

As Facebook plans for the future, VR looms large

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When Google wanted people to know it was serious about virtual reality two years ago, it sent software developers attending its I/O conference home with Google Cardboard - a cheap, build-it-yourself VR headset that developers could use with Samsung Galaxy smartphones. If they owned one.

When Facebook wanted people to know it was serious about VR on Tuesday, it sent [software developers](#) attending its F8 conference - all 2,600 of them - home with Gear VR headsets, which retail at \$99.99, and Samsung Galaxy S6 smartphones, which cost \$598 apiece.

Facebook Chief Executive Mark Zuckerberg's announcement of the high-end swag was met with emphatic applause from the audience of developers, who packed an auditorium in San Francisco's Fort Mason Center to hear him detail the company's 10-year plan.

The Gear VR may not rival the coveted, high-end [virtual reality headset](#) released last month by Oculus VR, which Facebook acquired in 2014 for \$2 billion. But it was enough to drive the message home: VR will play a big role in Facebook's future - and so will developers who embrace the medium.

"I think virtual reality has the ability to be the most social platform, because you feel like you're right there with that person," Zuckerberg said.

Telling the audience that he expects [virtual reality](#) and augmented reality headsets to eventually shrink to the size and shape of a pair of reading glasses, he predicted that objects such as televisions and phones will one day be a thing of the past.

"When we get to this world, a lot of things we think about as physical objects will just be \$1 apps in an AR app store," he said.

Imagine, he said, instead of pulling out a phone to show someone a photo on a small screen, you could use augmented reality to pull an image out of thin air and enlarge it as much as you wanted.

"It's going to take a long time to make this world," he said, "but this is our vision."

Other things in Zuckerberg's vision included satellites, planes and drones that can bring Internet to the developing world. Those efforts continue even after regulators in India halted Facebook's controversial Free Basics program in the country earlier this year.

In the shorter term, Zuckerberg outlined a significant push for artificial intelligence and chatbots - algorithms that understand language and can talk to users, answer questions and make suggestions.

With 900 million people using Facebook's Messenger service every month, Zuckerberg announced that the company is opening up the Messenger platform to developers so they can build features such as customer service bots, which will let people bypass the need to get on the phone with customer support.

"You should be able to message a business like you message a friend," Zuckerberg said.

If developers and users embrace Messenger's bots as Facebook hopes they will, they might be able to bypass websites and other apps altogether. Developers will be able to program bots that can provide anything from automated subscriptions to content such as weather and traffic updates, article suggestions and summaries and shipping notifications, and even let people browse and shop for items through the Messenger app.

Instead of switching between apps and websites, everything could potentially be done inside Messenger.

Companies such as CNN, clothing and home retailer Spring, and 1-800-Flowers are among the first companies to have Messenger bots.

"I find this ironic," Zuckerberg said, "because now, to order from 1-800-Flowers, you never have to call 1-800-Flowers again."

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