

Augmented reality offers new way to shop for furniture

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Close your eyes. Can you picture that sofa you're coveting in your living room? Now, open your eyes and pull out your phone - because edgy furniture stores are giving you a tool that's more accurate than imagination.

It's called augmented reality. And all you need is a smartphone or tablet.

Take Jerome's augmented reality experience, which launched at the end of the June. The San Diego-based furniture chain now lets customers click a "see it in your home" button listed alongside products on its website. That action will launch a mobile app that allows people to virtually place true-to-size desks, dining sets and beds in their own home - up to three different items at any given time - and get a better idea of whether or not the pieces are a good fit.

"With furniture buying, visualization is a big aspect of it," said Scott Perry, the vice president of digital for the family-operated Jerome's. "The last couple of years, I've witnessed customers bringing in paint samples, pillows from a chair, a little piece of carpet. They'll bring this stuff into the showroom.

So I had this wild idea: what if we had augmented reality so customers could see our furniture in their home with their tablet or phone?"

Actually, the ability to visualize furniture with the help of augmented reality, or AR for short, isn't that wild of an idea. Early-adopter retailers

like Ikea are already experimenting with a similar-but-different tech, [virtual reality](#), to create immersive visualizations such as a life-size, walk-in kitchen where colors and styles are interchangeable.

And pretty soon AR is going to get a ton more love from name-brands including Lowe's and Wayfair, which are betting on Google Tango, a computer vision hardware-software system debuting soon on the Lenovo PHAB2 Pro smartphone. Tango-powered apps will take AR beyond the superficial, so you can do more in real-slash-virtual environments and complete complex tasks, say measure your space with 3-D tools.

Perhaps that's why some experts believe augmented reality is going to forever alter the way we shop and will help retailers, even brick-and-mortars, boost sales.

"I do think it's a game-changer for the retail industry," said Artemis Berry, the vice president of retail for Shop.org and the National Retail Federation. "What we know right now, though, is that it's in the very early stages."

Unlike virtual reality, which uses a head-mounted display that resembles a scuba mask to transport users to fictional realms, augmented reality relies on a see-through display, such as the lens of an iPad camera, to overlay digital elements on top of the real world. Both technologies are already impacting the way people buy and sell homes, but AR, in particular, is having a coming out party. That's thanks in part to smash-hit smartphone game Pokemon Go, which employs AR so players can catch Pokemon characters who appear on the screen in their same locale.

A small startup based out of Israel is helping Jerome's virtually display its furniture inside your home. The company, named Cimage, was founded in 2012 and is backed by \$3 million in capital.

Cimagine has developed proprietary technology capable of scanning rooms without needing a marker, or a two-dimensional symbol that can be read by a phone's camera. For Jerome's customers, that means they can simply point their smart device at an empty space and the Cimagine app will automatically register the dimensions of the area so that they can place furniture at near-perfect scale.

The startup has a few other famous clients, including soda company Coca-Cola, which gives its sales associates tablets to virtually show-off vending machines and coolers when making in-person pitches to would-be buyers. Online retailer Shop Direct and U.K. department chain John Lewis also rely on Cimagine to create AR-based in-home displays and virtual showrooms.

"This year and next year, there will be a lot of experimentation on the use of VR and AR tech, and how it can help in the sales process," said Brian Blau, an analyst who studies immersive technologies at Gartner. "We should find out relatively quickly, say in the next 18 months, how well it works and in what circumstances."

Theoretically, [augmented reality](#) in retail answers problematic questions for both online and offline shoppers that could otherwise slow down the buying process. Will this bed fit in my room? Will it match my decor? Practically speaking, however, the technology can't replicate some really important characteristics. Your smartphone can't tell you if that Jerome's sofa is as comfy as looks, for instance.

Really, then, AR isn't going to eliminate the trip to the furniture warehouse.

"And we don't want it to," Jerome's Perry said. "I don't see (AR) replacing the store experience. We want that (experience). We want to build a relationship with the customer. We want them to see it, feel it

and love it before they buy it, because that makes for a happier customer."

As it stands, Jerome's sells a vast majority of its furniture at its physical stores and Perry doesn't anticipate that will change. The new app, however, is paying off in other ways, he said.

Shoppers who virtually see items in their home are 35 percent more likely than other website visitors to call the company, get directions to a store location or fill out a finance application. Plus, they're also 65 percent more likely to buy, Perry said.

"Augmented reality is a big buzzword. People like to talk about it. It's in the news," Perry said. "But it's an actual, real application that's very useful in retail. We're kind of the perfect case scenario where it's very useful for our customers."

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