

Reaping virtual rewards

NEW TECHNOLOGY OFFERS AN
EXPANDED REALM OF OPPORTUNITY



By Jay Salois

VRtical Media

Thirty years ago, the internet revolutionized how businesses and people connected — opening up a whole new world for sharing products, services and information.

The virtual and augmented reality arena is now taking things to a new level — creating more opportunities for greater interaction on a global scale.

VR and AR — as they're known — enable companies to boost their online business presence, while helping consumers make informed decisions on where to direct their dollars.

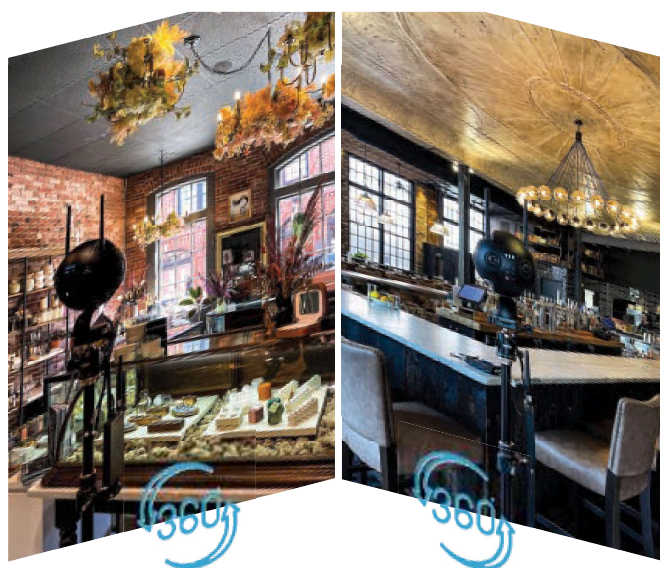
For example, a person thousands of miles away can land on a local artist's popup gallery online and take a tour without leaving home. The virtual visit can lead to commissioned work, sales and ultimately an expanded network of potential customers. That's the power of virtual experiences.

Almost every type of business can benefit by a 360-degree virtual tour. The technology is being utilized as a marketing tool by industries from retail to hospitality, gallery and museum spaces to event venues, and even car dealerships and golf courses.

Other industries are diving into the arena, too. The technology can be used for immersive and interactive training initiatives, and has been shown to produce higher knowledge retention rates.

While two-dimensional images provide viewers with a useful visual, the brain comprehends size of space more accurately with 360-degree imagery. Whether someone wants to book a dinner for 10, tour a wedding/corporate event venue, walk through a construction site without getting dirty, plan a trip, pick out theater seats or explore a museum before making a purchase or reservation, a virtual tour can prove valuable.

Virtual tours are also customizable. They can be branded with a company's logo, fonts, colors and other digital



assets, making it wholly identifiable to that business. They offer interactive potential through hotspots (clickable buttons), links, videos and pictures that further engage visitors.

Virtual reality has the advantage of being accessible, too. People with limited mobility, financial constraints and phobias (such as agoraphobia or claustrophobia) can enjoy experiences that otherwise may have been out of reach. The tours do not require a VR headset or specialized equipment. They are viewable simply via a computer, tablet or phone.

The data shows a solid success rate: 78 percent of people view businesses with virtual tours as well established. Customers are known to spend five to 10 times longer on a website with virtual offerings.

Younger generations, with their increasing purchase power, are particularly drawn to the concept, having grown up with the technology. They expect to do business with companies that keep up with the times.

Want to experience a virtual tour firsthand? Visit the website of most any real estate company across the country or beyond and tour one of their homes for sale from the comfort of your own living room.

I started creating virtual tours in 2018. After traveling to the United Kingdom and Ireland for 2½ months honing my craft, I shared my virtual tours with a friend who teaches English in Japan. His students were treated to a tour of a castle in Scotland, some 5,300 miles away.

From there, I began offering the tool to clients. I worked with an artist in Lynn to create a virtual experience of his one-week popup gallery, which he shared with his family 7,600 miles away in Zimbabwe. A local jeweler attracted new clientele from Boston through her virtual showroom, and an area wedding venue booked couples based on its virtual tours.

The cost of securing a professionally designed virtual experience is tailored to the size of the business. They typically start at \$1,000.

The real-world potential of the technology is clear. Virtual tours are an emerging marketing tool that will help businesses elevate their brands, increase both physical and online traffic, boost customer confidence and become accessible to a wider audience. **1**

Jay Salois is the founder and owner of VRtical Media in Salem, which specializes in creating 360-degree virtual experiences for businesses.