



Augmented & Virtual Reality: Going Beyond the “Gee-Whiz!”

BY MICHAEL HAMILTON – PRINCIPAL - GETSYNCHRONICITY

Q: A good friend of mine used some cool Augmented Reality in his exhibit, and it failed miserably. How could this happen?

A: In the wrong hands, and without the proper know-how, even the BEST tools won't get the job done.

So ... you've convinced your Senior Management to expand your budget to include Augmented Reality or Virtual Reality (AR/VR) in your exhibit. Terrific!

Now what? Is that it? Do you simply plug it in, charge it up, and let the multitudes throng to your exhibit to oooo and ahhh over your products and services?

To employ a much-overused and beaten-up phrase, “If you build it, they may very well come ... but so what?”

Will “they” have a positive experience? Will the AR/VR technology you've chosen help tell your solution story? Will your expanded budget yield expanded business results?

These are questions many companies fail to ask themselves prior to investing a great deal of budget and resources into an AR/VR program for their exhibit. Or, as is usually the case, they DO ask the questions, but do so when it's too late, and the program is close to, or is currently, failing.

This article will explore the many considerations you must take into account when employing AR/VR in your exhibit. For a fuller exploration, visit [Leveraging Augmented & Virtual Reality for more impact at your meetings and events](#)

In a VR experience there are no distractions. Participants cannot see the person standing next to them, booth signage, or the vendors next door. The headset restricts their attention to a

“If you build it, they may very well come ... but so what?”

single point of focus, the artificially created VR world. Their immersion is total. In order to make the experience rewarding for them, a number of critical decisions must be made long before you “get ’em in the goggles,” including:

Purpose. Some companies get so caught up in the “isn’t it cool!” aspect of VR that they forget to consider whether the experience they’re offering is a logical fit with their brand or featured products. The fact that a product or service **can** be turned into an augmented or virtual experience doesn’t mean it’s the right platform. The medium must match the message.

The right path, then, is to be clear about your business objectives. What specifically do you hope to accomplish with VR? Expand brand awareness? Introduce new products? Entertain your audience? Or perhaps a combination of all of these?

Relevance. A good VR concept enables the participant to make a meaningful connection with the brand or service, such as a more-positive impression or a greater understanding about what’s in it for them.

Tone. The immersive sights and sounds of VR can induce almost trancelike states. What do you want your audience to feel in their “trance”? Awe? Amusement? Excitement? A sense of impenetrable calm? Will these emotions support your business objectives?

Simplicity. The operation of handheld joysticks or game pads should be either intuitively obvious or teachable within a matter of seconds; explanations lasting any longer than that risk intimidating would-be participants and creating lengthy wait times and lines. This is especially important when the activity is game-oriented. A game should be simple even if the task is challenging.

Length. The right length for a virtual experience depends on the desired content and booth traffic logistics. If a large volume of participants is expected (and desired), the activity should be relatively brief (say, 2 minutes) to accommodate high numbers, with the traffic flow planned accordingly. For shows with more-modest attendance, or in which the sponsor wishes to restrict the activity to only the most-qualified prospects, a 3 to 5-minute activity might fit the bill.

User-driven interactivity can increase onboarding time. For non-interactive content, no handheld devices are needed.

The Look. Do you want the setting and objects to look photo-real, like a movie, or stylized like a video game? If participants encounter people in the virtual world, what will they look like? Give proper attention to the “casting” of your virtual characters, taking diversity and gender into account.

Movement. Though the eye perceives movement in VR, the inner ear does not move correspondingly. The result can be motion sickness, especially for “VR virgins.” There is evidence, however, to support the use of hand controls in the VR environment or the provision of a representative view of the user’s feet. These tactics help to spatially orient and ground users

The fact that a product or service **can** be turned into an augmented or virtual experience doesn’t mean it’s the right platform.

in the new reality, eliminating nausea. No matter how gentle the design of your VR, have a plan for treating guests who have an adverse physical reaction.

Interactivity. How interactive do you want the content to be? Does your scenario require the user to manipulate the virtual environment (e.g., making choices, pulling levers, flipping pages)?

Keep in mind that user-driven interactivity involves the use of joysticks or game pads, which can increase onboarding time. For non-interactive content, such as following a highlighted pathway or merely observing the contents of the virtual world, no handheld devices are needed.

Oculus is currently at work on a magnet and sensor combination that will let VR users more naturally use their hands and fingers instead of using sticks or special gloves. Oculus-backed Finexus uses fingernail-sized magnets located on the user’s fingertips to determine the exact location of their fingers in 3D space, in real time. Both technologies will provide a greater range of movement and control for the user.

Safety. Even though participants are fully aware that the experience is a virtual one, the sense of motion feels real. Avoid scenarios that could create a reaction of alarm, such as thrusting the person to the edge of a cliff or simulating other potential dangers. Surprises can enliven VR, but sudden extremes could cause people to react in ways that injure themselves, particularly if they are new to virtual formats.

AR/VR can drive engagement through immersive experiences that educate and entertain while enhancing the perception of the sponsor as creative, visionary, and customer-focused.

Operational Guidelines

With most of a sponsor’s attention focused on AR/VR design and promotion, it’s important not to overlook the three basic operational aspects that contribute to the success of an activity:

Face to Face. People attend shows not only to see the latest high-tech innovations but to meet people and build business relationships. Even the most self-guided experiences benefit both from professional brand ambassadors to welcome the visitor and set up the activity context and from sales rep involvement for follow-up conversations. If attendees are remembering only the incredible VR trip they took, and not the people who made it happen, it’s a missed opportunity.

Accessible. When AR/VR looks inviting, people want to dive right into it. Sponsors can inadvertently squelch that eagerness, however, if they make participants jump through too many administrative hoops before they begin. Minimize the pre-activity qualifying process to avoid the perception of a joyless “pay to play” setup. Visitor data can be obtained through lead capture, a post-visit survey, and other tools.

Clean. Hygiene matters. Headsets collect oils from skin and hair, so clean them with an antibacterial solution after each use. Do this in full view of the visitors—they’ll appreciate the effort to make their experience sanitary

As with most AR/VR promotions, it’s important not to overlook the three basic operational aspects that contribute to the success of an activity.

But like any tool,
simply obtaining
AR/VR is no
guarantee of
success.

Conclusion. It's plain to see that AR/VR, while a great, powerful tool, requires a great deal of thought before and AFTER deciding to implement it. But like any tool, simply obtaining it is no guarantee of success; the user MUST know HOW to use it as well to experience optimal results.

But when it's the right fit for your brand & message, and when it's properly implemented and supported, it can turn your exhibit into a true DESTINATION on the show floor.