

Why take buyers to a virtual world?

An introduction to VR for B2B marketers

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Virtual Reality: not just for gamers

An introduction to VR

Developments in virtual reality are gathering pace. Adoption rates are up and the depth, breadth and quality of content is steadily increasing. Forbes reported that from January to March 2016, $1.1 billion dollars was invested in VR. That compares to $2 billion in the whole of 2015.

While the gaming industry is the undisputed frontrunner of VR, it is now being embraced for wider business applications. Confidence in the capabilities and longevity of the technology is growing, and marketers across the globe are taking note.

Whether you're enthused by the potential of VR or sceptical about its relevance to your brand, you can't afford to ignore it. This paper spotlights B2B applications and gives practical guidance if you're planning your first steps into the immersive world of VR.

> "Forbes reported that from January to March 2016, **$1.1 billion dollars was invested in VR**"

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VR for B2B brands

So why would a B2B brand want to transport people to a virtual world? First off, we're not talking about Second Life, Kaneva or any other virtual worlds geared solely towards social interactions. Rather, in a B2B context, VR enables prospects and buyers to view and explore relevant places or things that would otherwise be inaccessible.

Take General Electric (GE). To mark the opening of its Brazil Technology Center in 2014, the organisation created a VR installation complete with headsets and rumble seats. The objective was to take users to a virtual deep sea oil production facility where they could witness GE equipment in situ and visualise future technologies. By immersing potential buyers and other stakeholders in this experience, GE underlined its position as an innovator at the heart of subsea technologies.

Visit the GE Subsea Virtual Reality experience >

Early adopters in other sectors are also making good use of the technology. Architectural and construction firms use it to bring blueprints to life, enhancing planning and reducing risk for the construction phase of projects. And it's also being deployed in the medical sector to demonstrate the fit and function of implants and devices.

It's clear there are many ways in which VR can help B2B brands boost engagement, as well as add value to interactions with prospects and buyers. This can be delivered through facilitating differentiation and leadership positioning as well as educating buyers about ground-breaking or complex technologies.

But how do you know when the time is right for your brand to explore VR? It's important to put in some groundwork before you take the plunge.

> "Gartner predicts that during 2016 **over 2 million VR headsets will be sold**"



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The 3 C's of VR planning

Any brand thinking of creating a VR asset should begin by considering customers, content and cost.

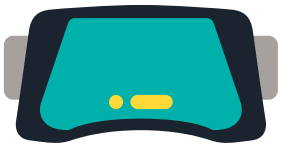


Customers

Before investing in VR, think about how your buyers will interact with it. Not many brands have the resources to create a VR installation like the one in the GE example on the previous page.

Uptake of VR devices is on the rise, partly driven by the emergence of entry level headsets. Google alone has shipped more than 5 million of its Cardboard headsets since 2014. Other, more advanced brands are keeping pace. Gartner predicts that a further 2 million VR headsets will be sold in 2016. While total sales are expected to hit 200 million by 2020 according to Fortune. So it's safe to say there's an ever growing market for VR content.

That said, it's important to remember that this is still an emerging technology. As it stands, B2B buyers are unlikely to have a VR headset at their desk or in their work bag. However, that doesn't preclude the sector from exploring immersive content. VR can be deployed as an excellent brand engagement platform at events, whilst 360 video offers a lot of potential for B2B applications too.



Content

Development of VR content should be subject to the same rigours as traditional video. Clearly there are many more layers and levels to think about during the actual production phase, but at the planning stage, your main considerations should be:

- **What will buyers gain from the content?**
  It must deliver added value, and there should be a good rationale for using VR as opposed to traditional video.
- **How will they access the content?**
  If the asset will live online, think about where it will sit, and how it will play out on different devices - with or without a headset.
- **When will they engage with it?**
  Ensure content is geared towards the appropriate stage of the buyer journey – whether that's at the top of the funnel or when making purchase decisions.



Cost

As with linear video, it's difficult to put a generic price tag on creating VR content. The potential scope and range is vast, and the type of device it will be consumed on also has an impact on production requirements. The overall cost will be dictated by multiple factors and it is more beneficial to think in terms of investment vs. return, rather than cost alone.

Nevertheless, steps can be taken to avoid costs spiralling out of control. A robust brief should be drawn up at the outset to ensure variables are nailed down. To maximise return on investment, the best possible team should be selected for the job. This should include people with VR or 360 video expertise, as their knowledge and insights will be invaluable across planning, creative and project management activity.

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Before you get started....

Once you're ready to get going with your first project, take a moment to consider these points:

Don't focus on being first, focus on being the best

Avoid creating VR content for the sake of it. Find the right moment and invest in something that will have a really positive impact. Ensure there is a good rationale for creating an immersive experience – it needs to add value that wouldn't be achieved with linear video.

Adapt the content planning process

VR has many parallels with linear video production, but putting a little more thought into the planning process could save a lot of time and money later.

Teams need to 'think beyond the rectangle'. Steps such as replacing rectangular storyboard cells with circles that provide an aerial view can enhance visualisation of the 360 nature of VR.

Educate stakeholders

Lack of familiarity with VR is a significant risk factor when it comes to getting projects off the ground and approved. Key stakeholders need to be educated about the capabilities and limitations, as well as the objectives and rationale for the project. At the very least, anyone who will review the content should be well-versed in VR. Otherwise, any feedback may be unhelpful or even detrimental.

Top tips for VR production

Without care, VR experiences can shift from immersive to overwhelming. Production values need to be sensitive to the fact that this is a new and unfamiliar medium for many users.

Here are a few things we've learnt when working on VR assets:

1. Just being there is ok: this isn't like regular video content – give viewers the opportunity to explore and take things in. They are in an entirely new environment so allow them time to understand it.
2. Quality over length: experience is everything – don't bloat the content with too many business messages, implicit or otherwise. Continually ask what value is being added to the user experience.
3. Be consistent: when someone enters a virtual world, there is a lot to take in. Keep it gentle – don't jump around between multiple perspectives. A steady, harmonious experience is far more valuable and satisfying for users.
4. Don't overwhelm: viewers should enjoy the content. If the immersion goes too far, they won't want a repeat experience.
5. End calm: this is especially important if the viewer is wearing a headset – wind down gently for an easier transition back to the real world.

VR vs 360 video

The terms VR and 360 video are sometimes used interchangeably, but they are not the same thing. VR is a revolutionary technology enabling users to control their own movements in a virtual world. 360 video is an evolution of linear video where users simply control the perspective of the camera.

Nevertheless, 360 does unlock opportunities for a more immersive brand experience. What's more, it can be consumed on platforms such as YouTube and Facebook – with a VR headset enhancing the experience, but not being essential. Marketers who already work with video could test 360 as a precursor to virtual reality content.





Conclusion

This is an exciting time to be in the content creation space. Ten years ago, video marketing was practically non-existent, yet look at its success now. VR is poised to follow the same path, but with visualisation capabilities that far transcend traditional video.

Nobody can predict exactly when VR will become truly mainstream. But all the signs indicate that it is set to become an important medium. Over the coming months, we’re likely to see a surge of trailblazer brands testing the water with marketing executions involving VR and 360. If you’re one of them, don’t operate in isolation. Talk to people who have experience producing immersive content; even if they operate in an entirely different sector, the insights they can bring will be invaluable.

Most importantly, remember that there needs to be a tangible reason for taking B2B buyers to a virtual world – if VR isn’t essential, don’t use it.

The best advice for any B2B marketer at this stage is to watch and learn. If you haven’t experienced VR, get hold of an entry level headset such as Google Cardboard and explore the content that’s readily available online. Keep an eye on the VR marketing space, across B2C as well as B2B brands, to see how use of the technology develops over time. And if you’re sceptical about the potential of VR – try to be open-minded. Otherwise you might find yourself at a distinct disadvantage in years to come.

Discover how virtual reality can help you take buyers to new worlds.

Get in touch:
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About the authors

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David is responsible for ensuring Harte Hanks’ client activity is effective and results-driven. He has headed-up activity for key B2B accounts including Microsoft, IBM, HP and Juniper. Leading Harte Hanks’ global activity for Samsung, David has been involved with ground-breaking VR and 360 video projects. He’s an enthusiastic digital marketer, with a passion for the continued innovation and evolution of creativity. He believes that in today’s rapidly changing world, brands need to adapt quickly to stay ahead.

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Living in the centre of the creative problem solving process, Simon helps brands untangle complex digital, marketing and business challenges. He achieves this via the development of intelligent strategies that shape sophisticated creative ideas. Simon has worked with B2B clients across a number of verticals including telecoms, media and tech. An advocate of innovative and results-driven marketing, he is currently exploring the VR marketing agenda with leading brands.