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DEC 25, 2018 6:00PM EST

How AR is Shifting From Marketing Gimmick to E-Commerce Upgrade

By Madeleine Streets



Augmented reality has frequently been used for gaming, like the global phenomenon Pokémon Go or this HoloModels app, shown on a smartphone during the Tokyo Game Show (TGS) 2018, Chiba, Japan.

CREDIT: AFLQ/SHUTTERSTOCK

Augmented reality (AR), the more down-to-earth cousin of virtual reality (VR), has been cropping up at product launches and brand events throughout 2018. The technology places a digital rendering of an item into someone's environment, most commonly through a smartphone app, and has mostly been used by brands to add an interactive element to events. Now, a new generation of companies is seeking to turn the technology from marketing stunt into an integral part of e-commerce.

"We're not interested in splashy AR event activations that 70 people see throughout a weekend," said Vince Cacace, founder and CEO of Vertebrae, a company that develops VR, AR and 3-D technology. "It's really about providing a better product experience for the end user."

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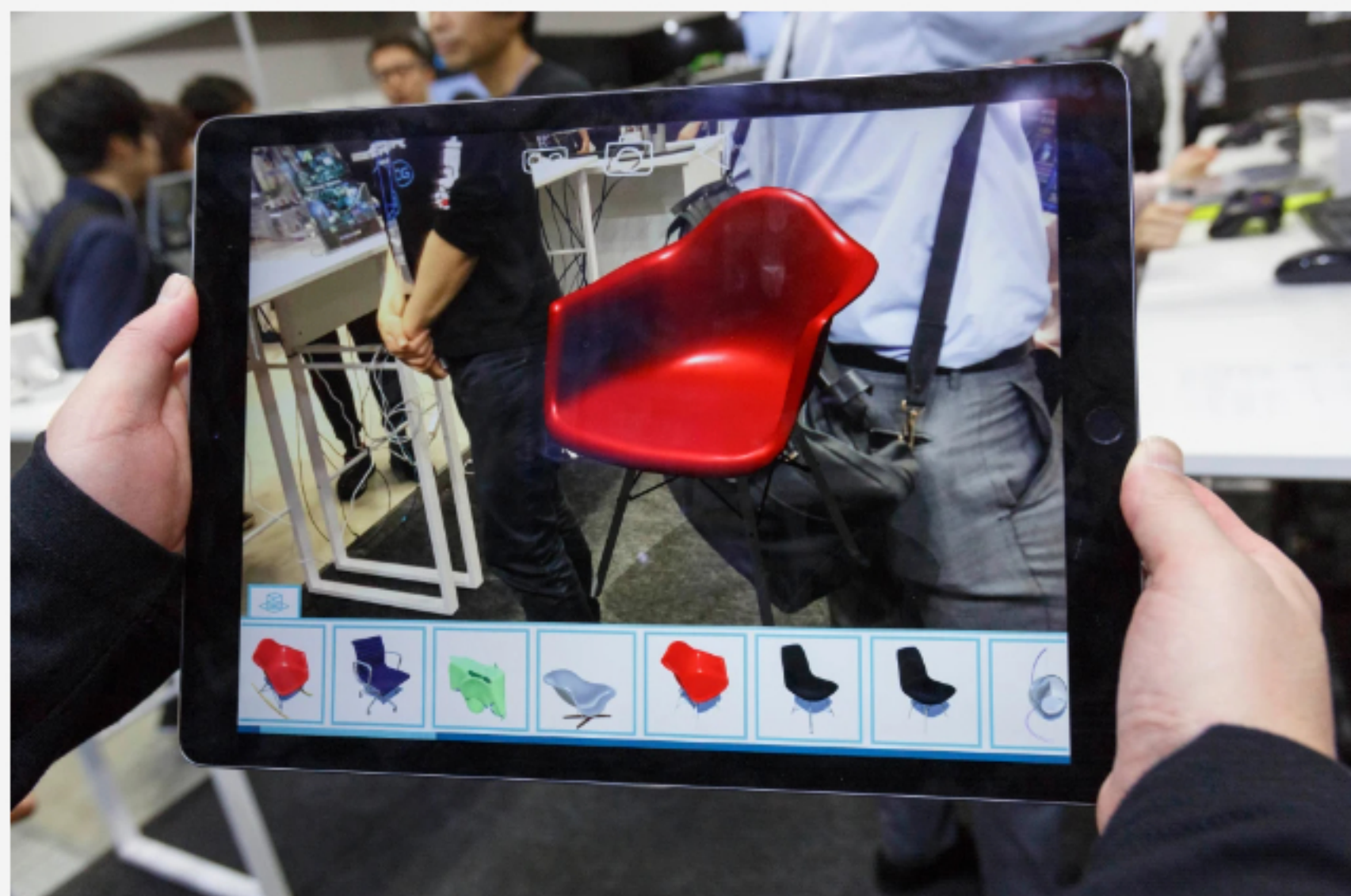
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Vertebrae's focus is updating the website experience so that consumers are able to get a better sense of a product from the comfort of their couch. By integrating its technology into a product page, Vertebrae enables users to see an item in full 3-D, not just a 360-degree rotation, and place it into their environment – without leaving the browser. For items that tend to have a high consideration rate and low conversion rate, like luxury shoes and furniture, this added shopping experience can help customers feel more confident to purchase.

The company currently produces these 3-D brand assets for use both online and in-store. Customers

are able to visualize a range of items 'live' in their home environment or look at digital renderings of products that might not be physically present in that retail location. This enables a retailer to reduce its inventory onsite without reducing the products available for view. The next step is making these assets interactive, which is where the company Vyking comes in.

"People want to see what something will look like on them," said Matthew Klimpke, co-founder and CEO at Vyking. "You don't go to a shop just to look at a shoe on a shelf, you go to try it on and see what it looks like on you."



AR technology can allow customers to see how an item would look in their home before purchase, as shown through this demo of app Dream AR during the 26th 3D & Virtual Reality Expo (IVR) in Tokyo, Japan – 20 Jun 2018.

CREDIT: AFLQ/REX/SHUTTERSTOCK

Vyking is building software that will enable shoppers to virtually try on a pair of shoes, through their smartphone screen. Currently, a user can try to approximate this by placing the shoe in their environment with AR and, through camera manoeuvring, hovering the shoe over their foot — however this provides limited functionality. Vyking's technology will be able to track an individual's foot and apply the shoe for full 3-D visualization even as the user moves about. It will also be able to assess the appropriate size of shoe needed for that particular style.

Similar software has already been developed for facial tracking, but feet are a bigger challenge. With fewer key tracking points, feet are trickier to pinpoint than faces and the software use is quite specific to retail; facial recognition has multiple applications beyond trying on makeup or Snapchat filters. Still, footwear is a more natural progression than one might think; unlike clothing, shoes are non-deformable.

"Clothes move around, they crease, so you need the fabric dynamic," said Klimpke. "Shoes typically don't change shape once they're on your foot so, from a graphics perspective, it's easier to do footwear than it is to do clothing."

One of the limitations of AR technology so far has been that it requires an individual smartphone app for each use. Not only does this require time and data to download, the app then becomes redundant once the user has completed that individual AR experience. This barrier to entry has limited the adoption rate of the software, but companies like Vertebrae and Vyking hope to make it more accessible by embedding within retailers' own pages or evergreen apps.

"Most websites were built in a time when this wasn't feasible, so the norm became just imagery and flat posts," said Cacace. "Now that it is possible to have a full 3-D and accompanying AR experience, it's a completely new way to shop."

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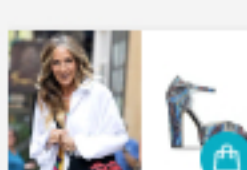
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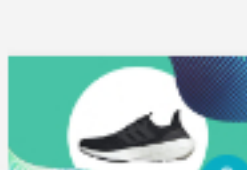
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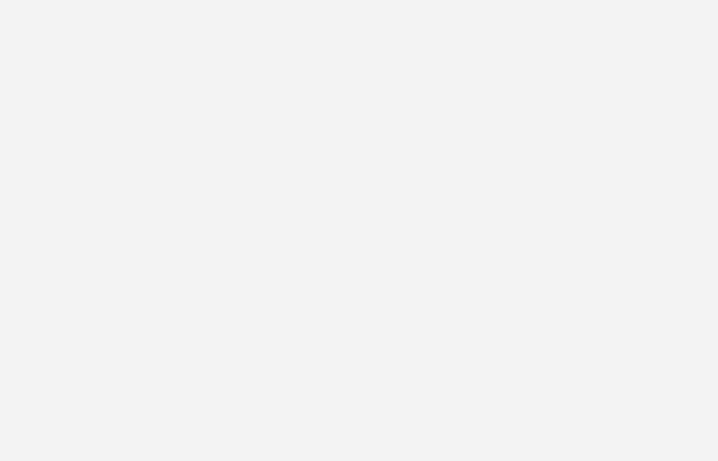
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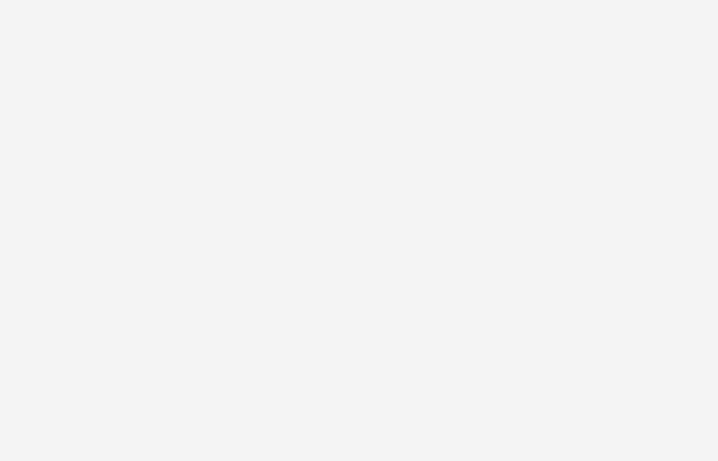
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