HOW INDUSTRIES LEVERAGED TECHNOLOGY TO

VIRTUALLY ENGAGE

DURING A GLOBAL PANDEMIC

BY RODNEY BEACH

As COVID-19 spreads like wildfire, it leaves a path of disruption in its wake – but not all of it is negative news. In some ways, the current pandemic forced organisations in all industries to reckon with their status quo and acted as a catalyst to move away from ingrained processes. This included the way organisations are able to train their staff and run their business in a safe manner.

2021 CAN BE A TIME TO EMBRACE THE CHANGES AND ADVANTAGES THRUST UPON US IN 2020

Those organisations that already had a foot in the digital world at the beginning of 2020 had a headstart – and for those who had to catch up, there were many options ready to go. And yet, not all technology proved to be useful in overcoming the challenges at hand.

Overall, we saw two tech-related approaches emerge that provided exceptional value for money and performance in these dire times.

1 THE NEW VIRTUAL REALITY: VR IN THE EDUCATION AND RETAIL SECTORS

Australian universities were hit hard with a complete halt to prospective international students travelling, attending classes or even going to open days, cutting one of their main income and marketing channels. Pair that with the simultaneous Australian Government reforms to student fees, along with the need to move all teaching activity online within 2 weeks, and you had a perfect example of 'we need a magic wand and we need it now to turn this around!'

One solution lay in using virtual reality (VR) technology. In a fast-paced, low-budget project, Liberate Learning worked with a large Australian university to create a virtual open day experience. This allowed prospective students to virtually walk through the lanes of Melbourne, visit key campus amenities and learn about Australian culture. All the content was, and still is, available on web browsers from anywhere in the world, thus increasing the number of potential open day attendees way beyond what a real-life event could have catered for.

Web-based VR has advantages over immersive VR (that's the one set up in a specific fixed location with the VR goggles) in that it can be deployed to anywhere in the world via web browser using low bandwidth. It also helps participants avoid motion sickness and comes with a much smaller price tag and shorter production times

compared to immersive VR. It is much more suitable for crisis application where timing, budget and remote access are all equally critical.

Another industry taking advantage of this VR solution were organisations in the fast-moving consumer (FMCG) sector who were faced with a higher-than-average infection risk and fluctuating staff cohorts due to quarantine requirements and panic buying.

They needed a way to train remote learners in authentic and locality-specific topics – and web-based VR delivered for over a hundred thousand learners. Unlike fully immersive VR, it also integrated into the retailer's learning management system (LMS) allowing crucial training tracking for accountability and compliance in workplace health and safety.

2 The move towards minimum viable products (MVP)

The pandemic often required learning artefact development in timeframes way below the industry norm. As a result, some hastily produced solutions were under par in terms of learner outcomes, engagement, good learning design and measurability.

A case in point is that many organisations were uploading session slides and calling them 'online learning' – when at best it could be called 'information dissemination'. One way out of death-by-PowerPoint was the rapid development of shorter minimum viable products – a pared down initial product with sufficient features to fulfil basic needs – using modern authoring tools, multiple deployment platforms, including mobile devices, and modern tracking mechanisms.

For example, we saw subject matter experts take videos of manual handling procedures with their smartphones, eliminating the need to put camera crews at risk on

site. We observed learning teams embrace a new role as curators of such user-generated content. We also witnessed a higher sense of ownership of learning content from floor staff, as clips came straight from the horse's mouth, produced by real-life Jack at the deli counter.

In the end, as the quality level of the videos was similar to self-made videos on social media platforms, learners felt part of the learning story because it was authentic and created a sense of collective effort.

Time will tell how long we will need to contend with this socially distant way of going about our business. However, it is very clear that the digital age has brought many advantages that our ancestors in the times of the influenza or plague pandemics did not have – so let's be grateful for these opportunities.

2021 can be a time to embrace the changes and advantages thrust upon us in 2020, using them wisely for the betterment of these, and future, circumstances.

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