

Is Second Life the next frontier for market researchers?

Mario Menti, GMI, explores the growing range of ways in which researchers can use the virtual world of Second Life, in a preview of his MRS Conference paper

THE VIRTUAL WORLD of Second Life (SL) continues to grow, with a resident population topping a million worldwide by the end of 2007. European users are now catching up on their North American counterparts, with Germany and the UK featuring in the top three behind the United States. To many, SL is still a bit of a novelty, just as the internet was in the early days. But, this time, businesses do not want to be left behind. Professionals at market research firms and *Fortune* 500 companies alike are increasingly trying to figure out how they can leverage and engage with this new medium to advertise and market their wares.

Different approaches

If you look around Second Life, you will find a number of different approaches to marketing and market research. Some market research firms use the virtual world to recruit panellists and build panels for both qualitative and quantitative research. The quantitative side is usually conducted through online surveys, while focus groups are held for qualitative research, often in specially designed areas in SL. Market research agencies also provide forms of product or ad concept

testing, making use of competitions inside the virtual world to encourage panel members to create their own content. This could take the form of 3D content, such as buildings and other objects, or creating so-called machinima - videos filmed inside Second Life - making use of the virtual world's 30 animation capabilities.

Product and concept testing takes on an exciting new direction in Second Life. SL users are by definition always in interactive mode, sitting on furniture, trying on clothes, or even wandering up and down the aisles of a virtual store. It does not take a huge leap of the imagination to move this natural interactivity on to more formal co-creation, and picture a scenario where avatars (the virtual representations of the people who explore Second Life) help design and build product prototypes as part of the market research process.

Philips Design's co-creation experience in Second Life is one such example, helping the company understand people's values and motivations in virtual immersive environments. The company then used this understanding in its service offerings in the areas of people engagement and brand immersion.

Meanwhile, Coca-Cola hosted a premiere for its 'Happiness Factory' ad inside SL, and then extended the life of the campaign by running the 'Virtual Thirst' competition, inviting SL residents to design and prototype a virtual vending machine with limitless possibilities.

Many virtual research techniques translate easily into Second Life. Virtual shopping malls and stores could provide a shopping experience that combines elements of virtual shopping and shelf layout testing with real in-world purchasing and product usage observation. Products being sold and tested in virtual stores could contain real-life products (there are actually a number of Amazon-powered shops in Second Life) or products for use inside the virtual world, such as clothes for people's avatars. And, unlike the real world, SL can provide marketers with a way not only to measure what people say they will do, but also, crucially, monitor what they actually end up doing.

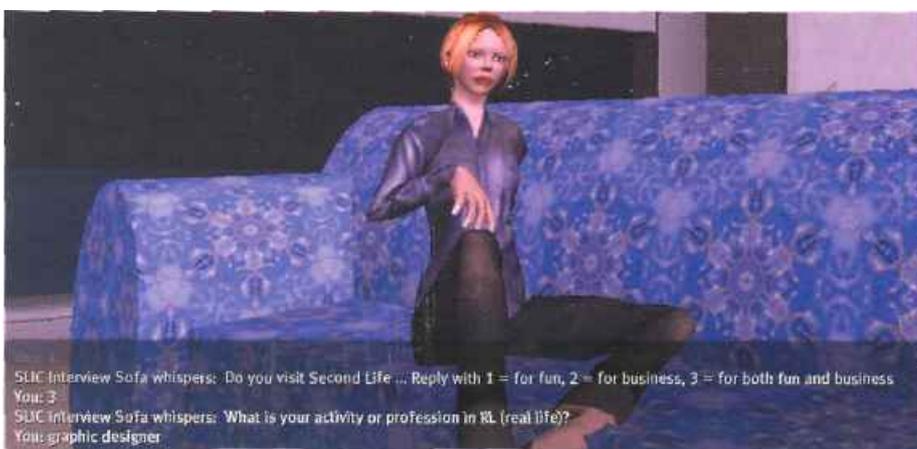
As with web analytics and traffic measurement, a number of companies offer metrics in Second life. These products typically deploy sensors on a company's virtual land to record and analyse numbers of visitors, as well as their actual movement on the land. Adding a survey component to these metrics can enrich those data, adding attitudinal and opinion information to traffic and behavioural intelligence, much as feedback gathered through surveys enriches usage metrics and clickstream data on the web.

Survey software gets a Second Life

Second Life's open technical architecture makes it possible to develop bridges that enable web survey software to reach directly into the virtual world, without relying on users having to open their web browser, thereby breaking the immersive nature of the Second Life experience*. These programs exploit the capability to add interactivity and animation to objects created inside SL, including the ability to connect to the outside internet. In practice, this means that a scripted object that exists inside >



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Second Life can interact both with objects and people or avatars in the virtual world, and at the same time communicate with external programs on the internet at large.

Who needs interviewers when you have ... sofas?

The Second Life Interview Corner, or SLIC, jointly created by global market intelligence solutions provider GMI (Global Market Insite, Inc.) and marketing research firm DervalResearch, is one pioneering example of the types of interactive survey objects that can be implemented in the virtual world. SLIC features interview sofas for different hot topics in Second Life as well as in real life. The interview starts when a respondent selects a topic and sits on the related sofa. The sofa asks open or multiple-choice questions via Second Life's chat function, and respondents' answers are recorded. SLIC is fully automated and integrated into the SL user interface.

By being available 24 hours a day, 365 days a year, SLIC offers good geographic representativity of respondents at competitive cost. Respondents can be recruited in real life as well as in Second Life via groups and word of virtual mouth. If desired, respondents can be automatically rewarded with Linden dollars (SL's in-world currency) or a gift at the end of the interview, according to their

gender or preferences. This makes for an extremely cost-efficient process, taking advantage of existing Second Life infrastructure rather than having to involve manual processes or payment fulfilment by a third party. Residents can then use these well-earned Linden dollars inside Second Life to purchase items and services, or exchange them for US dollars at special Linden dollar exchange outlets.

Did you say ... bots?

On the academic research side, the University of California Riverside's Sloan Center for Internet Retailing is currently building eLab City in Second Life. Modelled as a live-work-play community, eLab City will provide a working laboratory and subject pool for academic research. Tom Novak, Professor of Marketing and Co-founder of the Center, hopes to study a wide range of issues, among them peer/social influence, decision-making, virtual consumption, group behaviour, merchandising, branding, research methodology and social capital.

eLab City's online academic panel of SecondLiferesidents is being developed by integrating GMI's panel management software into Second Life. For conducting surveys, GMI has created wholly automated bots (Second Life users controlled by software rather than humans) that can approach and engage passing Second Life avatars in face-to-face interviews. In

addition to the survey data itself, these bots can also collect meta-data - for example, reactions to the way they look, or to the manner in which they approach people. As Novak puts it, 'True physical attractiveness and social skills don't impact first impressions online, but what about virtual attractiveness and social skills? This is one aspect of research we will be studying.'

To boldly go ...

While the practical uses of these examples are still in their infancy, they illustrate clearly that in virtual worlds, and Second Life in particular, a lot more is possible than just conducting simple online surveys. Thinking back about ten years, the vast majority of web surveys simply replicated telephone surveys in a web browser, not making full use of the multimedia capabilities available through the new medium. As the virtual worlds are themselves getting increasingly sophisticated, with the right combination of technical prowess and imaginative thinking, marketers and market researchers will be able to provide survey experiences in virtual worlds unlike any we have seen before.

In any environment, real or virtual, the survey experience is key. As companies and marketers start to experiment in

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SecondLife, there is a growing feeling that many are simply doing it for PR's sake, without any real relevance to Second Life residents. The more engaging and rewarding the survey experience is, the more likely it will be seen as an integral and useful part of the virtual world, rather than just a disjointed bolt-on from outside. Despite what is sometimes claimed, Second Life users are not hostile to brands and marketing involvement per se. A GMI poll that surveyed more than 9,000 US residents in 2007 showed that Second Life is a burgeoning market for real-life brands and product promotion. Some 56% of users polled believe Second Life is a good promotional vehicle. Only 16% say they would not be more likely to buy or use a brand represented in the virtual world. Around the same time, a survey by Market Truths showed that 49% of SL residents think the presence of real-life

brands is positive, and about a third have a neutral attitude. However, precisely because virtual worlds are such an engaging medium, users expect marketers to engage them in return, offering creativity and inspiration, not just replication of traditional one-way advertising or marketing campaigns.

Second Life is increasingly seen as the first incarnation of a coming 3D internet or metaverse, and it is not that far-fetched any more to imagine a time in the near future when our avatars will wander a web of connected, virtual spaces instead of today's flat, relatively impersonal 2D web environment. Linden Lab, the company that created Second Life, is actively working with IBM and other companies on making this vision a reality. Gartner suggest that 80% of internet users will be active participants of virtual worlds by the end of 2011, and Forrester Research

writes in a recent report that 'virtual worlds are on the brink of becoming valuable work tools', and that 'within five years, the 3d internet will be as important for business as the web is today'. No matter what timelines and predictions are made, marketers, advertisers and market researchers can be at the forefront of this new frontier by taking advantage of available technology today. ■

Mario Menti will be co-presenting a paper entitled 'Survey techniques in virtual environments' with Diana Derval, Founder and CEO of Derval-Research at the forthcoming MRS Conference to be held 18-19 March at the Riverbank Park Plaza in London (www.research-live.com/re5earch2008). The paper will include the first research findings collected using SLIC (Second Life Interview Corner).



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