Imagine if marketers could create advertisements that turn viewers into active protagonists who experience a brand’s story firsthand. What if vendors could enable potential customers to try products right from their homes — no shipping required? Well, they can.

Augmented reality (AR) is a new marketing technology that allows marketers to merge digital content with the physical environment of the real world. This kind of technology enables consumers to try different make-up styles using photo-realistic 3-D effects and enables consumers to watch the Super Bowl in completely new ways by wearing Microsoft’s Hololens.

Many of the world’s largest businesses — including Coca-Cola, McDonald’s and IKEA — have already incorporated augmented reality into their marketing strategies. Analysts predict that augmented reality will “disrupt anything with a screen” and grow into a market worth as much as businesses in 2015 spent on TV, print and radio advertisements combined.

As someone who has researched digital marketing trends and the growth of AR, I know that augmented reality offers tremendous branding opportunities — for
companies and for Cal Poly students. In a few months, a new cohort of intelligent, young people will take their first classes at Cal Poly. By the time they graduate, the augmented reality market will have exploded into a $120 billion industry. How do we prepare these bright minds for the jobs that will not only be hot in 2020 but will alter the trajectory of marketing for good?

Cal Poly is one of the few universities nationwide that introduces students to this new marketing technology through our Learn by Doing philosophy. As part of my Digital Marketing and New Media course, I challenge my students to explore how augmented reality can help marketing managers overcome various business problems by conducting a deep-dive analysis on today’s most creative campaigns.

One group researched the “Arctic Home” campaign from Coca-Cola to show how augmented reality initiatives can build emotional connections between customers and brands. Another student team analyzed the “Try Something New with Visa” campaign to demonstrate the importance of leveraging brand meanings when designing AR campaigns. And other teams explored how augmented reality can improve gamification strategies, stimulate product trials, and explain complex products.

These and many more articles on augmented reality marketing will be published throughout the coming months on www.marketingquad.net, an online magazine I started to showcase our students’ articles alongside my own research on augmented reality.

Earlier this year, co-author Andrew Smith of Suffolk University and I published in the journal Business Horizons the first academic article that specifically guides managers in incorporating augmented reality into their marketing strategies. In the lead article for the issue, we explain how marketers can design AR initiatives that create valuable, immersive customer experiences to achieve their communications goals. We know this is just the beginning for AR and the professionals who will harness its power to connect with consumers.

Augmented reality has tremendous potential for businesses to invigorate their brands, for students who gain a competitive advantage by mastering this new marketing technology, and for Cal Poly to become a leader in augmented reality research and education.