



Is 360 Video Worth It?

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For brands, is 360 video worth it? The format is potentially revolutionary, but do 360 video ads actually drive more engagement than standard ads? Google partnered with Columbia Sportswear to find out.

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"Wait a minute, wait a minute, you ain't heard nothin' yet!"

Those were the first words spoken on film. They would forever change the course of filmmaking, ushering in a new era for the medium.

In recent decades, there have been a slew of evolutionary advancements in film, like HD, Dolby surround sound and 3-D – but only a handful of revolutionary ones, like the addition of sound and colour. As 360 video technology goes mainstream, the question is whether it will revolutionise filmmaking, or whether it will end up as a historical footnote like Betamax.

The promise of immersive storytelling with 360 video has led brands to experiment with the format. But what can 360 video really do for a brand? In the context of advertising, does it ensure higher viewer metrics?

To answer these questions, we partnered with Columbia Sportswear to create an ad campaign around two US Olympic skiers enjoying an epic season in Chile. In addition to Columbia's marketing team and in-house photographers, we enlisted the help of 360 Labs – a firm that's been playing in 360 since the earliest Street View days – and a team of fearless Chilean ski photographers.

An experiment in immersive video storytelling: 360 vs. standard

To find out whether spherical video ads drive more viewer engagement than standard video ads, we created two similar campaigns using TrueView, YouTube's choice-based ad format. Each campaign featured a 60-second spot for Columbia Sportswear; one version was shot and presented in 360 video, and the other was a standard format video ad. Both ads included CTAs in the lower-left corner that drove to an extended version, so that we could see if the 360 ad was better than the standard ad at driving viewers to a full-length video.

To compare viewer engagement across both ads, we looked at typical metrics, including view-through rate and viewer retention. For the 360 ad, we also considered a new engagement metric called interaction rate, which measures whether viewers engage with the functionality of 360 videos by dragging the viewfinder on a desktop screen or tilting a mobile phone.

Both of the 60-second ads we tested, as well as the full-length versions, remained unlisted throughout the experiment. That means the only way to see any of the Columbia Sportswear videos was through our in-stream ad campaigns or peer-to-peer sharing.

The narrative set up for the ads was simple: A veteran skier, Hannah Kearney, and a rising star, Keaton McCargo, come together to train and learn from each other. We wanted the audience to feel like they were on the slopes with the skiers – sensing how Hannah and Keaton take on a mogul course, for instance, or hockey stop next to the camera rig.

The standard version of the ad (and the extended cut) was visually framed around the skiers, with aerial and wide-angle shots of their runs and the landscape.



Passing the Torch | Trailer

The 360 version of the ad (and the longer version) planted the audience within the terrain, allowing viewers to explore independently. Both the standard and 360 ads were narrated by Hannah and Keaton.



360 vs. standard: The findings

We predicted that view-through rates and watch time for the immersive, 360 in-stream ads would be better than our standard video campaign. But, when we compared viewer metrics, the results were surprising. Here's what we found:

1. 360 video doesn't overperform on traditional viewer metrics

Surprisingly, the 360 in-stream ad underperformed the standard ad on view-through rate, across desktop and mobile. This led us to conclude that viewers aren't always in the mood to interact with 360 video if they're primarily watching standard video.

But, interestingly, we found that 360 ads made up for this with other strengths.

2. 360 video motivates viewers to watch more and interact

The 360 video ad had a lower retention rate than the standard ad. But, the 360 ad also had a higher click-through rate, meaning that viewers were more interested in checking out the full-length version of the video. So, as a promo for the longer video, the 360 version of the ad worked extremely well. Viewers didn't even need to watch the full cut to know they wanted more.

And, the interaction rate, which measures how often viewers explored the 360 functionality by tilting or scrolling, was higher than the view-through rates for the 60-second 360 ad. This means that the 360 ad drove engagement via interactions, even if people didn't watch 30 seconds or more.

3. 360 video drives viewers to share, subscribe and view other videos

The 360 ad trounced the standard ad on all the earned action metrics, including views, shares and subscribes. In total, the 360 ad drove 41% more earned actions than the standard ad. It also drove more engagement with Columbia's YouTube channel than the standard ad.

But it gets even more interesting: Since we kept the 60-second ads and the full-length pieces unlisted for the duration of the experiment, the only way a viewer could get to a longer piece was to click from the ads. So, we expected the views for the longer 360 piece to match the clicks for the 360 shorter ad ... *but they didn't*.

This means people who saw the longer 360 piece were copying the URL to share directly with others. In fact, we saw messaging apps like WhatsApp and iOS messenger listed among the traffic sources for the 360 version – but not for the standard version. The full-length 360 video had a 46% higher view count at the end of our experiment than the standard full-length piece. As a result, the 360 ad was a more efficient buy since its cost per view was lower when organic and paid views were combined.

As this experiment showed, 360 video has the potential to drive engagement in promising new ways. The technology encourages viewers to get in on the action by controlling their perspective with a simple tilt of a smartphone or nudge of a mouse. That's great news for brands, as the novelty of that viewing experience not only makes people want to watch 360 videos, it also makes them want to share. As the technology continues to develop and more brands experiment with the format, its value will likely become stronger – for viewers and brands alike. You might even say, "We ain't heard nothing yet".