Chapter 19

Immersive Media and Branding: How Being a Brand Will Change and Expand in the Age of True Immersion

Linda Ricci

https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0985-6660
Decahedralist Consulting, USA

ABSTRACT

This chapter explores the impact immersive technologies—augmented reality and virtual reality—will have on consumer branding and business in the near- and longer-term future. Weaving multiple use cases and examples throughout, the author discusses the next phase of experiential marketing: how immersive branding will develop as spatial computing becomes more mainstream, and how brands can start thinking about how they can leverage the technology. The author examines the rise of virtual influencers, how they will affect social media marketing—and how artificial intelligence will ultimately enable true one-to-one interaction with customers through virtual avatars. Finally, the author discusses risks, rules, and recommendations for how to successfully proceed as a brand curious about how to best harness the technologies.

INTRODUCTION

It’s an old story.

There are new technologies on the scene—immersive media, experiential marketing—and brands are watching, struggling to figure out what it will mean for them. How they should be involved? What opportunities do they bring? What are the risks? Some will hang back, waiting; some will dive right in, wanting to be first. Many brand efforts won’t even be noticed, but others that embrace these new frontiers will achieve successes, winning customers and establishing deeper relationships with the ones they have.

Virtual Reality, Augmented Reality and Mixed Reality (VR/AR/MR)—or the more inclusive term, XR—form the latest tools in the brand arsenal. They are part of emerging spatial computing revolu-
tion, fueled by immense computing power, unbridled connection speed, and increasingly sophisticated artificial intelligence, combining to create a new generation of immersive technology.

Although it is very early in the mass adoption of these immersive technologies, now is the time for brands to strategize, plan and/or experiment in the spatial computing worlds. Brands that take this leap will be ahead of the curve when these media develop more mainstream methods in the marketing and communications domains. Brands that position themselves to harness immersive technologies are positioning themselves for the next big disruption. This isn’t the future ... this is now.

BACKGROUND

The evolution of what the word “brand” means has morphed over time. Originally it was a promise: a shortcut for choice in a marketplace. In a sea of sameness, being a brand allowed a product or service to stand out, be recognized, and say something about itself that would encourage purchase or even status.

Brands have come a long way from being logos and signage; with each incremental addition of media, brands have adapted. Where once it was important for brands to simply have a name that was memorable or a recognizable logo, they evolved to encompass sound and voice for radio and memorable (though short) stories for television. But in all these cases the method was to broadcast a message in the hopes it would resonate and build rapport with customers.

The arrival of digital technologies and the mass penetration of the Internet around 25 years ago—and subsequently, the connectivity brought by mobile networks—has changed the relationship between consumers and brands. Some brands such as Apple or Nike have inspired tribal fandom bordering on cult status. Brand has become a relationship between a consumer and a product, one that has evolved to thrive on dialogue and listening (on the company’s part). Technology now lets consumers become content creators and sharers, taking brands from out of the driver’s seat to serving as copilots and collaborators. Peer groups have become stronger influencers on brand choices than any paid-for media or planned brand positioning. Customers have become content creators who are partners, allies and advocates, versus target audiences.

The meteoric growth and influence of social media has created social platforms that are an incredible opportunity for brands to engage with their audiences and gather insightful data on who they are, what they do, and identify what they want and deliver it in a personal way. The rise of influencers and social networks as a key element of a brand’s marketing strategy has changed the relationship between brands and consumers. The power of influencers cannot be overstated. “Influencers” is a nebulous term that can include paid influencers, and social networks themselves, such as online groups, peers, friends, and reviews.

WHAT IS IMMERSIVE BRANDING

There is no definitive definition of the term Immersive Branding. Generally speaking, it is used in reference to a brand experience that’s translated into a variety of mediums, working together to create a metaphorical 360° experience of the brand thus creating a holistic brand experience.
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