

INDUSTRY NEWS

Israeli tech start-up introducing augmented reality feature for online furniture shoppers

BY CLINT ENGEL

NEW YORK — Cimagine, a technology start-up based in Israel, is introducing an augmented reality feature for the home furnishings industry here, promising the type of effectiveness and ease of use that can convert online furniture shoppers into buyers both in-store and online.

With the touch of a button on a mobile device, users can see what a piece of furniture will look like in their room. The Cimagine app (for Apple and some Android devices) scans the consumer's room, using the camera on her tablet or smartphone. Cimagine takes the 2D product image from the retailer's website and turns it into a high-resolution 3D rendering. Still with the mobile camera focused on the room, the user drops the 3D image right into the scene she's viewing from the device — exactly where she wants it to go in the room.

App users also can add items to the scene, rotate the items and move them into different positions. They can change customizable features, such as fabrics or finishes, and take a photo of the room with the product or products in place and send it out to friends via email or social media.

And since the augmented reality program becomes a feature of the retailer's website, consumers can buy, too, if the site is set up for e-commerce, Cimagine said.

The new technology solves four problems that have kept augmented reality from taking firm hold on the home furnishings front, said Joe Recchia,



Cimagine's augmented reality app lets users drop high-resolution 3D product renderings (modeled from website photos) into their existing room settings and then save the settings as photos for future use or to share via social media and email.

Cimagine vice president of sales and business development, who has been pitching the technology in the United States.

Other augmented reality systems, he said, require markers (such as the Ikea catalog marker the user drops on the floor as a tag in order to build room settings with digital renderings). Cimagine doesn't require this. Instead, retailers or suppliers insert a single line of code into their product pages for a "visualize" button that the consumer will use. Cimagine does the rest, he said, scanning the consumer's room and modeling the 3D rendering by using photo information that's already available.

Another problem has been the tendency for images to float on the screen, but Cimagine has figured out a way to anchor its

items into place. Poor product resolution has been another sticking point, but Recchia said when Cimagine scans a user rooms and drops in the furniture, "the resolution is impeccable," up to 10 times better than the original 2D image used for modeling.

The final roadblock has been the lack of an easy and intuitive user interface, Recchia said, but he contended Cimagine's interface can't get much easier, and that the company, which has its roots in military defense systems software, has managed to dumb down something extremely powerful so that anyone can use it.

What's more, Recchia said the technology can be used just as effectively in-store; it's a way for salespeople to show SKUs the retailer offers but doesn't

show on the floor. Also, a consumer who has been using the app at home can bring the saved room photo into the store and work with a sales associate on more options.

The augmented reality tool was first adopted by ShopDirect, a United Kingdom-based e-commerce retailer, and later rolled out to U.K. department store chain John Lewis and other international retailers.

In the United States, the company made early inroads with Coca-Cola, which has used the technology to help its sales team sell floor planning ideas to grocery store and other store operators by showing them what the products will look like in a specific space.

Recchia said in the home furnishings arena, he's targeting "the whales" of the industry

on both the supplier and retail sides, including e-commerce companies. He said he's in negotiations and pilot programs with several major players but declined to identify them just yet.

Recchia wouldn't disclose the cost of implementing the software, either, but said the technology is being sold as SAS, or software as service, with a monthly subscription price based on SKU count.

In a Power Pitch segment on CNBC's "Power Lunch" program last year, a panel of three investment and home experts gave the technology positive reviews. However the home expert, Apartment Therapy founder Maxell Ryan, added that he didn't think furniture would end up being a big business for the application, telling Cimagine founder Yoni Nevo that the industry is "slow and sleepy."

Recchia said he understands that take on the industry, noting it was a laggard to the e-commerce space. But he also said he believes a few large players and young consumers already buying online and over mobile devices will force companies' hands.

"If (Millennials are) the biggest segment for online sales, the industry needs to focus on that segment and adapt," he said.

"All the big boys are talking to us right now. So once the big guys move down the path with this, (other companies) are going to have to do this. Once shoppers see this capability on furniture company sites, I think owners (of furniture other furniture companies) are going to ask, 'Why aren't we doing it?'"

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Motion Italia LLC - 2815 Earham Place
High Point, NC - Tel. +1(336) 885-0275
e-mail: info@motionitalia.com



MOTION s.p.a. Headquarter Italia - Via Navicella, 26
47122 Forlì (FC) Italy - Tel. +39 0543 774768
www.motionitalia.com