



Designed and built by Sarnier on the site of France's oldest and most famous distillery, the Calvados experience immerses the audience in a multi-sensory journey through the production and history of this iconic spirit

The rise of storytelling

Key Points

- Storytelling by brands has become more common in recent years
- In AV, storytelling has traditionally been more prominent in pop-up brand events and in museums and visitor attractions
- Many see the corporate sector as showing great potential - most large companies have an experience centre of some kind
- AV and emerging technologies are the catalysts for storytelling in a number of growing sectors

As more and more verticals embrace digital storytelling, the AV industry is in a position to exploit what amounts to a user experience revolution. **Rob Lane** reports

Over the past few years, as marketing has evolved due to the growth of relatively new platforms such as the internet and smartphones, consumers have become used to the now ubiquitous brand 'narrative'. Whether the brand is Coca-Cola, Lloyds Bank or Apple, brand narratives are an essential way of communicating with customers.

Narratives, of course, are essentially a brand's story, and it's no coincidence that as brand narratives have become ubiquitous, the broader use of storytelling within business has grown in popularity, with so-called user experiences or integrated experiences at the heart of things.

The term 'user experience' has actually been around since 1993, when Donald Norman joined Apple as user experience architect - the first time UX was used within a job title. But UX and sister buzz-phrase 'integrated experience' only recently become de rigueur in AV, culminating in the AV industry's trade body, InfoComm International, rebranding as AVIXA (Audiovisual and Integrated Experience Association).

Experience-based storytelling

In AV, user experience-based storytelling has traditionally been employed in temporary installations - the short-term, pop-up brand narratives that have regularly utilised technology such as AR and VR - and semi-permanent museum and visitor attractions.

"Brands have, over a number of years, been

using AV technology and storytelling," says Ross Magri, managing director at Sarnier. "Cadbury World, the Guinness Storehouse in Dublin and Heineken Experience in Amsterdam are just some examples."

More recently, Sarnier designed and installed the Calvados Experience, a visitor attraction that immerses the audience in a multi-sensory journey through the centuries, to tell the story of how the humble apple is turned into Calvados.



'A corporate message, an artistic vision, an education project, religion, broadcast: the best way to transfer the message is through storytelling'
Peter Pauwels, Barco

Other permanent storytelling installations such as those deployed by big enterprise - so-called 'experience centres' - are also gaining traction, as are those used by retail to revitalise the high street shopping experience. Indeed, 'digital storytelling' was a key theme of July's Digital Signage Summit Europe (see pages 20-22).

"Within retail, combinations of immersive signage, audio and brand storytelling platforms have transformed the shopping areas into experiential stages, enabling retailers to get closer

to their audiences," explains Peter Cliff, creative director, Holovis.

"Digital storytelling within retail is increasing as the narratives are travelling outside of the stores and into people's homes through apps and extended guest experiences. The key is then getting people back to the shopping space so they continue their journey with the brand."

A good example is Gatwick Airport's North Terminal, where the World Duty Free store's experiential stage gives brands the opportunity to invite customers to join them for interactive events or branded photo opportunities. This allows personalised narratives to be played out for each shopper, which are then captured and shared as content rich posts on social media sites.

Emma Bigg, managing director of Octavius RE, agrees: "With the increased sophistication of marketing campaigns and selling a lifestyle to sell a product, we are seeing AV used for all sorts of storytelling within retail. The way we sell is becoming more sophisticated and so is the digital content and deployment. The ability to link digital content, social media and engage directly with smart devices means that the customer experience is more encompassing."

Obvious areas are high-profile sports brands and luxury brands, but increasingly high street names have been joining the party. Fashion retailer Oasis used creative digital agency Kaleidivision to reinvigorate its London flagship store, and beauty brand L'Occitane has used AV to great effect to

create its multi-sensory London outlet.

"Brands are always looking for new and more creative ways to differentiate themselves – digital storytelling is a key part of this," says Matt Barton, managing director, 7thSense Design. "Retailers are recognising that to bring people back to the brick-and-mortar stores to do their shopping rather than online, they need to offer a unique experience. A well-told story with the correct use of technology can help in this."

Corporate potential

Storytelling may not have advanced as quickly in the corporate sector, but this is a market many see as having huge potential – albeit with caveats.

"Google, Apple and others have taken full advantage of the 'experience centre' concept," says Magri. "Many are continuously expanding the number of such centres, but the developments of experience centres also require a substantial financial commitment that is only available for the bigger corporations."

However, Bigg believes the sector will grow due to reductions in technology costs. "With the development of more sophisticated and more cost-accessible immersive technology, I see this as an area that will see significant growth," she explains. "Seven years ago, Diageo commissioned

their Customer Collaboration Centre to help them engage more with their on-trade [such as bars and restaurants] and off-trade customers [such as supermarkets]. Very quickly they saw an increase in new initiatives that translated into profit growth. Since then, companies have seen how this route can be successful and have embraced the concept."

"This side of the industry is one that interests us a lot as a solutions provider," adds Daniel Lee, managing director at Hewshott International. "What experience centres allow us to do is immerse end users in the technologies that we've



'The way we sell is becoming more sophisticated and so is the digital content and deployment'
Emma Bigg, Octavius RE

been discussing with them. It allows us to take them on a journey through their own workflow and demonstrate how it might be enhanced."

Barton is also a fan of the concept: "Experience

centres can provide a great platform for brands. It's an exciting area of the industry and we really enjoy working with clients to develop their concepts for these types of experiences. They can generally be multi-purpose spaces which is why we believe this area of the industry is only going to grow – serving as a B2B relationship selling tool and a promotional tool on a B2C level."

"Every larger company is investing in an experience centre of some shape or form," confirms Peter Pauwels, director of strategic marketing at Barco. "The 'product' they sell is becoming less tangible or harder to demonstrate through touch and feel. The only solution to explain what you do, how you do it and why you are the best at it is through interactive storytelling."

When it comes to the more established storytelling verticals, recent developments in the way AV is being employed have improved the way that stories are told, with interaction particularly making a difference: "More immersion, more interaction, non-linear", according to Pauwels.

To pull visitors into the story and away from their smartphones there needs to be a larger canvas. This is leading to the use of larger digital walls and mixed technology, with LED, projection and LCD coming together. At the same time,

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visitors expect a greater degree of interaction and a varied, non-linear approach to the storytelling.

"Visitors are expecting the content to adapt to them," says Pauwels. "Great storytelling requires interaction from the audience. By creating interactivity you can assure a longer engagement of the spectators. Walking through a museum or theme park, through a pre-set path or scenario does not work. Every visitor will find his own way and his own viewpoint. The AV technology needs to enable this."

AV is certainly allowing storytellers to create a more varied engaging experience while appealing to a wider demographic: "Exhibitions now tend to include more interactive and immersive elements, but retain some of the more traditional features so as to appeal to a wider range of ages," says Bigg.

"We're definitely seeing an increased demand for interactivity," adds Barton. "Something that allows the visitor to discover, and perhaps define, their own experience. This interactivity can be venue-led – for example, a member of staff leads guests through a journey and encourages participation to drive engagement. Alternatively, visitor-controlled experiences make for a particularly exciting experience."

Lee comments: "Interactivity and user engagement are the keys here. Rather than telling a story to an audience, they want the audience to participate in the story themselves – maybe even have a way to affect the story and its outcome."

Tools and techniques

AV professionals are utilising a variety of tools and techniques to tell these stories, and these methodologies are key to ensuring that each piece of storytelling fully engages its audience.

Holovis utilises its RideView proprietary software suite to bring stories to life in shared VR CAVes – four or five-sided structures where all the walls feature volumetric projection and users wear 3D glasses to interpret data and explore it in real time, 1:1 scale.

This allows multidisciplinary teams, from creatives to engineers, to experience the final set-up in a physical space long before they would normally be able to, and has proved an invaluable tool for identifying things that aren't working within the proposed design – allowing changes to be made before any physical builds begin.

"Talking and showing is key," says Bigg. "The reason that experience centres work and digital storytelling is effective is that most people respond to visual cues. Quite often clients need to see and hear examples before they can truly envision the solution. Sometimes it's as important to eliminate everything they don't like before you get to something they do."

"Pre-visualisation is a key part of our offering now and we're continuing to develop this as a feature that allows customers to visualise their



system and content prior to installation," adds Barton. "This is essential as it enables clients to better understand both complexities and opportunities when setting up display systems. We have always found that working with clients early on the life of a project to review concepts and ideas leads to the best quality and the most positive project outcomes."

Lee adds: "More and more we are using 3D visualisation tools. To deliver the client's vision, we are using the same tools as always but deployed in a different way. We are also adding a layer of intelligence and interactivity across the top."

In terms of the potential for AV business, there appear to be very few limits to storytelling's expansion capacity. According to Pauwels, storytelling as a way of communicating messaging has now entered every vertical market: "A corporate message, an artistic vision, an education project, religion, broadcast: the best way to transfer the message is through storytelling. This trend is primarily driving the way the content is developed: more video, more interaction. But it is also driving the use of technology."

"Although it started in themed entertainment, we see storytelling appearing in all Barco verticals, from live events (corporate gatherings, live concert or outdoor mappings) through large fixed installations in corporate experience centres, broadcast studios, museums and houses of worship."

Lee also sees demand across the board: "I think that most organisations now want to tell their story. Whether it's a corporate, a hotel or a retailer, they all want their clients and potential clients to form a lasting relationship with them and they often do this through storytelling."

Barton has a similar view: "AV is a great and highly versatile enabler for creative storytelling. We are seeing AV in storytelling in many interesting

new applications such as airports, shopping centres, corporate venues and casinos where use cases vary from direct advertising and 'lobby-attractions' to some more abstract and intriguing artistic installations."

Cliff focuses on two growth areas: "AV and emerging technologies are the catalysts for storytelling in a number of growing sectors including on-board cruise ships and the property market. Cruise ships are looking to extend the guest experience using AR and tracking technologies, creating unique interactions for each passenger. This extends the narratives of the ship's entertainment and allows people to be creating their own adventures based on the interactions they have."

"Within the property market, experience centres are being created to help sell homes, utilising new technologies and IoT connectivity as a key feature of modern connected living. These present samples of different technologies with a story led approach to exploring them all, encouraging people to envisage this as their new life."

Storytelling is only successful if end users are satisfied, and such satisfaction demands a seamless, frictionless AV experience – which in itself requires detailed and considered AV consultation, solutions and delivery. Whether the storytelling takes place in a global brand's visitor exhibition, a retail hub, theme park ride, or corporate experience centre, the key to a story's success is exceptional user experience. **1**



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