

Is Virtual Reality becoming the New Reality?

Whether you're looking at a new-build river-side apartment or a potential venue for your wedding reception; whether it's that aging rock band, you had always promised yourself to see, or the latest Monet exhibition in the Louvre- London's Docklands at 11, Southern Italy for 12 and time for a quick bite before Paris at 2. There is a whole new world out there, where distance has no meaning and time runs in all directions at once. It's virtual. It's real. And it's waiting for you.

No Longer a Game

Time was when a mask resembling an old metal bucket would be placed over your head, with a few connecting wires and a couple of tubes attached, and you would become the Master of the Universe. You would slay multiple-tentacled creatures from other worlds, while you walked, on the spot, through greeny-grey gloom across a landscape lit by several suns and resembling the Dalek's Skaro- but less realistic than a 1960's iteration of Dr Who- wobbly scenery and dodgy camera-work and all. It was called 'Virtual Reality' (VR). But it wasn't. Yes, your vision of the landscape would follow the turn of your head, your laser would fire in the vague direction of your finger, but that was where the 'reality' bit stopped. The poorly drawn, cartoon landscape cocooned a computer game. It was fun. Virtual?...sort of. Reality?...no it wasn't.

But times have changed.

Reality Bites

VR has come of age. It's no longer all about kids playing games- or adults pretending to be kids playing games. Yes, there are still VR games for kids, of course, but there's much more going on- and it is very serious. The virtual has become a reality. In a world where most real estate purchases begin at a computer screen, VR is not an escape. It is bringing 2 dimensions into 3 and transforming a viewing, from a merely visual experience, into an emotional, *immersive* experience. Be careful, that bear in the third cage from the left bites!

The Viewer in Control

Instead of looking at a few photos or watching a video, the viewer is a participant. It is no longer a passive role. He tours a venue, in his own time and at his own pace. He is not looking at a screen, he is within the environment. In some ways, it's about control. The viewer is in control. He can turn left or right, look up or down. He decides on how his experience progresses. It's not about some unseen

cameraman or a video editor deciding to 'cut' or leave that bit out. In the VR world, the viewer makes the decisions. He is not seeing a presentation, he is taking a tour.

Construction Leads

Certainly, in the field of construction and building design, the virtual world is already shining a light- on every bolt and wire and meter of ducting. Engineers and specifiers can walk around a project and get a real feel for how the whole thing is going to come together- along with the potential pit falls that could lie ahead. This also allows other stake-holders to see and approve design-points and confirm amendments in real-time. In this way, the project becomes truly collaborative at all levels, rather than a basic 'yes...no' at varying stages of construction. The ramifications of the positioning of a nurse's station, for example, can be more easily understood in a walk-through environment, where beds and patients can be seen, rather than on a more traditional CAD drawing, where the relationship to the viewer would need to be imagined.

Try Before You Buy

Likewise, customized office buildings or apartment blocks can be seen while experiencing the different effects of natural light at varying times of the day. Views from windows can be compared between one site and another. Changes and improvements to interiors can be agreed before building work even begins, so buyer and seller are in more complete agreement- making defaults and disagreements far less likely. A purchaser knows exactly what it will feel like to walk into his lounge; he's been there before, in the virtual world. There will be neither shocks nor surprises, merely familiarity. In making the outcome of the purchase decision more predictable, virtual reality de-risks that decision and makes it easier to make.

Answering the Call

For some years, it has been accepted truism that potential clients can no longer be 'sold to'. That taking a too pro-active sales approach can be self-defeating. The potential buyer will be scared-off, annoyed- or just plain bored. To fill this new gap in accepted sales practice, a new marketing mantra arose, that of inbound marketing. In inbound marketing and sales, the buyer is not pursued, but lured. It uses a consumer's desire to research and learn about a product, before making-up their own mind whether to buy, as the worm on the hook that will reel-in the sale. It's less about content as king; more about content as bait. In that 2-dimensional world, consumers want knowledge and reviews. The challenge is for sellers to become part of that dialogue.

The Next Step on the Buying Path

It is in the area of engagement, that VR really takes the whole thing a huge step further. The learning and the research gets left on the computer's page as a potential buyer can experience how the purchase will feel, along with the benefits it brings. It's not just about the carpeting of a new lounge or the light fittings in a hallway. With the average consumer seeing 5,000 marketing messages a day- 10 times more than in the 1970's- it is becoming increasingly difficult for sellers to stand-out from the crowd and offer value in, and of, the marketing message itself.

VR Creates Emotional Engagement

It is the Big 'E' of rudimentary sales and marketing. Emotion. Engage the buyer at an emotional level and the stage is set for a successful sale. Not only that, but the sheer novelty of the VR experience will have the buyer coming back for more. It is a very rare example of that most elusive of marketing goals; to have a marketing message and delivery method that actually impacts on the product, itself, and on the way it is perceived.

And it Works

Thomas Cook saw a 190% increase in New York travel when it launched its 'Try Before You Fly' virtual tour campaign. Viewers got the chance to 'experience' New York as never before. Their appetites were whetted and they booked tours in increasing numbers.

Absolut Vodka used drones to create a VR experience around sold-out concerts, which saw benefits, not just to the consumer, but to the company with its positioning with music partners.

Marriott Hotels created VR tours around London and Hawaii- and saw bookings rise as the campaign, itself, raised great interest in the press.

There's No Time Like the Future

It has been a while coming, with a few false-starts and the odd car-crash. How many of us even remember Google Glass? But with headset sales exceeding a million, (<https://www.forbes.com/sites/paullamkin/2017/11/30/virtual-reality-headset-sales-hit-1-million/#5496c2722b61>) VR is already the 'Next Big Thing' as it takes the place of rich media content from the screen and replaces it with a user experience that is...an experience.