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Virtual reality does real marketing for LI companies

April 1, 2016 By Ken Schachter kenneth.schachter@newsday.com



3D animator Paul Lipsky with his VR headset at his studio in Hicksville (Credit: Newsday / Alejandra Villa)

Virtual reality is getting real for companies and businesses on Long Island.

From a restaurant in Farmingdale to a construction company in Cedarhurst to a spa in Roslyn Heights, they are using the new technology to get an edge in marketing, often hiring local companies to create their immersive computer simulations.

"This is the wave of the future," said Brian Berkowitz, whose Twilight Artistry in Hewlett has made numerous virtual reality productions. One depicts the USTA Billie Jean King National Tennis Center in Queens (see <https://goo.gl/H6GK9i> for a panoramic walk-through that also can be viewed with a smartphone and virtual reality goggles such as Google Cardboard).

Virtual reality is a computer-generated environment, often experienced through goggles, that use visual, auditory and other cues to immerse the user. The user may be transported to an animated world, flying with birds in the arctic or face a slap shot from center ice in a hockey arena.

The degree of immersion varies with the technical sophistication of the display, movement tracking and other input like sound and touch.

A report by the research arm of Minneapolis investment bank Piper Jaffray Companies likens virtual reality and its related technology, augmented reality — in which the viewer can still see his or her surroundings, in addition to the virtual objects — to the nascent mobile phone market about 15 years ago. Though it may take another decade for the technology to achieve widespread use, the study says, global virtual reality hardware sales alone will reach \$62 billion by 2025.

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Many industry experts predict that 2016 will be a breakout year for virtual reality.

Facebook's Oculus Rift virtual reality headset began shipping on March 24, the HTC Vive is expected to ship this month and the Sony PlayStation VR is forecast to reach consumers in October. Those headsets, however, will cost \$400 and up, not counting the high-powered computer or game console that provides much of the horsepower required to track the user and render fluid images.

On the low end, users can try VR by downloading an app and folding their smartphones into a \$15 Google Cardboard viewer or even some McDonald's Happy Meal boxes.

Some of the first virtual reality applications are focused on games, simulated travel, immersive cinema, you-are-there journalism and college tours for prospective students.

Global companies such as Swedish automaker Volvo and Deerfield, Illinois-based food conglomerate Mondelez International Inc. are among the early adopters of the technology. Mondelez created a virtual reality video to promote Oreos, and Volvo created an app to let prospective buyers "test drive" XC90 sport utility vehicles before they reached dealers' lots. "It helped us get more orders," said Glen Cove Volvo general manager Dumitru Ungureanu.

Long Island companies are also using the technology to grab customers' attention.

A Farmingdale designer of commercial food service installations, called elite|studio e, began rolling out virtual reality renderings of its designs for food service installations at a New Orleans trade show in October.

"We stole the show," recalled Chad Weiss, assistant vice president. "Everyone was hanging around our booth. . . . We knew then that this was big."

The 33-employee company, which has created dining installations for Google, MetLife, Stony Brook University and Smithsonian museums, offers virtual reality as an option in addition to static renderings of its designs (see <http://bit.ly/1RwtUJM> for a design for an unnamed New Haven pharmaceutical client).

"It's an extension of marketing," Weiss said. "It's like putting the client in the rendering."

Weiss said he began tinkering with the virtual reality capabilities of Autodesk Revit, a program used for architectural design, engineering, and construction, in February 2015. Client response was immediate once he began to produce virtual renderings, he said.

"We show it and their jaw drops." The next step, he said, will be to work with even more powerful software that will let clients walk through the designs.

Another Long Island business using virtual reality is The Melting Pot, a fondue restaurant (Long Island's sole representative of a chain) on Broadhollow Road in Farmingdale.

Christina Costanzo, general manager, said the "look inside" virtual tour (<http://bit.ly/1RFJlcs>) on Google Maps helps her show the restaurant's layout to prospective patrons who have a large party.

"Unlike a lot of restaurants, I can't move my tables," she said. "They're bolted to the floor."

She put the tour on a tab on the restaurant's Facebook page as well. Another benefit: The added content improves the restaurant's ranking on the Google search engine, getting it more exposure, she said.

Virtual reality meets reality TV at the spa of Cori Goldfarb. The founder of Truth & Beauty Spa in Roslyn Heights also is a star of "Secrets and Wives," a reality TV show on Bravo.

The virtual tour of the high-end spa on Google Maps (<http://bit.ly/1RBizFI>) adds to the online buzz surrounding the nearly 3-year-old business, where services range “from lipstick to lasers,” Goldfarb said.

A new treatment is cryotherapy, in which patrons are chilled using liquid nitrogen that reaches temperatures of 275 degrees below zero. Afterward, Goldfarb said, “You feel you could run to exit 70 on the LIE.”

But first, clients have to come through the door.

“The more information you give them, the more the return rate,” Goldfarb said. “Everything is digital. You have to plant seeds everywhere.”

When Cedarhurst-based K&R Construction Corp. built a 14-unit condominium in Park Slope, Brooklyn, it turned to Berkowitz and Twilight Artistry to create a virtual walk-through of the model apartment (<https://my.matterport.com/show/?m=p3BBXojbDqA>) that lets viewers swing from a miniaturized view from above to a detailed examination of any room.

For that project, Berkowitz used a sophisticated rig made by Sunnyvale, California, startup Matterport that rotates on a tripod. For Google’s panoramic tours, he said he takes “tons” of still pictures using a standard camera with a special lens.

In both cases, pictures are stitched together with special software to create a virtual reality experience.

K&R Construction project manager Roee Mordechai said virtual reality is a natural fit for real estate and a time saver for agents and prospective buyers.

“People are less patient nowadays,” he said. “They do this [virtual] walk-through. They can look up. They can look down. They actually have a feel for the entire space as a whole. They want to see tiles. They want to see appliances. Nothing is hidden.”

Mordechai said using a new technology burnishes the image of the construction project, and taking a tour “from the comfort of your own home” lets agents and prospective buyers avoid traveling to unsuitable properties.

Google announced in January that it has shipped 5 million of its Cardboard viewers, but rolling out a new technology can take time, said Paul Lipsky, founder of Mindyolk Animation Studios in Hicksville, a company that is seeing demand for immersive virtual reality versions of its animations.

“We’re just getting there,” said Lipsky, who left TV post-production work in New York to start his own animation studio more than two decades ago.

Lipsky’s two-person company, which typically hires three to five freelancers for each project, carved out a niche creating animations such as the cutaway view of a car engine or hair conditioner repairing damaged strands for clients including CBS Sports, Hofstra University, Canon USA and Ogilvy & Mather.

Now, demand is building for virtual reality, he said.

“From a pure business standpoint, [companies] are starting to realize it’s not hugely expensive,” he said. “A typical client spends \$50,000 to \$60,000 to go to a trade show. It begins to make sense to spend \$10,000 to \$20,000 on an app. Let’s say it cost \$10,000 and you can generate 10 percent more foot traffic” at the show.

The cost of the virtual reality app can be amortized over several years while it’s in use, Lipsky said.

One recent project called for Lipsky's company to create an animation of a yet-to-be built half-billion-dollar shipyard in Paraiba, Brazil. That animation is being converted into a virtual reality app.

Paul Rubell, a partner at the Meltzer, Lippe, Goldstein & Breitstone law firm in Mineola, said virtual reality technology holds promise in the legal profession, but the day when jurors don virtual reality headsets to visit a crime scene is not here yet.

Still, virtual reality could be used to recreate accidents in a way that will "engage our senses," he said.

Mindyolk's Lipsky said virtual reality entertainment is gaining a foothold. And the business-to-business market is not far behind.

"We're on the cusp," Lipsky said.

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