brand emotion
creative film and events

Virtual Reality & B2B marketing: What the future holds

Our lead developer Tim Watts answers the most common questions on virtual reality asked by marketing professionals

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Tim Watts talks VR

Tim Watts is an experienced photographer and motion graphic designer and is the lead VR developer for Brand Emotion. He is currently developing an exciting virtual reality experience aimed at children from 8 -15 who will be visiting events to celebrate the 100th anniversary of the RAF. Tim has a wealth of experience in delivering engaging digital experiences for global brands including Fujitsu, Linde Group and BMW.

The jargon explained!

There's so much jargon around virtual reality – for those of us new to all of this can you explain the difference between VR, 360-degree video and AR?

"Well, all of these are awesome technologies which are going to become more and more important for marketing professionals over the next five years.

Of the three you refer to, the easiest one to explain is 360-degree video. This is video where a view in every direction is recorded at the same time rather than just a single direction. This is achieved using an omnidirectional camera or a carefully configured collection of cameras set up as a rig. When you watch a 360-degree video you can control your viewing direction using your computer or tablet controls or by turning your head in a Virtual Reality headset.

Augmented reality or AR is a bit more complicated. It is where your view of a physical, real-world environment is "augmented" by computer-generated information or content being introduced into the "real" picture. Pokémon Go is the most popular example of AR; players look at the world through their phone's camera and see the game's content as if it were really there.

Most AR is experienced through a tablet or smart phone and there is no real need for a Virtual reality headset.

Virtual Reality or VR is entirely different. The viewer is immersed in an environment that is artificially created instead of recorded with cameras, but which delivers a superrealistic experience. This immersive environment can be similar to the real world, such as the latest model of a car or the interior of new building, or it could be completely sci-fi like the surface of an imaginary planet or the inside of a star ship.

Of the three – virtual reality is getting the greatest traction in marketing applications."

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Experience breathtaking VR yourself. Click the playhead left to experience 360° VR Spacewalk

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Know your headsets

Samsung Gear

Occulus Rift

HTC Vive

Let's talk about headsets. What is the difference between the smartphone-based headsets like Samsung's Gear VR or Google Daydream and the more expensive Occulus Rift and HTC Vive?

"There is a huge difference between the two types of headsets and I am going to have to get a little bit technical to explain why. The first big difference is to do with a concept called Degrees of Freedom (DOF).

When tracking an object, we measure the rotation and translation. Both have 3 degrees of freedom (3DOF). Rotation means pitch, yaw and roll and Translation means forward/back, left/right, up/ down. We say something has 6DOF when it has the ability to track both.

Most smartphone headsets track only the rotation of the head (3DOF). The Occulus Rift and HTC Vive devices track 6DOF for both the head and hands. As an experience, the difference really cannot be overstated.

The first is like being completely surrounded by an amazing vista in 3D.

The second is like moving to your right, looking around a tree then reaching and pulling the branches out of your way to reveal a hidden cave. This is presence. You don't need instructions to tell you to press buttons, you think there is a branch in your way and you move it out the way with little (if any) conscious effort. You know you are in a simulation, but your hand has already reached out to the branch and you'll completely forget you could simply move yourhead through the branch (there's nothing to physically stop you).

The other difference between the devices is their frame rate; Smartphone devices can run a maximum of 60 frames per second where an Occulus Rift or Vive can run at a maximum of 90 frames per second. A faster frame creates a more impactful and fluid experience for users. Having a higher frame rate also reduces the likelihood of a user feeling unwell or nauseous.

So, if you are considering commissioning a VR project in a B2B marketing context, it really is better to develop it around the high-end headsets."

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Making a great VR experience

With all your experience of producing VR experiences what techniques do you use to make a VR experience really memorable?

"The art of creating a great VR experience is to subtly direct your user's attention without restricting their natural curiosity and the movement that VR offers. You can spend thousands of pounds creating an experience with intricate parts, but if you fail to guide the user towards those parts then the work is wasted. Signposting important elements is a delicate challenge; too little and they don't see it, too much and they are drawn out of the immersion of the moment…

…Let me give you an example. We created a VR experience of a hospital of the future, designed to show how technology will reduce the workload for clinical staff on a ward. The problem we found is that, when we wanted to draw the user 's attention to technology that controlled the flow of oxygen to a patient in their bed, the user could be looking in completely the opposite direction and watching what was happening at the nurse's station!

We learned that the user 's perspective — their position within the experience — is everything. Positioning and moving the camera (by that I mean where the user is positioned within the experience) is a delicate but necessary part of continuing and developing the narrative.

So, for the hospital project we moved our user from the centre of the ward, to the bedside and then to the nurse's station and rather than moving them across the scene which risked making the user feel unwell. We used the fade-to-black video technique, and when the lights come back up the user's position has changed.

The other import ant point is that when a user puts on a VR headset they want to be entertained – they want it to be fun. So, adding elements that capture the user's attention makes them smile and provokes comments.

This really enhances the level of engagement."

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Technology that will change VR

VR technology is changing fast. What new developments are worth getting excited about?

"There's no doubt that we're in the early stages of VR, which is what makes it so exciting to work in.

Headsets are a big focus at the moment. The current generation can provide great experiences, but they're still bulky and awkward to use and so we are starting to see devices that are wireless and smaller in size.

Aesthetics are also being improved; nobody likes an ugly headset. New devices such as the recently announced HTC Vive Pro offer significantly improved image quality thanks to a higher resolution on the lenses the user looks at. Better image: better experience.

The high cost of good VR hardware is an additional challenge. I think new technology such as eye-tracking will help with this. If your device knows where your eyes are focused at any given moment, you can save processing power by taking advantage of our peripheral vision by presenting lower quality visuals in the edges of your view that go unnoticed. This advanced technique – known as 'foveated rendering' – may lower the hardware requirements of headsets significantly.

Eye-tracking could be a potential game-changer for guiding attention, as effects and information can be presented only when the user looks at the appropriate area with their eyes and not just their head. This could be a major development, especially for advertisers that are keen on the idea of placing ads within a VR experience.

We're also seeing innovation in how the computers that power headsets are being carried, with waist and back-mounted setups starting to appear. These are exciting to see, as they could improve immersion and make larger, more free-form experiences possible. Instead of needing to be near the computer powering the device, you simply take it with you."

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VR in B2B

"Whilst the high-end headsets are expensive for consumers, they are still very much affordable for enterprise customers. VR, as it is today, in my view represents a huge opportunity for B2B clients wanting to showcase their product or service in a memorable way.

From my own experience, the level of engagement generated by VR is off the scale compared to any other format - and that's its main attraction. You can get a super-busy CEO to spend 5 to 10 minutes going through a VR experience where the same CEO would struggle to watch a 2-minute video all the way through. In fact, a company that spends £50,000 on a VR experience and £100,000 on a video experience can, in my view, expect a better return on investment from their VR content. It's new, it's novel and it's entirely immersive. This makes early adoption a great choice."

Hosted at our London HQ Office, close to Waterloo Station, our VR Taster sessions are running throughout 2022 and will provide you with a 'marketer's insight' into the power of VR. Spaces are limited. **If you are interested in attending please get in touch.**

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