Augmented reality (AR) is undergoing a transformation from niche technology to potential trillion-dollar opportunity. Led by innovative sneaker and apparel brands, retailers today are finding creative uses for AR, showing new potential for the technology from marketing to the dressing room.

In June, Nike launched the SNKRS app to disrupt the traditional sneaker “drop” for its partnership with NYC restaurant group Momofuku. Scanning a Momofuku menu with the app launched the AR experience, which could also be triggered by special SNKRS posters outside restaurants. The app reveals an interactive 3D model of the new shoe, which users can then unlock for purchase.

The mobile-focused AR experiment reflects the growing role that mobile shopping is playing in Nike’s sales, versus physical stores. (The company also announced a partnership with Amazon in June, another ploy for online shoppers.) Location-based augmented reality can also provide a sense of excitement close to the feel of the in-store release.
In July, Japanese footwear brand Onitsuka Tiger partnered with fashion label Anrealage for the world’s “first augmented reality sneaker.” When scanned with the Anrealage app, the sneakers’ logo appears in 3D accompanied by music from Japanese rock band Sakanaction. Although the experience has received mixed reviews, it still shows the possibilities for unique AR-enabled experiences built into everyday objects.

Retailers have also experimented with using AR to add value to the in-store experience. In Paris, a Nike flagship on the Champs-Élysées debuted an in-store AR experience last fall. Shoppers could customize their sneakers via tablet, then project their design onto a white shoe, for a real-time preview of their custom product. Gap’s “DressingRoom” app, unveiled at January’s Consumer Electronics Show, allows users to customize a virtual 3D model to their proportions and preview outfits. Neiman Marcus has launched Memory Mirrors, in-store mirrors where shoppers can try and compare different looks using AR.

Augmented reality can also be used to give consumers more information or context. For Fashion Week 2017, creative technology studio Superbright created an augmented reality catwalk for marketing company xAd (now GroundTruth). When viewed with the app, the runway came to life with custom graphics that provided additional information about each piece of clothing.

“We think this experience used augmented reality technology in the best way possible: by making an already polished fashion show exponentially richer with real-time 3D content that was not only intriguing but also relevant from a viewer perspective,” reads Superbright’s website. “At the end of the show we connected a crowd of over 200 people to xAd’s technology and Lindsay Freimond's fashion collection—both a huge contextual and technological achievement alike.”
“Augmented reality is going to change the way the always-connected consumer works, shops and plays,” reads a July Ad Age article. In a challenging retail environment, augmented reality can help apparel brands stand out at any point in the cycle. Businesses should be attuned to new ways to use augmented reality to enrich the shopping experience from all angles.

Main image: Superbright.

Augmented fashion

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