

Mall of America is stepping up its digital game with virtual reality, robots

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It is hard to convey the spectacle that is Mall of America in a PowerPoint presentation.

Yet until recently, that is what its tourism staff had to do when speaking at conferences.

Now, the staff can take people on a three-minute [virtual reality](#) experience that includes the Ferris wheel in Nickelodeon Universe, the 300-foot ocean tunnel in Sea Life Minnesota Aquarium, a view of the swanky Cedar + Stone restaurant in the new J.W. Marriott, the mall's atrium and its endless corridors of stores.

"It's really gotten the organization excited about how we tell our story - and how we use new formats of technology to tell that story," said Emily Shannon, who heads up a small team as the mall's digital director.

Virtual reality is one of the many ways the nation's biggest mall has been improving its digital game. Last year, a big checkoff on the to-do list was installing free Wi-Fi for all visitors. Another was a new mobile app.

Now besides virtual reality, its executives are exploring robots and - perhaps sometime soon - augmented reality.

While it can be tempting to get caught up with the novelty of the new tools, Shannon has been mindful to make sure they are using them to solve business issues. Virtual reality is a great example of that, she said.

The mall worked with Minneapolis-based firm Visual to create the 360-degree video, which it launched at the end of April. Since then, the mall's tourism staff has taken it to travel blogger and tourism conferences around the U.S. as well as to one over the summer in Stockholm.

"There were people waiting in lines to experience this, which was fantastic," Shannon said. "Anytime you go to a trade show, you want people coming to your booth. This definitely accomplished that goal."

An added benefit of virtual reality, she added, is that the technology transcends language barriers that MOA staff often confront when traveling around the world.

But there are some potential liabilities, too, since some people have been known to become physically ill from the motion in virtual reality. That is why MOA's digital team chose the slower-moving Ferris wheel rather than other head-spinning attractions in Nickelodeon Universe.

"We knew we weren't ready to put someone in a roller coaster yet," she said. "We wanted something that conveyed movement and motion and energy without making people sick."

The virtual reality presentation is geared toward travel and tourism professionals but is available for the public at www.mallofamerica.com/visit/virtual-reality.

Next, Shannon and her team are exploring how they might incorporate virtual reality into some rides in the amusement park or in some of their recruiting efforts at job fairs.

So far, the mall is using robots to mainly advertise some store promotions. As one might imagine, they have already proved to be big

crowd pleasers.

"We've had them out on the floor a couple of times," Shannon said.

"They draw a lot of attention. People take selfies with them. They take Snapchats of them. People are all over the robots."

Shannon and her team see other ways to interact with customers through the robots - or, for example, have celebrities, who often come to perform and sign autographs at the mall, surprise mall-goers by allowing them to interact with them remotely through the robot.

Mall staff members also think it could be a good way to let people around the world - or people who are physically or medically unable to come to the mall - a way to experience what it is like in the mall by allowing them to control the robot's movements remotely.

Shannon and her team are also actively exploring ways they might incorporate [augmented reality](#) - which became popularized through Pokemon Go - into the mall's mobile app.

"Imagine being able to use your [mobile app](#) and it understands and senses where you are," she said. "It tells you, 'Well, if you're looking for J. Crew, turn left, because it knows where you are in that environment. ... But the technology is still very new and, in a building our size, it's something we have to go through a very rigorous vetting process to deploy."

While it may not be as sexy as robots or virtual reality, the mall is also planning to test in the coming weeks new wayfaring kiosks with touch screens that visitors can use to find where stores are located instead of the current mall directories with maps and lists of stores.

"The challenge with our existing directories is the minute you print them

and you put them in those backlit stands, they're out of date because a store moves or a store leaves or a new store enters the building," she said.

If it goes well, Shannon hopes to replace all of the mall's directories with those new kiosks next year.

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