

Whitepaper

How to Apply Virtual Reality as a Market Research Methodology

Introduction

In the last 12 months Virtual Reality (VR) has gone from being a very expensive technology to one that is affordable, with the introduction of Google Cardboard and the Google Cardboard camera app. Other technologies also exist which has brought Virtual Reality into the homes of everyday consumers. In fact, premium VR headsets were one of the most popular technological Christmas presents in 2016.



All of this means that the market research industry should now be asking the question; can VR really add value to our toolbox of techniques?

VR is not a new technology. In fact, it's been around since 1968, when the very first Head Mounted Display (HMD) unit was created. But it was only in 2012 that the headsets started to become more affordable. And only in the last 12 months they have seen mainstream use.

Benefits of Virtual Reality

So what are the benefits of using VR in research? The most obvious benefit is its ability to transport the participant to a different dimension, allowing them to experience new products or services that have yet to be developed. This is great opportunity in relation to sectors where the costs and speed of prototype design can be barriers to innovation. However, for VR to be successful as a universal market research tool, it needs to provide exclusive,

genuine research benefits over and above existing face-to-face or online methods.

“ For VR to be successful in market research, it must provide UNIQUE selling points over and above existing methodologies. ”

Virtual Reality USP 1: The Participant Partnership

The first market research USP of Virtual Reality is that it engages the participant like nothing else. In an age where response rates are challenged and the cost of incentives is soaring, researchers are under increasing pressure add interest to projects for participants. VR resolves this issue. In part, because of its current novelty, but moreover it creates an unequivocal partnership between the commissioning organisation and the participant.



Participants are immersed in a VR based study to a much greater extent than with any other methodology; they can see their input and value more directly, which increases engagement exponentially. In a co-creative customer focused world, this level of cohesion between brand and participant is invaluable.

Virtual Reality USP 2: A Higher 'Presence'

presence:

noun

the state or fact of existing, occurring or being present

Oxford Dictionary

The second market research USP of Virtual Reality is immersive insight. Virtual immersion results in heightened interaction compared to showing people 2D images and stimuli. And this higher degree of interaction with the subject has benefit: it gives a higher 'presence', a term used by psychologists when they measure the degree of psychological (brain) activity that a participant experiences. The greater the level of brain activity: the more realistic the insights.



If market research is about generating realistic quality insight, psychological presence is an industry must: a direct return on VR investment.

“ *The higher the participant interaction: the higher the participant presence.*

The higher the participant presence: the higher the insight accuracy. ”

So what are the primary market research applications for VR?

Top 6 Virtual Reality Research Applications

1. Rapid Prototyping

The most obvious VR research application is rapid prototyping in the early stages of product design. Infant designs are not often tested with consumers due to the cost constraints of producing realistic product mock-ups. When they are researched, it is usually done with concept descriptions or 2D designs; but the timescales involved in this can outweigh the cost-benefit of bothering. VR changes this. Virtual product mock-ups enable direct involvement from consumers at all the stages of the design process. This reduces the risk of products failing and increases the financial return on product launch, making it the number one application for VR.

2. Spatial Experience Testing

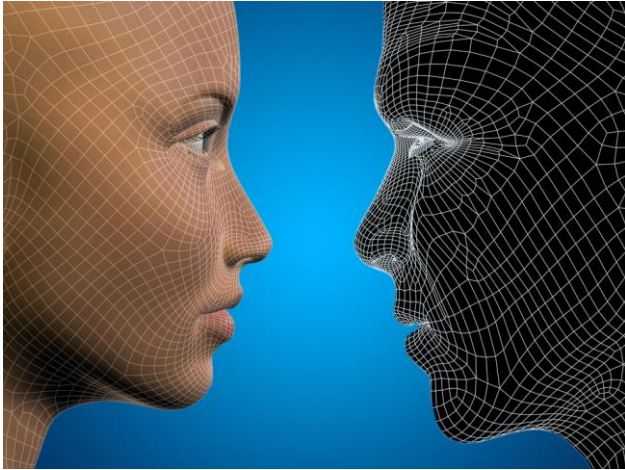


Currently it is impossible to solicit feedback on the spatial element of new customer experience. The only way to elicit feedback on a new store layout or building structure in actuality, is to build it and then do exit interviews. But with VR, the environment can be built virtually for customers to wander around and interact. This reduces the risk and cost of launching new services. Perfect for a retailer, a holiday resort, an hotelier or even an architect.

3. Projective Tasks

Projective techniques are often discussed in research circles. Asking a participant to imagine him or herself in a different scenario; as a different person encourages them to think creatively, which is great if a target audience is hard to reach or finds

it difficult to articulate their needs. VR goes one step further imitating physical transference.



IKEA for example, researched safer kitchen designs that were more child-friendly by using VR to allow parents to experience a range of kitchens from the perspective of a 3-year old. This technique could work in a wide variety of situations from public policy design (a politician can experience a new immigration system) to commercial feedback (a business owner can experience their premises as a disabled person).

“ VR augments the need for psychological transference in projective research techniques by simulating physical transference. ”

4. Controlled Environment



Researchers often discuss the significant influence that context has on participants. It is well documented that time, task type, the weather, and

the presence of other people have an effect on customer feedback. VR allows for the control of environmental factors; they can be removed completely or individually to evaluate the impact of each.

“ The research industry should actively encourage the use of VR for further understanding of environmental influence on respondents. ”

5. Virtual Focus Groups and Interviews

Webcam interviews and focus groups are gaining traction as a way of increasing convenience for participants and reducing travel costs for researchers. However, many participants still prefer text based focus group and interview methods due to the additional confidentiality and anonymity that they provide. VR discussion groups can bridge this gap.



Using avatars instead of webcam visuals, a group can discuss freely as they would in a face-to-face scenario, with the anonymity and comfort provided by text chat discussions.

6. Stakeholder Presentations

How about using VR to share insight with stakeholders? This could take a variety of formats, from a virtual meeting (reducing travel time and costs) to having stakeholders interact with findings. Imagine the impact of using 3D charts that can;

literally, be climbed upon to demonstrate the customer satisfaction lags or potential barriers to new product adoption. This is a novel and experimental use of VR but one that will certainly engage your audience, increasing their 'presence' and 'buy-in' to a much greater degree than that of 2D charts.



Constraints

There are challenges associated with the application of VR in market research. The obvious one of cost still exists, not in terms of the HMD units, rather the cost of creating the necessary virtual environments. The level of programming required here is complex and time-consuming, which may limit the use of VR to studies where the cost of actual production is currently even greater. However, technology will advance and costs will reduce.

“ The insight possibilities of VR will be restricted where tangible physicality is essential. ”

VR is also unrealistic in certain circumstances. For example, feedback on the prototype of a new car cannot be holistic if it can't be physically felt. Participants may try, but the brain struggles to cope with the lack of physical presence that exists. Insight possibilities will be restricted in these areas.

In Conclusion

There is no doubt that VR is an innovative niche of market research. And as costs continue to fall and industry understanding and experience grows, it is sure to play a much greater role. Potentially it is an ideal marriage of the online and face-to-face research worlds that exist today. These are currently contrasted as polar opposites but VR provides the connection, combining the convenience of online together with the presence of the face-to-face techniques.

The most compelling argument for VR in market research is the increased 'presence' that it gives participants; this significantly increases the value of the feedback.

“ Virtual reality combines fundamental online and face-to-face research benefits. ”

Will VR become more relevant to the industry or will it pass as a fad? Neither. It's unlikely to become the mainstream research method, like all methods it has its limitations, but nor will its use fade away. VR is here to stay and when properly understood, is another valuable tool in the market research arsenal.



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