

# Virtual reality revolutionizes the retail experience

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Brendon Moran tries out a virtual reality headset for the first time as his family stops by to shop for shoes at the Toms store in Los Angeles, California, April 1, 2016. Photo: Marcus Yam/Los Angeles Times/TNS

LOS ANGELES, Calif. — The next time you visit the mall you might just find yourself trying on a virtual reality headset.

Virtual reality, or VR, is a computer-created simulation of a three-dimensional environment. To experience VR, a user puts on a special helmet or headset with a screen inside. They then feel like they are inside the VR environment, and as if they can interact with it.

VR was once mostly used only by video gamers. Now, it is coming to many other settings, including amusement parks, movie theaters and classrooms.

The technology also presents a major opportunity for retailers. Many stores have lost customers as more and more people do their shopping online. They now see VR as a way to help lure shoppers back.

## **Retailers Look To Increase Sales With Virtual Reality**

Already, Ikea, Lowe's, Toms and North Face are turning to virtual reality. They are using it to sell products, boost their brands and make shopping more fun.

According to a report from the marketing firm SapienNitro, “virtual reality is going to fundamentally transform the human experience of shopping.” VR, the report predicted, will “lift sales for those retailers who get ahead of the curve.”

The home improvement chain Lowe’s has added VR to help customers who are remodeling a kitchen or bathroom.

In 19 stores around the country, Lowe's has installed a space that enables shoppers to see a 3-D mock-up of their renovation plans. Called the Holoroom, the simulated space can be personalized with individual room sizes, equipment, colors and finishings.

Shoppers can give Lowe’s the dimensions of a room and fill it from a selection of thousands of Lowe’s products. They then can slip on a VR headset to look at how all the elements work together. An employee can switch out parts of the room while the customer is still looking.

Kyle Nel, an executive director at Lowe’s, said the Holoroom helps nudge people over the biggest hurdle when it comes to a room refresh: imagining what those changes will look like in real life.

The way people think about remodels now is very indirect and slow, Nel said. “They go and get a little swatch here and one there and lay it on a table.”

## **A More Realistic Approach**

With VR, however, people can get a much faster and clearer view of how a slab of marble or different paint color can change an entire room, Nel said. “It removes five steps along the way.”

The next step for Lowe’s is incorporating new technological developments that allow VR objects to be overlaid on top of real objects.

“You can stand in your own kitchen and overlay a fridge on top of your own fridge,” Nel said. “It’s uncannily real.”

Down the line, as virtual reality becomes more mainstream and consumers buy their own headsets, much of so-called v-commerce could move away from stores and into the home. Shoppers may be able to walk through a store and browse for new jeans — all without leaving their couch.

However, virtual reality is not just being used to make shopping easier and more convenient — it is also being used to make it more fun and exciting. Retailers are dabbling in VR in part just to lure people back into stores. They figure that the sci-fi aspect of VR is a form of entertainment that cannot be experienced from behind a computer screen.

## **A Way To Attract More Shoppers**

Retailers have been “down for so long,” they have got to do something to “get people to shop,” said retail expert Ron Friedman.

The shoe company Toms put virtual reality headsets into more than 100 stores around the world last year. The video shown depicts a trip to Peru as part of the company's popular one-for-one campaign, in which it donates a pair of shoes for every pair it sells. Viewers can see a video with panoramic views of a schoolyard as children are handed boxes of shoes.

On a recent weekday, Tyler Costin, 32, slipped on a headset while shopping at the Toms store in Los Angeles.

"That's amazing," he said, swiveling in his chair to take in the 360-degree views. At one point, Costin lifted his hand to greet the students before quickly putting it back down. "You want to wave back," he said sheepishly.

## **More Than Just Simulation**

Although much of retail VR is currently taking place in stores, Ikea launched an app earlier this month that allows people who own a VR headset to look inside a virtual kitchen from home. You can poke inside drawers and change the color of cabinets.

However, some experts say such practical uses of VR will remain few and far between for the time being. Until the price of a VR headset comes down substantially, few people will want to buy them for use at home.

For now, most retailers will turn to VR for the gimmicky dazzle factor, said retail analyst Sucharita Mulpuru.

"The truth is you can probably get a good enough way of simulating something just with photography," Mulpuru said.

Useful or not, many companies are rushing to cash in on the virtual reality gold rush.

## Quiz

- 1 Which person in the article would MOST likely agree that the advantages of VR as a shopping aid are probably exaggerated?
- (A) Kyle Nel, an executive director at Lowe's
  - (B) Ron Friedman, a retail expert
  - (C) Tyler Costin, a retail customer
  - (D) Sucharita Mulpuru, a retail analyst
- 2 At the end of the section "Retailers Look To Increase Sales With Virtual Reality," why does the author include the quote by Kyle Nel about remodeling strategies?
- (A) to point out one way that VR allows the customer to compare swatches when remodeling
  - (B) to emphasize that VR has much in common with the current approach toward remodeling
  - (C) to highlight one of the important steps involved in remodeling when using VR
  - (D) to reinforce the idea that VR improves the current approach toward remodeling

- 3 Read the fourth paragraph below from the article.

*The technology also presents a major opportunity for retailers. Many stores have lost customers as more and more people do their shopping online. They now see VR as a way to help lure shoppers back.*

How does the word "lure" affect the meaning of the third sentence?

- (A) It suggests that retailers believe they know what shoppers desire.
- (B) It reinforces the idea that VR is primarily used by video gamers.
- (C) It reinforces the idea that VR can be used by shoppers in many ways.
- (D) It suggests that retailers use deceptive methods to attract shoppers.

4 Read the sentence below from the section "A More Realistic Approach".

*The next step for Lowe's is incorporating new technological developments that allow VR objects to be overlaid on top of real objects.*

Which word could replace "incorporating" WITHOUT changing the meaning of the sentence?

- (A) inventing
- (B) including
- (C) initiating
- (D) investigating