How immersive technology revolutionizes traditional storytelling to move brands from message making to meaning making
The classic story framework has served advertisers well for decades. But in a world of options, people have become masters at avoiding marketing messages and brands are losing their ability to connect.

Some 65.9% of US Agency execs are recommending VR to create customer engagement, but how do these technologies actually connect with users?¹

Enter the age of "story living": Immersive technologies like the accessible VR180, to full 360 Video and full VR move beyond storytelling to engage users actively -- through their bodies and senses. Truth be told, it’s actually a more natural way of exploring the world than on a flat screen or page -- and the messages connect deeply, resonating for hours, days or weeks after they are delivered.

VR is expected to grow from 22.4 million users in 2017 to 49.2 million VR users in 2019², with a large share of that usage being driven by video. Want to see how story living can work for your brand? Let’s take a look at how it can happen. Here are the findings from our three month study of how users connect with VR -- the largest-of-its-kind anthropology study of this technology.

¹ March 2017, Vibrant Media via eMarketer
² May 2017, eMarketer
A New Delivery: Re-engineering Stories

Users responded to content that was developed outside the traditional frame of characters, plot points and value messages. As immersive storytelling grows, it will break through the traditional story paradigm. In time, user preferences will require us to re-engineer the way we conceive brand work.

Users found VR experiences to be:

All-Encompassing
- Unlike most media, which battle with numerous distractions as people watch, immersive tech uses a combination of gear and stimulation to fully focus a user; in a way, filtering out all the other noise of the world.

Open-Sourced
- Because there is no traditional story frame to follow, the user is in control. As such, people tend to actively explore versus observe and with immersive the viewer is largely in control. This leads to a different depth of expectation, like the difference between a cab ride through Times Square or a walk through it.
- Without a single POV, there’s little ability to guarantee what a viewer’s takeaway might be.

Momentary and Often Non-Linear
- We experience these as moments that we can explore, controlling where we focus. Just like being in a real place, there are nooks and crannies to investigate, new paths to be taken and nuance to be uncovered.

"The old frame has been ripped off (the frame of narrative) we have been in that cage for so long and now you can do magic in this space, this new space... the laws of physics can be broken in this space.”

Tom S, VR Developer, NYC
A New Vantage: From Storytelling to Story Living

Users found the motion, life-size scale and sensory immersion of VR were the keys to unlocking a deeper connection to content. These factors made users acutely aware of their virtual surroundings and more open to new information than with traditional media. The result: the content is absorbed in a more visceral, emotional and lasting way, allowing us to truly feel connected to the world we were in. In fact, 54% of users say VR devices will be the new screens for video.

June 2017, Ericsson “Merged Reality” via eMarketer

These experiences:

Trigger the “Beginner’s Brain”

- Totally focused in this new world, with our senses more fully occupied, the viewer’s brain slips into a mode of acute awareness, trying to find moorings in the new environment through pattern recognition in the hopes of establishing familiarity. Driven by a primal survival mechanism, the beginner’s brain tends to be more open to ideas or concepts that challenge established beliefs.

Utilize a Non-Verbal, Physical Form of Communication

- With so much visual stimulus combined with movement within the space, the power of narration or text is depleted. The more immersive the experience, the more viewers gain what anthropologists call “embodied knowledge” from this form of media -- combining physical, emotional and visceral cues to deeply connect with the story in ways that make it seem authentic.

Inhabit the Stories

- While other media may give an impression of what a place, person or thing might be like, immersive furnishes an experience the brain assumes is the essence of place, person or thing. Participants get a sense that they “know” -- versus simply imagine -- what it is like to inhabit those spaces or events.

“...you are experiencing the scene yourself, as if it is happening to you. You are there. In a novel or movie you are not really there... it is an interpretation.”

Candice D., 25, South San Francisco, CA

“...It is a shape shifting device. I can become a rat, a helicopter, or another person and that is a new feeling, something that happens in dreams... you’re given the abilities of whatever you’re turning into. If you’re an eagle you can fly...And I think that the advantage is learning. I can learn firsthand when I do that.”

Jacob L., 24, Fremont, CA
The Aftershock: Creating a 4th Perspective

While VR plays out in a three dimensional space, the experience creates a lasting fourth or emotional perspective that lingers beyond the time spent with the media. Some users walk away elated by the deeper understanding of something. Others walk away deeply uncomfortable or upset. But no matter what, users will want to respond as they sort through this deeper understanding of the people, objects or brands they encountered.

Users tend to:

Move from Selfish-To-Selfless

- Viewers often start driven by the desire to explore for personal gain. Yet a fourth perspective is often created as participants implicitly know they have not actually been to the places or moments in the story, but often can’t help but feel transformed by the experience, with a new unique vantage on the subject matter. Because they are now removed from the situation, these immersive experiences can create elation from discovery or leave viewers with deeply challenging questions.

“VR creates a lived moment of experience, a certain embodiment of a piece’s meaning and message and in this way can establish a more holistic, a more complete felt understanding of another’s situation.”

Thomas Maschio, PhD, Anthropologist
SO WHAT?

For brands, by shifting to story living, people can truly understand the brand’s essence, it’s meaning and its role. This is not opportunity for persuasion but for opening up a new world.

We can get inside the brand, so to speak, discover the inner workings of a factory; experience what it’s like to be a basketball being thrown around on a court; be on the tea fields when tea leaves are being harvested; or step into the shoes of someone who is already benefiting from a service or brand.
SENSE OVER LANGUAGE

Appeal to our multiple senses. Focus less on language and persuasion and more on experiences, limiting distractions like overt calls to action for your brand.

EXAMPLE:
Guinness has collaborated with R/GA to develop a 360 environment with the use of colors, shapes and sounds that “have been scientifically proven to enhance the flavor profiles of each beer.”

DON’T WALK A STRAIGHT LINE

Brands will often need to forego a linear story. Offer an experience with paths to entertainment, but options for exploration.

EXAMPLE:
The cast and creators of Netflix Stranger Things have to live out one of the scariest scenes in VR.

SELL THE MOMENT

VR is about focusing in on moments, the details, the angles. What are the moments that define your brand? What places and spaces do you occupy that differentiate your people and products? Capture those moments for customers to explore.

EXAMPLE:
In the powerful VR experience outside of Wrigley Field after the World Series, “Winning View from Chicago,” one user talked about it being cathartic, exhilarating, feeling connected to everyone there, like a participant in the event. Meanwhile, The New York Times was covering that game in so many other different ways; play-by-play, stats, you name it. But this emotional experience was only something that VR 360 could bring.
**SWEAT THE DETAILS**

Every nook and cranny will be explored. Discoveries will be celebrated as rewards for exploration. In this way, the nitty-gritty, life-like details are actually the ingredients of the experience. This includes scale, color, movement and all the minutiae of a real moment.

**EXAMPLE:**

In “GoPro VR: Tahiti Surf with Anthony Walsh and Matahi Drollet”, the user sees surfing from the POV of a life-sized professional, with the juxtaposition of a towering 8 foot wave looming as the ride continues smooth as silk with Hawaiian mountains gently moving in the background. It’s this blending of this delivery of many details that lead to the intense connection for the user.

**EMBRACE AMBIGUITY**

Users are going to walk away with a wide-range of responses to these moments they live out in VR. Lean into these possibilities and encourage people to make their own meaning.

**EXAMPLE:**

There could be players of “Last Call” that may walk away feeling secure in their potential alcohol intake. Is that Ok?

**LEAVE AN IMPRESSION & START A DIALOGUE**

Much of the brain’s heavy lifting will happen AFTER the VR experience is over, so set the table with something to ponder, dream and discuss in the hours and days afterward. If we are challenging people to truly live something new, how do we ensure a dialogue or new behaviors as a result of the experience?

**EXAMPLE:**

Tilt Brush allows users to record their drawing sessions, share them with other Tilt Brush users and even watch sessions of professionals as they design top-level drawings with the program. This sharing and exploration of the creation is a key part of the strategy to grow the skills and potential for the platform across a wider range of artists.
**BRAND EXAMPLES**

**HEINEKEN**
VR flight experience over moscow city
View Example »

**UNITED NATIONS**
Clouds Over Sidra - A VR film about the Syrian refugee crisis
View Example »

**DIESEL**
Plays on your fear of heights with VR ledge walk
View Example »

**BIRDLY**
Fulfill people’s dream of flying With VR and robotics technology
View Example »

**GOOGLE (SPOTLIGHT STORY)**
Pearl - An emotional VR storytelling experience
View Example »