

Best Western Goes All In on Its Virtual Reality Marketing Move

Deanna Ting, Skift - May 23, 2016



[Best Western Hotels & Resorts](#) is the latest in a slew of hospitality brands to enter the realm of virtual reality in an effort to step up their marketing efforts.

By summer, all 2,200 Best Western-branded hotels in North America will have a “Best Western Virtual Reality Experience” whereby travelers can see each property’s rooms, lobbies, and amenities virtually online before they even arrive at the hotel.

Phoenix-based Best Western has been working with Google Street View to develop this product for the past three years, gathering some 1.7 million photos of its North American properties. With Google Street View, Best Western has taken those photos and added customized narration and music to them to create 360-degree videos that transform into VR when viewed with a headset device like Google Cardboard, Oculus Rift, Samsung Gear VR, and the like. The videos will be made available on platforms that include Google Maps, Google Search, YouTube, and Facebook.

The Best Western Virtual Reality Experience is just one piece of the 70-year-old company’s overall, \$2-billion-plus effort to reach new audiences and present a new, refreshed image for its

hotels, what Dorothy Dowling, Best Western CMO summarized as “re-architecting.” It’ll also be promoted heavily this summer when the brand debuts a new advertising campaign.

“To me as a consumer, I think it’s quite an amazing experience,” Dowling said. “For me, the first time I was doing it, I was looking at the nap of the carpet and it was a really shocking realization to me that I was looking at the nap of the carpet like I was in the room. That I could actually see that degree of texture and get that sense of size and scale. I think, for consumers, that’s really going to redefine the game.”

Dowling says that this kind of technology will significantly impact the hotel booking process for consumers by providing the kind of “deep information” that household decision-makers, especially women, will appreciate.

“To go that next step before they go, and actually map out a lot of those things in their mind before they arrive, I think is going to be transformative for the business,” she said.

Best Western, in a press release, claims to be “the first major company of its size and scale to launch this cutting-edge technology setting a new industry standard for how virtual reality can be used to enhance the customer experience.”

That’s a bit debatable, but the truth is, [it isn’t the first travel or hospitality company to play with 360-degree videos or VR.](#)

A History of Hospitality in VR and Augmented Reality

Here’s a quick rundown of some of the notable VR and 360-degree video plays that other hospitality companies have made in recent years:

May 2015: [Starwood](#) was already testing out whether or not guests would respond to VR in its concept lab.

September 2015: Marriott piloted a program, called [VRoom Service](#), at two of its locations in New York and London, where by guests could “travel” the world via VR by borrowing a Samsung Gear VR headset for 24 hours.

October 2015: [Shangri-La Hotels](#) announced it will be the first international hospitality brand to debut Samsung Gear VR headsets for its 17 global sales offices and 94 individual hotel sales teams. Whereas Best Western is using VR to sell its hotels direct to consumers, Shangri-La is using VR to sell its hotels to wholesalers, travel agents, meeting planners, and other customers.

April 2016: Similar to Shangri-La's strategy, [Carlson Rezidor Hotel Group](#) debuted BluPrint, a VR-enhanced app that helps investors and developers have a better understanding of the design process involved in the group's Radisson Blu hotel brand.

April 2016: [Hilton](#) launches a new 360-degree video ad to push more direct bookings.

April 2016: For its Sonoma Select pilot program, [Airbnb](#) partnered with Matterport to produce enhanced 360-degree video listings for hosts participating in the pilot program. With this program, guests can experience more of a hotel-like package when they stay with highly rated, selected hosts in Sonoma, California.

May 2016: [Holiday Inn Express](#) released a comedic VR video starring actor Rob Riggle, the brand's creative director, to promote the hotel company's "power shower" experience.

May 2016: [Vacation rental management company Vacasa](#) also partnered with Matterport to have unique 360-degree, interactive video experiences on all of its vacation rental listings.

Why Are So Many Hotels Turning to VR?

It's not just tourism and hospitality companies who are jumping on the VR bandwagon in order to be a part of an industry that some analysts estimate will be worth \$120 billion by 2020.

Last week, Google debuted [Daydream](#), a new smartphone-based VR platform, while [Facebook](#) launched, on May 17, its first VR/360-degree short film.

From what we've seen of hospitality companies in the 360-degree video/VR space, it's clear there are two distinct marketing approaches emerging:

To inform and sell: This is the strategy being adopted by brands like Best Western, Shangri-La, Carlson Rezidor, and Vacasa. For these brands, VR and/or 360-degree videos are being used as tools to inform their customers about their products.

To entertain and market: Brands like Marriott, Starwood, and Holiday Inn Express have taken a different route, seeing how VR can be used to entertain guests, and transport them, virtually, to another space all together.

But is VR much more than just a marketing gimmick? Can it actually translate to more bookings, more brand awareness, more consumer loyalty, or more customer engagement?

When asked if Best Western and other companies' forays into VR was more gimmick than practical tool, Dowling said, "I think you have to experience some of these things to really understand they are not a gimmick ... people experiencing VR will change their views."

For one thing, the technology is still limited in its scope and it's not entirely accessible to the masses — yet. However, some estimate that a total of 16 billion VR headsets will be sold by the end of this year and that by 2020, 30 million headsets will have been sold worldwide. Then there's also the fact that some people have reported experiencing motion sickness when they use it.

Not only that, but VR isn't like any other storytelling or marketing platform out there. It's not enough to simply film something and run with it; brands also have to consider all the different dimensions and ways that the user can conceivably experience the technology.