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In November, *The New York Times* launched a 10-minute virtual reality (VR) film called “[The Displaced](#),” bringing viewers into the worlds of three children who are war refugees. By downloading a special app and slipping a smartphone into a cardboard viewer delivered to subscribers with the paper on Saturday, users entered the 3-D world of the displaced children.

As [New York Times Magazine editor-in-chief Jake Silverstein explained](#), “by breaking free from the rectangular editorial frame of a traditional documentary film, VR invests the viewer with an uncanny feeling of agency, a sense of being able to look around for yourself. Your living room or kitchen falls away. Turning this way and that, examining the sky or a cucumber or a lily pad, you begin to feel present in these vivid locations.”

Although Silverstein noted that video game makers have already used VR and public discussion has focused on how it will revolutionize journalism, VR also promises to transform public relations. Here’s how:

1. Revolutionizing the way we tell stories: PR professionals are storytellers for our brands. Imagine taking viewers on a VR tour of your factory, creating an experience of what it’s like to drive your sports car down the autobahn, or luring tourists with clips of walking the streets of Old Delhi.

If the goal of public relations is to engage and build relationships with our stakeholders, then bringing them into the worlds of our brands may be the ultimate way of achieving this. Advertisers are realizing this as well. Facebook recently began selling ad space for 360-degree videos, which convey a similar experience to viewers as VR but do not require headsets for viewing.

2. Putting audiences in other people’s shoes: VR also holds special promise for nonprofit practitioners, since we depend on powerful personal stories of human beings who are affected by our causes in order to elicit empathy and spur people to action. VR can make the lives and experiences of other people more palpable to the rest of us. An international non-governmental organization could just have easily commissioned “[The Displaced](#)” to advocate for refugees.

VR can also be used for corporate social responsibility. For example, [Toyota](#) has used VR to show teens what happens when they try to drive a vehicle while distracted by text messages and noisy passengers. According to the company's corporate marketing director, 80 percent of users said they would be safer drivers after the experience.

3. Delivering captive audiences: As Robert D. Hof recently noted in *The New York Times*: "The most effective ads will probably be interactive, because there is no multitasking while wearing a headset."

VR holds the same possibility for PR practitioners: to deliver audiences who are so captivated that they don't simultaneously text and tweet while consuming content, making messages more impactful. [Thomas A. Furness III](#), a VR expert and international director of the [Human Interface Technology Lab](#) at the University of Washington, has described using VR as "like writing on the brain with indelible ink."

4. Changing how we pitch reporters: California-based practitioner [Shel Holtz](#) is already predicting that, in the future, PR practitioners will offer VR footage, rather than just traditional photos and videos, in our pitches to reporters. He notes that providing such footage could "help elevate a pitch" with outlets that are experimenting with this technology.

5. Upending physical meetings: Forget Skype — VR has the potential to connect us with clients and colleagues in other places and also convey the feeling that we are physically in the same location.

Fast Company notes that "once headsets go through several iterations, maybe in three to five years, they will have eye tracking and facial tracking, so that virtual representations of people will actually have that person's facial movement and allow proper eye contact."

6. Positioning brands as innovative and connecting with tech-savvy audiences: As Lindsay Stein wrote for *PR Week*, VR is a powerful tool for "brands looking to spruce up their image or appeal to a younger, more tech-oriented audience." For example, [Wells Fargo](#) created a VR game of a maze, which Stein said helps position the bank as more forward thinking.

So far, we've seen limited experiments with VR by other brands. For example, in 2011, [Volkswagen](#) offered an app that allowed users to experiment with features of their Golf

Cabriolet. And [The North Face](#) created a VR experience of climbing in Yosemite National Park, while [Birchbox](#) has offered clips of riding waves and helicopters and [Marriott](#) has transported users to Hawaii and London through VR.

Given the potential of this technology, for savvy brands, this can only be the beginning.