Could Google Cardboard Be The Future Of Healthcare Market Research?

Contributed by GKA
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Traditional market research has many benefits, but as we know there are drawbacks too. Bringing participants to one place can make it expensive and time consuming. For healthcare market research in particular, it can sometimes present a physical challenge for respondents who might be ill or have limited mobility. Physicians and other healthcare professionals often have hectic schedules that make it difficult for them to appear in person.

Thatâ€™s where Virtual Reality (VR) could offer a huge leap forward. Imagine your respondents never needing to leave the comfort of their own home or office, as VR becomes the standard of the future. But can it really become an effective tool that eventually replaces the need for face-to-face healthcare market research?

Exploring the possibilities

We may be fast approaching the point where VR affords researchers the same tone of voice, facial cues and body language opportunities as being physically in front of the respondent. Thatâ€™s because even though VR has been around for a good while now, recent technological advances, and the innovative approach of some of the worldâ€™s biggest tech companies, means itâ€™s now more effective and accessible than ever.

Take Google Cardboard for example. This simple â€˜viewerâ€™ turns a smartphone into a VR headset using just one piece of cardboard folded to enclose the device. Theyâ€™re easy to use, and a relatively cheap option for researchers. You could buy and send them to healthcare market research respondents, or respondents can easily download the template and make their own. If itâ€™s cheap enough to send to respondents â€“ why not? As it becomes more widely accepted and accessible VR could be a commonplace part of everyday life.

Other big companies are continuing to explore the possibilities of VR too. Facebook recently paid $2 billion for VR developers Oculus, while HTC Vive combines a VR headset and laser guidance to allow people to have a truly interactive experience. Sony are soon to launch their PlayStation VR to enhance their gaming, and Microsoft HoloLens is set to change the face of personal computing by offering the worldâ€™s first see-through holographic computer viewed using smart-glass headsets. These devices could offer a whole world of potential and opportunity for future market research.

Imagine the possibilities of for healthcare market research, not just from a virtual reality perspective but from augmented reality and live streaming as well. Researchers have potential to watch a patient and doctor consultation live, or could even view a surgeon using the latest devices first hand. If applied correctly then the possibilities are endless.

Oculus Rift is a headset that makes you feel like youâ€™re actually in the room, the doctorâ€™s office, or anywhere else you might want your respondents to be, while Oculus Gear VR turns Samsung smartphones into VR headsets. Like Oculus, Microsoft HoloLens also has a huge range of possibilities when applied to market research. All these headsets have applications that will transform how we interact with the world, in entertainment, on the internet, playing games or simply carrying out everyday tasks. So itâ€™s not a huge leap to imagine a time when itâ€™s possible to get great market research insight and data the same way.

Computer-simulated environments could have advantages over focus groups, concept tests, and other laboratory approaches, as consumers can test and respond to an unlimited number of products, or set up and alter tests at the touch of a button. You can even create an environment with a realistic level of variety of similar products, and use eye-tracking and motion monitoring to measure every aspect of a respondentâ€™s interaction with them. All these possibilities may in time be adaptable to offer respondents fully immersive 3D virtual testing equipment that allows healthcare market researchers to re-create the atmosphere of anything from a hospital to a focus group room â€“ quickly and inexpensively.

Virtual doctor visits

In healthcare, Virtual Realityâ€™s greatest potential surely lies in how it could affect doctor-patient interactions. Healthcare professionals have already been embracing alternatives to in-person visits for some time, whether itâ€™s 24-hour nurse lines, email consultations, or live video chats with physicians. VR technology could be even more effective than those options in providing patients with a realistic way of conferring with their doctors.

The benefits of this kind of VR consultation would be numerous. People who feel ill wouldnâ€™t be forced to leave the house to see a doctor. They wouldnâ€™t have to expose others to anything contagious that they might have. People on medications that might compromise their motor skills wouldnâ€™t be trying to get behind the wheel to visit the doctor. Doctors and nurses could have more flexibility in their schedules.

Of course, before we get ahead of ourselves, we have to remember the limitations of VR. To what extent can a physician examine a patient using it? It will have to be determined exactly what kinds of check-ups a doctor can manage through VR and what symptoms can be accurately detected virtually. When in doubt, it will always be best to do an in-person exam. However, for follow-ups or common illnesses with an easy diagnosis, the VR â€œvisitâ€• to the doctor could be something commonplace in the very near future.

So itâ€™s all good, yes?

Not necessarily. We need to be wary of thinking virtual reality is without its disadvantages. There are issues that need to be addressed in order for it to produce clear, relevant research. For example, how do you get a respondent to behave naturally and give honest, unbiased answers when theyâ€™re using a device that could leave them disorientated, or even a little frightened? It might possibly produce physical effects too, such as a heightened heart rate or faster breathing that could adversely affect their answers. This is especially concerning in healthcare market research, where you may already be dealing with participants who have pressing health concerns.

Furthermore, we have to understand that itâ€™s not a natural environment likely to produce â€˜real lifeâ€™ responses. Respond also need to be trained to use the technology correctly. And can VR ever really replicate the subtleties of eye contact and other visual cues available when sitting face to face? Will a potentially vulnerable patient feel the same ease as they would in the physical presence of a warm, caring human being?

All in all, the onset of more advanced, next-generation VR is an exciting prospect, and one that could revolutionise the way to carry out our work in healthcare market research. Weâ€™ll just have to keep a keen eye on how, and when, the technology matches our ambition â€“ and avoid any pitfalls it may bring.