and hopefully being able to supply them with the creative and technological solutions they need to get content out to the consumer."