3D Adoption in Retail – Avoiding the Deployment Trap

by Traci Stapleton and Chad Markle

Although early adopters of 3D fashion technology have experienced many false starts, 3D has matured in the last five years with greatly improved user experience, simulation of materials, and overall believability. 3D solutions are now ready to deliver significant value for brands and retailers, enabling them to reduce cycle times, save on sample and shipping costs, and ultimately create more value from innovation. However, these benefits only matter if they are translated into long lasting business results. When implementing 3D, adopters need a program that demonstrates value quickly and is sustainable.

The Benefits of 3D

When using 3D during design and development, photo-realistic digital assets improve communication and enable cross-functional team members to align on a vision. Designers and technical designers collaborate to create 3D renderings that align with design intent. Then, the asset is shared with merchandisers for assortment planning, patternmakers for fit-ready sample development, customer groups for product tests, or vendors for enhanced communication. Early adopter Adidas has eliminated 1.5 million samples over five years by replacing a portion of physical prototypes with life-like virtual ones, with savings we estimate to be around $8M per year. Target reports a 65% reduction in sampling and a 2-week reduction of development cycle time.

Downstream, the same photo-realistic digital assets replace ad or photo samples for catalog or e-commerce, reducing costly photo shoots. Holograms derived from 3D assets create engaging in-store experiences. 3D product rendering enables customers to try things on virtually with customized fit avatars, creating a digital fitting experience outside of the fitting room. IKEA has used 3D to replace nearly 75% of photographed online and catalog product images. The retailer saves money on photography, and customers aren’t able to detect a difference.

Avoid these 8 Deployment Traps to Get Started the Right Way

Compared with other investment decisions in retail, it’s not difficult to build a business case to get started in 3D. The savings alone from reduced development prototypes and fit samples, together with reduced lead times, justify the investment, without even tallying the many other benefits.

The biggest challenge – indeed the trap we have seen at many brands and retailers – is that many treat it as a deployment project rather than one focused on achieving company-wide adoption in support of a broader 3D strategy. Success in 3D requires knowledge workers to work and make important decisions in unfamiliar ways using 3D renderings. To change people’s mindsets and behaviors, a transformation and adoption mindset is required. Retailers and brands need to know what to avoid and how to get started.

Here are eight things retailers should look out for when driving adoption of 3D, and some practical tips on how they should get started.

1. **Bottoms up approach**: When 3D is implemented as an experiment without executive sponsorship, it gets deprioritized by other objectives on the executive agenda. Senior managers must regularly talk about their vision for 3D, and demonstrate the criticality of its success and adoption by their actions.

2. **No focused project management**: Avoid embarking on a 3D initiative without a plan and a facilitator in place to achieve the plan. Budget for the project management, change leadership and adoption, and organizational development required to succeed.

3. **Haphazard starting point**: Your choices around where to start, in terms of the categories and stages in the lifecycle, are critical decisions. Understand the potential and the opportunities to add the right value, and then prioritize by the size of the business impact and the ease of execution to find early winners. Pick categories with exceptional 3D believability first.

4. **Scope too narrow**: Start broad enough to involve multiple job roles, processes, workflows and team members. This allows a span large enough to measure results.

5. **Bypassing integrations**: System interfaces and integrations create cost and risk, so it is tempting to avoid them altogether. However, integrating with product lifecycle management (PLM), for example, provides valuable library synchronization of fabrics, artworks and colorways, and bill of materials extraction directly from the 3D software.

6. **Skipping data conversion**: Create 3D blocks and a library of past products to allow 3D users to generate value much more quickly than if they were to design from scratch. Conversion gets everyone up the productivity curve early.

7. **3D as a spare time activity, not “real work”**: Don’t ask designers and developers to get results from 3D while carrying their full-time day jobs unless you want very slow progress. Recognize the time and effort required to learn new tools and create new skills. Plan accordingly in capacity planning and goal setting.

8. **Not changing workflows, systems, habits**: 3D solutions create the opportunity to rethink how work is done in the retail value chain. It is crucial to reengineer workflows to unlock new value and also find ways to drive higher employee engagement in the new ways of
Saving on shipping and sample costs, reducing material waste, and increasing speed to market are just a few of the many benefits of a transformational 3D program. Ultimately, business transformation with 3D will deliver results when the objective is clear, the process is sustainable, and adoption is achieved.

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