

Retailing faces a new reality... are shops, shoppers ready?

By Rafi Leigh

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The first enthusiastic observer to say he'd seen the future, and it worked, was talking about communism... and it didn't. I'm on safer ground by predicting that new augmented reality (AR) technology is the future for many sectors and is going to work just fine.

AR uses computer-generated sound, video, graphics, GPS data and information to enhance perceived reality.

It was one of the emerging technologies featured at SIGGRAPH 2011, the world's premier computer graphics showcase on view in Vancouver last week (7-11 August 2011) and one of the hits of the show. When 15 872 delegates turn up from 74 countries to view 156 exhibits and catch presentations from 825 speakers, something important is going on.

AR is going to be big, particularly in retailing. Four key technologies provide a glimpse of what's in store:

- **'Tracking'**: not only tracking online and in-store transactions but pinpointing individual consumers in time and space so marketers know their proximity to a mall, store or display
- **'Modelling'**: building a digital 'you'; your shape, size, height, even skin tones before creating your avatar (an image for positioning in digital space)
- **'Compositing'**: to clothe your avatar, put it at the wheel of your dream car, whisk it off to a digital holiday destination and lots more experiential what-if scenarios
- **'Presentation'**: allowing you to try on clothes, assess or interact with numerous products, all via video screen (presentation could also give you a starring role in a brand's advertising)



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These are powerful experiential marketing tools for swaying in-store purchasing decisions and are already at work in London and Tokyo.

AR holds value for shoppers, as well as marketers. It is just so convenient (and so cool!) to let a woman shopper see how she looks in that nearly perfect dress, but in a different colour and perhaps with new accessories.

The ability to enrich product choice by adding information has special value in a diverse society. A food-product data-check that itemises all ingredients on screen would assist those with strict dietary needs. Similarly, peace of mind could be provided for those with allergies and medical conditions or those who demand precise nutritional information.

Marketing and consumer benefits are substantial, but South African shoppers and many retailers are only dimly aware of the possibilities. However, AR is already on SA's radar. After all, I was at SIGGRAPH to recce developments with most potential for my fashion retail clients.

After exposure at SIGGRAPH 2011, I'm confident major stores and brands will soon be shopping for AR solutions.

Some retailers may not yet be ready for it, but they will catch on fast. Because this is the



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retail future and it really does work...

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ABOUT RAFI LEIGH

Rafi Leigh is MD of Special-FX, a supplier to the shopper marketing sector and a provider of stage and other special effects. After training at the AAA, he specialised in film and special effects in the UK. He founded Special-FX in South Africa in 1996 and started providing experiential marketers with interactive sets, props, scenery and displays. Contact Rafi on tel +27 (0)11 493 9666 or email rafi@special-fx.co.za.

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