

PR in the metaverse: A virtual world with real opportunities?

Last year, Nike paid a rumoured \$33m (just under R500 million) to acquire a sneaker company that makes sneakers you can't wear. A few months later, Microsoft bought gaming giant Activision Blizzard for an eye-watering \$68.7bn (slightly north of R1 trillion). Both deals were made with an eye on how the metaverse is set to change our future.



Source: www.pexels.com

But what exactly is the metaverse? More importantly, from a PR perspective, how will it disrupt the way in which we do business? Danni Pinch, executive creative director for Atmosphere Communications and co-founder of King James Digital, forecasts the future here.

The What-verse?

The idea of metaverse-like spaces has circulated for decades in the form of virtual reality, augmented reality and 3D computing. The metaverse is like a more immersive version of *The Sims*. In a metaverse users can socialise, work, play and do just about anything else that they would usually do in the real world.



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This matters for PR because it opens a can of opportunities for brands to be able to communicate with people in new and exciting ways. Pinch says, "Think of the metaverse as the evolution of the internet. It is a more immersive virtual world or series of worlds that we navigate and are visibly present in."

As someone who was around for the changes that the web caused in the PR industry (which we're still trying to understand decades later) my guess is you cannot underestimate the disruptiveness of it. It is likely to impact many industries and impact most of our clients."

How will this disrupt PR?

The pandemic changed so much about the way we live. It didn't just introduce remote work on a large scale, it forced people to reimagine how they socialised.

Deprived of the option of meeting in real life, people took to meeting online, in gaming worlds like *Roblox*, *Fortnite* and *Minecraft*. These places became "proto-metaverses".

Combined with the explosion of NFTs (non-fungible tokens) brands soon discovered that metaverse spaces held untapped potential in terms of finding new ways to build relationships with their audiences.



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Pinch says, "As the adoption of the metaverse expands, I think we're going to see opportunities to have more immersive experiences and get closer to customers in the kind of way we only used to be able to do at events or in stores. With that said, it is a little difficult to accurately gauge just how disruptive the metaverse will be, because it is still being built and we don't know its full capabilities yet."

A brave new world

One of the biggest problems that PR agencies will face as they begin to dip their toes into the metaverse is that, at least initially, it will be a touch lawless.

"The metaverse is a frontier space and if you've watched cowboy movies you know that these can be a little gung-ho and, sometimes, dangerous. We are certainly going to see issues arise. The more people that are in them, the more significant these challenges will become. Think of what it's like when a Twitter mob forms around an issue; now imagine seeing this mob visually represented in a metaverse space.

We are going to see mistakes; we are going to see abusive and fraudulent behaviour; we are going to see misinformation. We need to look at our existing practices at managing risks and use our imagination to apply them to the metaverse before issues arise," says Pinch.



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In the same way that the current iterations of social media initially arrived and became a bit of a minefield for practitioners to navigate, getting the best outcomes from the metaverse is going to take some trial and error. With that said, social media also proved that it could be a phenomenally valuable resource if used correctly and that there were big gains for the agencies that showed a bit of digital 'chutzpah' early on.

Pinch concludes, "The more audiences grow in metaverse spaces, the more influence will be shaped there. So, for clients it will be about teaming up with agencies that have experience. The money will flow as the population of the metaverse increases and, from watching this happen with web 1.0., many agencies won't be moving fast enough and will be caught off guard when they suddenly realise how big it has become."

Early adopters may be richly rewarded. This could be a key form of real connection and humanness, in a fully digital world.

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