

VR Marketing in Life Sciences

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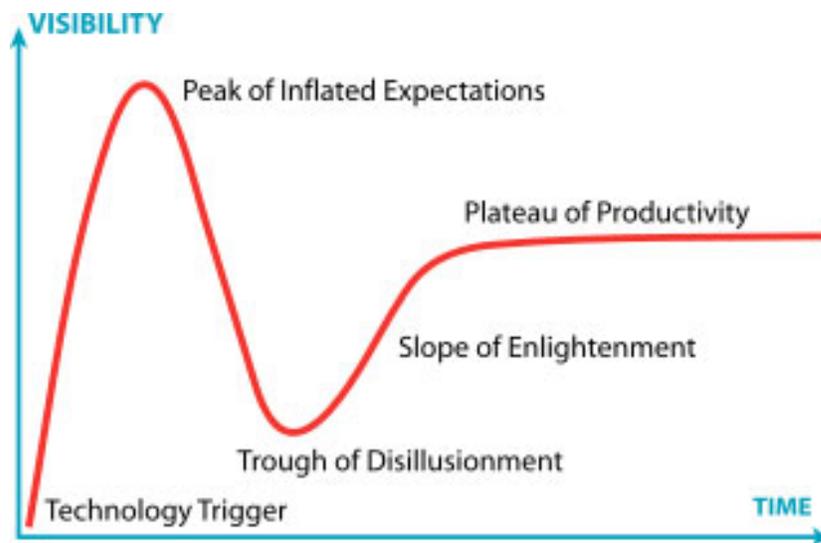
<http://recode.net/2015/07/27/whats-the-difference-between-virtual-augmented-and-mixed-reality/>
Composite image by Re/code; original: Japanexperterna.se

In marketing, there is a bit of showmanship and education. The use of spectacle and novelty as a way to attract attention and gain a foothold into the mind of a target audience has long been an accepted technique of the savvy marketer. More and more novelty experiences, such as Virtual Reality and Augmented Reality, are being used in trade shows and for sales support in the field, but they often do not have the desired impact due to poor understanding of the presentation requirements for such novel experiences. To make the experiences fully resonate, the presentation needs to be designed with the participant's mental state in mind throughout their entire experience.

Virtual Reality (VR) is a human interface concept where the user has their senses fed by artificial stimulus that presents a sensory experience so strikingly real that the suspension of disbelief is both established and maintained. Sight, sound, touch, scent, positional orientation, and context can all be fed by virtual interfaces. In real life, application VR is challenged by both physical and representational issues. From the impact of donning the sensory devices, to the acclimation to the new reality, there are barriers to suspending disbelief.

Today, VR is mainly defined by sight, sound, and positional orientation as the primary sensory replacements. These are most frequently expressed in a Head-mounted display (HMD) and a pair of ear-phones. Because most people have not had many VR experiences, the experience may be a bit off-putting, claustrophobic or unsettling for the first-time user. The majority of the initial experience is simply orienting oneself in the new environment, which can be challenging.

The classic Gartner Hype curve for technology correlates to the novice user's experience with immersion in a VR encounter (see below). First, there is the novelty of the experience and then the acclimation to the environment, which is characterized by frustration, as it does not do what is completely expected. This is followed by enlightenment to how this new world works, leading to initial exploration of environment and finally, the slow climb to mastering the basics, which results in the ability to explore the environment in depth. In VR, it is about 5 minutes from the trigger to the slope of enlightenment.



In the marketing world, we tell stories to educate. We talk of value, quality, brand, and experience. We do this to increase awareness to potential customers for a whole host of reasons. In Life Sciences, we talk about products from both a scientific and a medical benefit point of view. Clinical representation and support is required for the delivery of communications. Depending on the marketing product segment—promotional or educational—different FDA guidelines influence the content required to present and support the message. Safety information, prescribing information, clinical study references, established guidelines or disclaimers need to accompany and balance the story message to ensure that the information is in compliance with the regulatory mandates.

Telling a story in a VR experience is not only challenged by the novelty of the experience, but also by the regulatory constraints upon the medium of presentation. In order to overcome both of these issues, it is best to utilize a method of presentation that includes three phases: Preparation, Interaction, and Debrief. In location-based entertainment, this is referred to as Pre-show, Show, and Post-show; in military situations, it is Planning & Preparing, Conducting, and After Action Review.

For example, with a trade show experience, there is a short period of time when you have the attention of the audience. Generally, for the fully engaged participant, it is only a few minutes, and even less for an interloper who is merely there to snatch a pamphlet or a mint! This short period of time must be spent wisely and appropriately in order to achieve the sought-after goal at the booth. Novelty is always seen as a booth draw and VR fits that bill—it may even convert an interloper into an engaged participant. However, does it get the message across to the participant? Unless the participant is prepared for the experience, then the answer is almost always “no,” because it does not allow for enough time to capture and comprehend any story that might be presented. From the engagement curve previously presented, we know that a user is primarily focusing on aligning to the environment by the time the experience is over.

In order to fully experience a VR situation, everything needs to be laid out and repeated at all three phases. To ensure that an experience has the maximum potential for relaying a story, there should be a pre-experience briefing that highlights what the operational mechanics are and the story that will be presented. There should be visual depictions and references of what the audience is to look for in the scene and an explanation of why it is important. Also, any disclaimers or important information related to any regulatory requirements should be presented.

During the experience, visual text, which lacks resolution in the display, should be either minimal or appear very large. This will aid the participant’s orientation to reading text in the 3D world. Text can be presented as a heads-up display, overlaying on top of the simulation window, but keep in mind that this will remove the participant from the experience for what might often be of little value. An immersive 3D environment is not ideal for reading. On the other hand, audio is effective; however, a narrative can be confusing unless the narrator is a guide who is talking about the nature of what an audience is experiencing. While you can determine that a user is looking in a general direction, you cannot confirm that a user is looking at the subject at hand; therefore, the narration needs to be general to the environment or subject being illustrated, and not specific to the visual elements in the scene.

After the experience, there should be a post-show debrief in which the important elements are recapped, the story reiterated, and the experience evaluated. Outside of the VR experience is also where heavier text, disclaimers, and safety information should be highlighted. The recap should be in the form of: “What you have just experienced is...” In this way, you ensure that the message from the pre-show, the message during the experience, and the confirmation of the message after the VR experience has the highest potential of being impactful. Also, with the debrief, you can assess the effectiveness of the message to the audience, which is often a revealing activity.

VR for tradeshows needs to be focused on supporting the message of the simulation or presentation and not on the novelty of the interface. The user needs to be in a state of mind to comprehend the message. You can help the user reach this state by preparing for the experience, executing the experience, and recapping what the experience revealed.