
What You See, Is What You WILL Get

By Fran Donegan

For those consumers who live by the credo that seeing is believing, a new digital technology will help them make buying decisions that they could only picture in their mind's eye in the past. Augmented Reality (AR) marries the reality seen through a camera with images generated by a computer. For a bare bones example, think of viewing a photo of your living room through a smartphone and being able to drop in 3-D images of sofas to see how they look in the space. The shopper can then post the images on Facebook or Twitter to get the reaction of friends and family. That's one version of AR, and it is poised to change the way shoppers shop.

[The LEGO toy company](#) was one of the first retailers to utilize AR technology in its LEGO stores. Called [Digital Box](#), the program allows shoppers, who are for the most part kids or have kids in tow, to hold a box in front of a screen where they can see a virtual 3-D image of the assembled toy right on top of the box. Besides the WOW factor, kids can see what the LEGO model will look like once completed, providing unique interaction between the customer and the product at the point of sale.

AR in the Home Space

The furniture scenario described above is one of the ways AR is entering the home area. [SnapShop](#) allows buyers to choose furniture by seeing how it looks in their actual rooms. Through a free smartphone app, shoppers snap a photo of the room and then pick from a catalog of furniture. They can place it where they want in the image, fiddle with it until it is just right, and then get costs and specifications on the pieces they like. The shopper can post the augmented image on social media. The company says it is adding to the catalog and offering customize apps to furniture manufacturers.

To help homeowners see how its ductless air conditioning and heating units will look in their home, [Mitsubishi Electric](#) provides its sales reps with meVIEW AR. Aiming an iPad at a digital marker that is taped to the wall, homeowners can see how various units will look once installed. The company projects a \$30 million increase in revenue and savings in printing and distributing catalogs, according to an article in *InsideAR*, a publication of Metaio, a company that produces AR products. In the article, Gabriel Weiss, head of Interactive Marketing Technologies for Mitsubishi Electric said, "...we are able to give our customers (contractors and distributors) a mobile product visualization tool that is completely unique to our industry. Giving them a competitive advantage and making the sales process more efficient for them."

[Panasonic](#) uses similar technology to show customers how the Viera line of TVs will look once installed with the [Viera AR Setup Simulator](#). After downloading a free app for the smartphone, the customer prints a PDF that serves as the AR marker. There are markers for console and wall-hung units. Viewing the scene through the camera on the phone, the customer can see how various-sized TVs will look in the space.

Print Comes Alive

[IKEA](#) may have changed the part catalogs play in marketing programs when it injected AR technology into its 2013 catalog. With the help of a free app, smartphone users can scan selected pages of the catalog for additional content. One page might reveal a video of how a chair was designed. Another might show a slideshow of 3-D versions of alternative colors and patterns of the items shown in the print catalog. *InsideAR* reports that it was the most downloaded branded app of 2012, even though the catalog and the app were not available until July. With IKEA making catalog browsing more informative as well as entertaining, how soon before manufacturers and retailers make the use of AR technology commonplace?