

Virtual reality for brand marketing and product showcasing

WITH EXPERT INSIGHTS
FROM:



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Audi



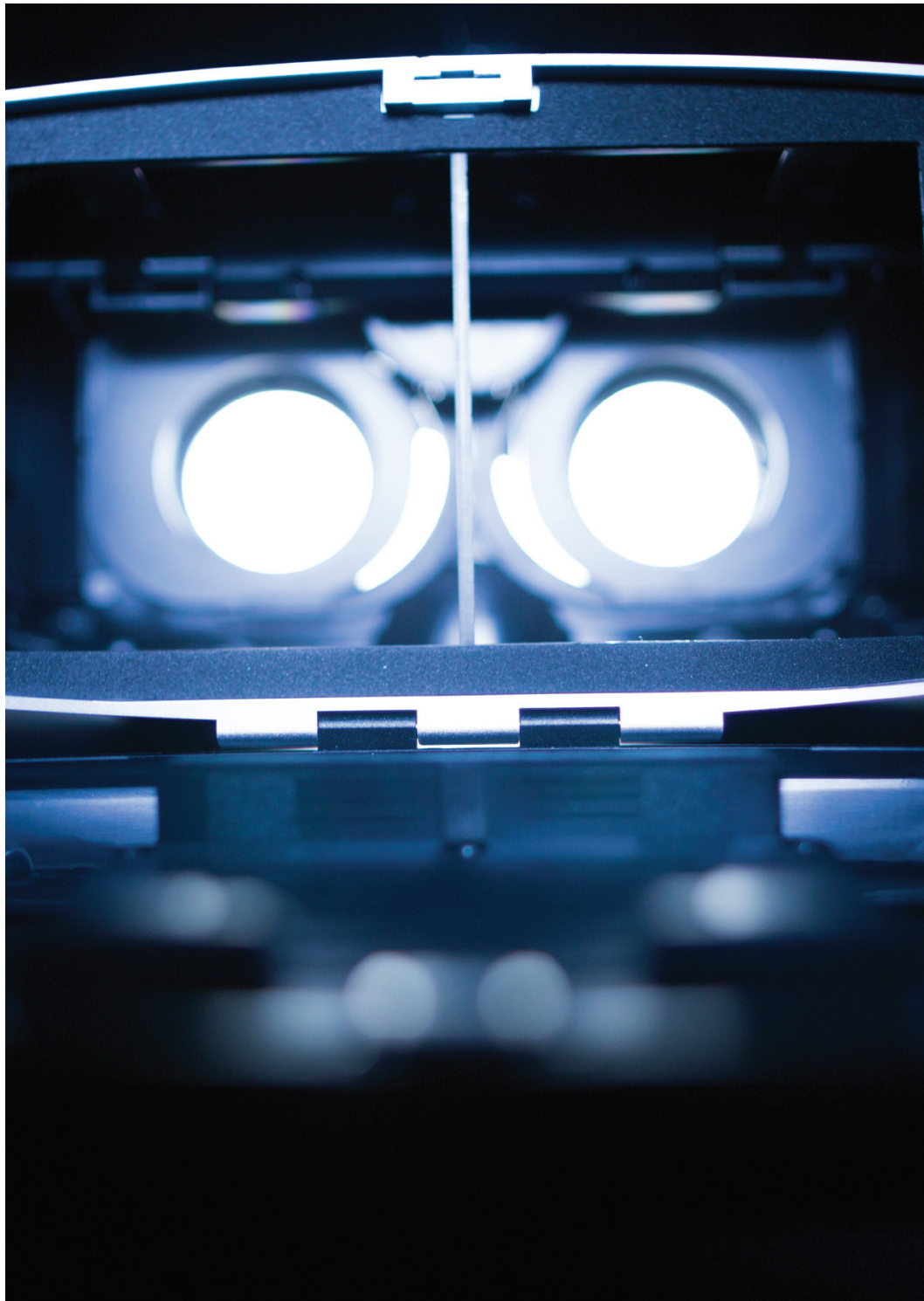
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 DODOcase



The rise of VR and where it's heading – the view from the experts

2016 is the year Virtual Reality hits the mainstream. Whilst head mounted displays (HMDs) powered by the same mobile devices practically everyone already has are beginning to move into the hands of consumers, console and PC powered 'True VR' devices are now also starting to hit the market. The hype machine continues to gain momentum as more consumers try VR and realise the bold claims being made are not hyperbole.

In light of this, a bunch of questions have come to the fore:

- Which VR platforms should businesses back?
- Will mobile VR act as a trail blazer for True VR or will it dominate the market?
- Which consumer facing sectors are going to take advantage of VR the most?
- How soon will brands adopt VR as a core piece of the marketing mix?

VR Intelligence gathered three of the front-runners working in VR to gain crucial insights into the most pressing issues in VR today. Key players from Audi; who are transforming the car show room experience through Virtual Reality, REWIND; a digital agency developing their own VR game content and working with hundreds of clients to deliver VR projects, and DODOcase; a strategic partner for Google and one of the first members of the Works with Google Cardboard programme.

And if you're looking for even more insight, plus the opportunity to network with the best and the brightest employing VR across gaming, marketing and consumer entertainment, make sure you grab your tickets to the VRX Europe conference and exhibition, running from May 12-13, 2016 in London, UK.

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Craig Dalton is the co-founder and CEO of DODOcase, a tablet and Smartphone accessory manufacturer who have seen serious success as part of Google's "Works with Cardboard" programme.

What is DODOcase currently doing with VR and who are you working with?

In 2014 at the Google IO conference, Google Cardboard was announced. It wasn't intended to be much – it was one of those 20% projects from some Google employees – but we immediately saw the value. With this cardboard box, a couple of lenses and the mobile phone I already have in my pocket I can have this other-worldly Virtual Reality experience, which is amazing.

Google made the design Open Source, so anybody with a DIY mentality could go and make themselves a VR viewer. However we knew that most people would just want to purchase something rather than carve one up themselves.

We launched a product page the same evening as the announcement. The next day Google mentioned us in their keynote address, and we effectively became the first member of the Works with Google Cardboard programme.

After selling 15,000 units in six weeks and really establishing ourselves as a leader in this space, what we recognised was that it was really early days for VR. Back in 2014 the content wasn't quite evolved enough to articulate the need to own one of these viewers. It has taken a little while, but we're now seeing the groundwork that began back in 2014 really beginning to pay off.

Your involvement with Google Cardboard has clearly been a huge success for you. Are there any other HMDs or platforms that you're backing?

Soon after Google Cardboard came out we began thinking about who might want to take advantage of the mind blowing experiences those who tried out VR were having. Virtual Reality experiences have a way of creating a sense of immersion that is unbelievable to most people. That really aligns well with brands who want to deliver something interesting, compelling and unique. Often brands want to take the access they have to particular events and provide that access to their consumers. VR is perfect for that.

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The automotive industry is a great use case because they have access to high performance vehicles, professional drivers and closed tracks in a way that the general consumer does not. Audi or Porsche, Lexus, Mercedes – any of the premium car brands – will see VR as a natural way of getting consumers to experience their brand.

Our business is twofold. One is the Cardboard side of the business where we're a Google strategic partner. I believe from a branding perspective it's the number one game in town. Cardboard is inexpensive, it has high quality printing capabilities – at least in our supply chain – and it can be very impactful relative to the cost.

We also recently introduced a viewer called SMARTvr. That's our vision for a higher quality Google Cardboard certified viewer made out of Plastic, Nylon and Aluminium materials.

What do you see as the future of VR? Is mobile going to act as just a trail blazer to showcase capability, or will mobile become the dominant player in the VR market?

Our focus has largely been providing a gateway experience for consumers and really democratising access to Virtual Reality content. If you think about the VR devices that are possible for consumers to buy, everything is orders of magnitude more expensive than the Google Cardboard unit or SMARTvr. We think, certainly in 2016 and likely in 2017, Smartphone VR is going to be the number one way people experience Virtual Reality content.

The thought process has evolved over time. In 2014 when Cardboard was announced it was considered a waypoint to a destination; that being the high fidelity units. From a strategic perspective what has become clear is that the penetration of Smartphones, the capability of Smartphone VR content creators and the portability of the units, plus the low price, are all combining to say that Smartphone Virtual Reality is actually a destination in and of itself – not just as a waypoint to True VR.

I personally believe that Smartphone based VR is a gateway, and that gateway is either going to lead you to consume more and more Smartphone content, or convince you that a home based, high fidelity VR unit is something you'll want to invest in.

Given the economics of the industry, Smartphone based VR is what I'll be banking on all the volume being for the next few years.

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Which consumer facing sectors outside of gaming do you see taking advantage of VR the most?

I would have said education, but I know you're looking more along the lines of marketing and product showcasing. For brands that have access to artists, experiences or locations, anybody can take advantage of VR because you can deliver something that is otherwise impossible for consumers to experience.

We did a project with The North Face and Outside Magazine where we distributed the DODOcase viewer, custom branded for North Face to the magazine, which is one of the most popular outdoors magazines in the US. The project was very on brand for The North Face because what they did is to film content in Monument Valley and in Yosemite of their professional athletes rock climbing in these locations that were unbelievable. So as a consumer to be able to experience that, it directly referenced The North Face tagline of 'Never stop exploring'. The anecdotal evidence is that a lot of people were sharing that content.

Similarly, in the fashion world, we did a project with Elle Magazine and 7 For All Mankind Denim where we filmed a fashion show in a chateau in Paris. None of us are going to get to sit ringside to that type of event, but it brought the viewer very close to what they have traditionally only seen in a two dimensional film.

How do you think VR will impact education?

What's beautiful from an education perspective is that you can fill a classroom with these units and then have an instructor bring students through experiences, whether that's still 360 degree images or video. You can leverage the empathy elements of Virtual Reality to really show students what it's like existing in another environment.

The New York Times famously filmed in Syria. It was touted as an amazing way to experience the unfortunate situation that refugees are in. It's hugely impactful to the people that view it. I think that's why we're seeing the United Nations filming a lot of things specifically for VR right now, they recognize that when they show people content using VR tools they really create an empathy that's off the charts.

How soon do you think brands and retailers will see VR as a core piece of the marketing mix in their campaign planning?

Given the number of projects that we've worked on – which at this point is over 500 – I think you're beginning to see VR as a part of core budgets. What we saw initially when VR became part of a brand

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marketing budget was an expectation that people could create cool VR experiences with a branded headset and VR will just be good for the brand. VR is now evolving to be something much more strategic.

From an advertising perspective, brands are looking holistically at the space and exploring different ways to pursue content, whether that's to create branded content and wrap it in their own branded viewers or partnering with major media publications to co-brand content and leverage the distribution mechanisms of those publications and partners.

For brands and advertisers, 2016 and the early part of 2017 are going to continue to be about getting VR viewers and headsets into the hands of consumers. At a certain point in 2017 you're going to start to expect that consumers have these viewers already. At that point the budget considerations shift, because you no longer have to budget to give away the viewers and eat that cost – you can really focus on the content and the distribution of the content.

As an industry we need to be aware of the penetration of VR viewers because we are definitely on a trajectory. The level to which brands will need to underwrite the cost of the viewer will wane over the next 18 months, and we'll start to transition into a world where Smartphone based experiences will be VR as standard.

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Mainstream in 2016

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Marcus Kuehne is the Project Lead for VR experience and immersive technologies at Audi digital retail. He is concentrating his efforts on technologies that have the potential to revolutionise the complete marketing and sales process at all Audi dealerships worldwide.

What is Audi currently doing with VR and what is the vision for your strategy?

Three years ago I saw an early Oculus prototype at CES in Las Vegas. After seeing the possibilities, I invited Oculus to Ingolstadt in Germany to present their prototype to our management team in strategic marketing. A little later Brendan Iribe came to Germany with the one of the first prototypes, and we had a really great day with a lot of discussions about the possible meaning for the future for sales and marketing.

We knew we had some work to do on the whole experience of going into an Audi dealership – whilst the larger ones have a number of cars for you to view, there are so many customisation options, especially within the European market, and often the only way to see everything we had to offer was through more traditional media.

Given the wealth of technology we have at our fingertips, these solutions couldn't be the best option to show off the premium products that Audi has to offer.

With that in our mind we launched a proof of concept project to see what a Virtual Reality showroom experience could offer. As far as I'm aware we were the first car manufacturer to get involved in VR as a comprehensive sales tool; not only for marketing purposes.

For the VR project I moved to take charge of the Audi VR experience in a dual leadership with my talented colleague Thomas Zuchtriegel. We were lucky because Audi had already introduced Audi Cities – digital flagship stores around the world. Through Audi Cities they had effectively already laid out the infrastructure that we needed to tap into for the VR project. As part of the digitization that Audi Cities brought, we also had a well experienced team that were familiar with game engines and already working on sophisticated digital retail tools. That was perfect because it acted as a perfect base for our ambitious VR activities!

Over the next two and a half years we developed the Audi VR experience.

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A lot of our competitors seem to see VR as a one off marketing tool – using VR to show off one car model as part of the marketing campaign for that product. That is an understandable approach, but Audi sees much more potential in VR. Way back in 2013 we saw that if we began immediately we would ‘vorsprung’ (part of Audi’s brand tagline ‘Vorsprung Durch Technik’, a close translation of which is ‘to leap ahead through technology’).

We decided to make a full car showroom within VR, with more than 50 Audi models and a full car configurator so that you can see every feature available for each car.

In Europe we also had the consideration that the customisation market is huge – for each car we sell there are a number of additional features for you to choose from. Also, smaller dealerships in emerging markets may only have four or five cars for customers to view. If you want to see one of the high-end models, like the R8, the chance that you’ll be able to see one at a small dealership outside of a major outlet is very small.

VR is great if you want to reproduce reality as closely as possible, but you will never be able to hit 100% – it doesn’t matter how much you invest. The biggest opportunity that VR presents is the ability to move beyond reality. Why not allow people to look into the structures? Why not show off your cars in unbelievable environments?

So for Audi, VR presents an opportunity to show off many more vehicles than you could in real life simply because of logistical restrictions. However the main benefit to VR is the experience – to add value to the process of showing off our vehicles by delighting customers.

Audi has planned for three VR set-ups – a mobile experience using Samsung’s Gear VR, that people at home can find in the comfort of their own homes, the standard experience using the Oculus Rift and some nice Bang & Olufsen headphones, and finally the advanced set-up using the HTC Vive to experience virtual Audi vehicles within a 5m x 5m area.

We are beginning to roll out the VR experience to the first dealerships as a pilot now, and the worldwide launch is planned for the fourth quarter of 2016.

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Experiences as Virtual Reality Goes
Mainstream in 2016

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You mentioned working with Gear VR, Oculus Rift and HTC Vive. Do you see a future where one platform will dominate the competition?

We couldn't say that one will become the dominant party. Oculus Rift, HTC Vive, Samsung Gear VR – all are excellent HMDs – each system with their own particular strengths. Our professional approach is to currently go with all providers and challenge them as an ambitious and demanding customer and partner.

We already have a few years of experience developing VR and we have a great platform that a high number of dealers use. We have real experience with real customers creating real solutions.

Our team has been between 15 and 20 people, depending on the project phase, and we want to become a real centre of competence for VR – to help define VR concepts with new partners so that we can help assure quality and continue to drive the technology forward.

That's one reason why we name our key partners we work with. ZeroLight are one example; they provided the visual engine for us and optimized it for VR. We worked with them and invested in them to boost the visual fidelity and VR performance of the final product. Another example is Re'flect, they worked with us to develop the complete interaction concept of our VR solutions, and they're really intuitive.

Other brands try to avoid smaller firms, but we don't shy away from developing talent. The whole project happened under our roof, but without all of our partners it wouldn't have been possible. I guess that's a part of our spirit: Audi sees itself not only as the demanding customer – we're also one very active part of the development team.

Finally this approach generates the best results – you can see it at the Audi VR experience. There are so many small details, and each one has a cool story behind it – like the sound system. You can sit in the virtual car and turn your head to hear a binaural pre-record of your chosen sound system. You have to have that kind of detail if you want to convince people, to invest several thousand Euros in an outstanding sound system.

Which consumer facing sectors outside of gaming do you see taking advantage of VR the most?

We are really sure that the first experiences people have with VR will need to push the technology. If people first encounter VR at Audi, it's going to be a positive experience and they will leave with a positive view

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Deliver Incredible Consumer
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Mainstream in 2016

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of VR. From these first great experiences things will snowball, marketers will start to think about how they could be using VR in their own industries.

Will mobile VR be capable of showing off Audi's premium products in the right light?

Let me put it this way: we wouldn't use mobile VR at the dealership itself where we have the option of implementing the professional, high fidelity VR setup. When you have the infrastructure in place, you really shouldn't compromise in that way. Using the mobile solution is a compromise, but it also has its advantages. The mobile user might only have an iPad at their disposal, and when you compare the interior using a 360 degree image rather than a 2D image, mobile VR is still a better option in my opinion.

Obviously you can't go into the same level of detail because of the technical limitations you're working with for mobile VR, but that could easily change in the future as smartphones continue to develop.

In as few as five years you might be able to stream content into mobile headsets or use foveated rendering to relieve the GPU – these technologies are new and it's really difficult to see where it's going to go in the next few years.

How soon do you think brands and retailers see VR as a core piece of the marketing mix in their campaign planning?

I'm convinced that VR will be an elementary part of the marketing mix within the next five years. Of course I'm not neutral, because I've been so close to the development of our solution and so I can easily see all of the advantages that VR has to offer. Within two or three years, or maybe as many as four or five years, I can see a situation where the companies that aren't using VR in some way will be putting themselves at a disadvantage.

Today people can wear the HMD and tell us that the resolution isn't high enough to see all the small details. That's fine and I understand that – as great as the technology is, there are still limitations. But we're currently at the beginning of development and just around the corner we have many promising technologies that will improve the visual quality and level of immersion massively. In the future the only disadvantage with VR will be the fact that you can't touch the product.

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May 12-13, London

Deliver Incredible Consumer
Experiences as Virtual Reality Goes
Mainstream in 2016

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REWIND

Sol Rogers is the founder and CEO of REWIND, a creative digital agency focused on harnessing immersive technologies to deliver ground breaking content for some of the world's largest companies, agencies and brands.

What is REWIND currently doing with VR and who are you working with?

REWIND is working across all types of Virtual Reality production, from 360 degree video work, cinematic VR, and True VR; and it's this direction that I'd like to take the company in.

We're partnering with Red Bull and the BBC on True VR projects, we're also creating a launch title that will have both a HTC Vive and an Oculus Rift release. On top of that we're looking at working with Björk on her next interactive music video, which will be available on every platform.

When it comes to 360 degree video work we're developing content for BBC Click and some of the BBC flagship entertainment shows, as well as working directly with NBC on a wide range of reality shows.

You mentioned a couple of the major VR platforms, are you backing any platform in particular?

We're not focussing on any one HMD system in particular. REWIND is a content production studio and at the moment we're leveraging all of our skillset against creating good Virtual Reality content. VR content can be thought of a lot like Television content – there are so many different genres to experience and just because you don't like a particular TV show, it doesn't mean you don't like TV. You might try a piece of VR content and not like it, but that doesn't mean you don't like VR!

The mobile VR sector is focused on 360 degree video production – that includes any of the Google Cardboard type devices through to the Samsung Gear VR. Our real skillset, and what we get most excited about, is True VR: content created in a real-time game engine. At the moment compatible hardware includes HTC Vive, Oculus Rift and PlayStation VR – each of which has their own particular strengths and weaknesses.

I think True VR represents the biggest potential market to go into, and it's also the most exciting.

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May 12-13, London

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Experiences as Virtual Reality Goes
Mainstream in 2016

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Is the concentration of mobile VR on 360 degree video simply because of the processor limitations within the mobile devices powering the headsets?

Absolutely. The graphics cards in the mobile devices aren't very powerful in comparison to the PCs and PS4s that run the current True VR experiences. The drive toward 360 degree video for mobile VR also has a lot to do with the entry point for most production houses into content creation. For a lot of these outfits, they're used to getting a camera, capturing content and editing it together. 360 degree video is very appealing to some because the leap in terms of content production is really just a question of using a different camera and employing a few different rules when it comes to the edit.

On the games side, in True VR, we haven't got a way of representing people well yet, they are always 'gamesy'. For capturing reality it's best to use video, and if you're doing video then really you're wasting the power of an Oculus Rift, Vive or PlayStation VR - you might as well just have a mobile headset for that.

What do you see as the future of VR? Is mobile going to act as just a trail blazer to showcase capability, or will mobile become the dominant player in the VR market?

The dominant player in VR for 2016 will be the mobile market. All of us have a Virtual Reality Head Mounted Display unit in our pockets now – our Smartphones. The Smartphone market globally is currently 1.9 billion users, and all of those are capable of watching 360 degree video. Mobile VR has been smashed wide open with Google Cardboard, which uses just a dollar's worth of material to get you going.

The distribution models and monetisation for mobile VR is also already well established. We're used to spending a few dollars on Apps and so VR content as an App that sits in that ecosystem is going to be very easy for consumers to access.

Where the industry is really going to shine is True VR. Experiencing that type of content really is a life changing moment where you realise that is the type of VR that we all want to work with. It's interactive, it's immersive, and it gives you a full sense of presence. You are transported somewhere else. That's going to take a little while to get traction as the barrier to entry is very high – there's a cost point first and foremost, but there's also a space point. If you want to use the Vive properly you can go up to a 6m2 area, but who has a 6m2 area that doesn't already have a coffee table in it? Plus, making 360 degree video can be very cost effective – you can make it on a small budget and distribute it to people

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Experiences as Virtual Reality Goes
Mainstream in 2016

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quickly. To make True VR using game engine technology can be very costly; you need a lot of skilled artists creating content and the distribution models are completely different.

A middle ground between these two worlds does exist, but generally the majority of people choose a side: either creating video content or game content, then concentrating on one of those two different markets.

In your own home are you beginning to make furniture decisions with VR in mind?

The spare bedroom is being turned into a VR space! The spare bed has gone – we'll have a fold out instead. That then gives me a reasonable sized room that is dedicated space.

Which consumer facing sectors outside of gaming do you see taking advantage of VR the most?

The uptake is going to be in two directions, and again it comes down to hardware. 360 degree video is going to be taken on by anyone doing any sort of PR. If you're used to running events, or stunts, something where you have celebrities doing something interesting and the whole point is a couple of photos and some behind-the-scenes footage, why not capture that and let the world join you through VR? That's going to be really important and actually a lot of people are already in that space.

Alongside that is product. Cars, buildings – anything that you need to see to believe and you want to experience – capturing it in video or rendering it in CGI means that people can get closer to it. The idea of exploring a hotel and seeing your room for real - not just the Photoshop perfect representation of it - is very appealing.

On the other hand True VR is totally up for grabs. No-one has the exact solution for it, but a lot of the interactivity and a lot of the configurators are definitely going to be important for that. For car showrooms, I'll be at home and I'll be able to see every single model of a certain brand's vehicles and then I'll have the ability to change any detail of the car that I want, along with a buy button that will then prompt someone to deliver the car to my door in a few hours. The sky really is the limit for these sort of products, and it really isn't that far in the future...

Brands need to consider VR in the same way as they do currently for their YouTube content. Moving away from traditional TVCs of 30 and 60 second ads and into two, three, four minute entertainment pieces - for example a high action, dramatic car experience in a branded vehicle.

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Mainstream in 2016

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Branded content - brands sponsoring content or paying for things to get made - is potentially going to be the key factor that drives VR content going forwards. However, this kind of content cannot be forced. A couple of companies are looking at introducing 360 degree adverts into 360 degree video content, and it's a very weird place. You could potentially be watching ten minutes of a show and then find yourself transported to a branded commercial. It's so jarring, and when you're working with immersive content you have to be careful how you treat your audience.

There are also some people looking at pre-roll adverts; you have two or three 360 degree adverts before you get to watch the content you want. I think the future is more about paid for content that has worth beyond the actual advertising itself - that's the only way I can see advertisers getting real value out of it.

Plus VR brings the benefit of having interactive content, so rather than watching a passive advert you can interact with the brand...

Exactly. But if you're doing that then the content has to have value. The advert as we know it in a traditional sense has always been a one way piece of communication. You're invited to look at this aspirational scene with perfect people drinking a beer, driving a luxury car or having fun on a beautiful beach. You want to be them.

When you're actually in that space with VR, making an interactive world where you have to drive or drink or whatever else, it becomes a completely different value proposition.

How soon do you think brands and retailers will see VR as a core piece of the marketing mix in their campaign planning?

I think people already are, but they're still seeing Virtual Reality as a bit of a PR gimmick. Everyone is already beginning to think about what their piece of 360 degree content is or what their piece of VR is going to be. They're seeing it as a short term piece - they want to make something and get it into the system as quickly as possible because everyone else is and they don't want to get left behind.

The actual decision about where budgets lie - how much is split between TVC, online, print and VR - is going to take a little while to iron out because the VR audiences are not embedded yet. It's a real chicken and egg problem because we have a lot of hype and a lot of people talking about VR headsets, but we haven't seen the audience numbers because the products aren't really here yet.

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Mainstream in 2016

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2016 is the point where mobile VR is going to explode; we already know that. As a marketer it would be foolish not to use it. For True VR headsets, it's going to take a little while to build up the user base - if we're lucky this is going to be in the millions, but the likelihood is that it will be below that for quite a little while, the medium needs to gain traction and mainstream acceptance.

If you're going to pour a lot of money into making content then it needs to live in all the verticals where you are already intending on creating advertising. A lot of the big True VR projects we are doing involve creating a 360 degree video version of content that sits elsewhere; on Facebook or YouTube or a website. That way users without VR headsets can access the content in a 'light', or non-interactive version.

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Purpose built for brands, broadcasters, game developers and content studios, this event is the one place you need to be to get in shape for massive VR growth in gaming, marketing, film & entertainment through 2016 and beyond.

- The event combines a high level conference programme with an exhibition / demo hall alongside to showcase the best VR content and breakthrough solutions.

With stand-out speakers including senior representatives from the likes of Sony, HTC Vive, Samsung, CCP Games, Epic, UNICEF, Supermassive Games, REWIND, Rebellion, ITV, Audi, UNIT9, BBC and dozens more this will be the biggest and most senior level meeting place for VR professionals in Europe in 2016

Go to www.vr-intelligence.com/europe for more information. And if you're interested in getting your company involved in speaking, sponsoring or exhibiting at the event, drop Pete a line on the below.

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