

Virtually yours... in our 2nd lives!

Siddharth Banerjee, CEO & Founder, Indusgeeks Solutions talks about why the virtual world holds great promises for marketers and brands alike...

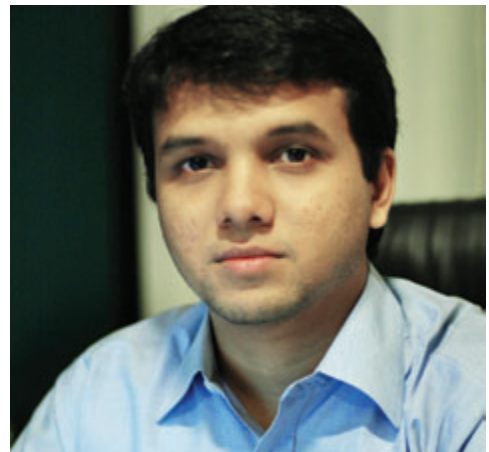
Virtual worlds like *Second Life* burst onto the digital marketing scene in early 2006 and since then it's been a roller coaster ride for marketers. In the early days most marketers correctly realised the potential of this medium to immerse their audiences in to the brand narrative but could not implement or create an effective virtual marketing campaign.

As virtual worlds continue to grow and their registered user base touches about 400 million users by some estimates; it's increasingly important for marketers to understand what works in these worlds.

Virtual worlds such as *Second Life* are a hybrid of web and contact marketing. They combine the advantages of technology and latest web trends like social networking, video sharing with the proximity and immersion of contact marketing. They create engaging user experiences being entertaining, interactive and immersive.

Second Life vs. Other Virtual Worlds...

Although *Second Life* started it all, but it isn't the only virtual world out there. There are many others like *There* (used by Coke and MTV), *Gaia*, et al. The choice of a virtual world or a combination of them that is best suited for a brand depends on the demographics, target audience, customer experience, et al, just as in the case of traditional web marketing. Virtual worlds can also be custom created for a brand and allow embedded brand advertising – Barbie Girls, Lego Universe



Siddharth Banerjee, CEO, Indusgeeks Solutions

are popular flash based virtual worlds targeted at teens and youth across the globe.

Branded and interactive virtual worlds can be effectively used to create loyal communities around brands. Long term community interaction, for instance Sunsilks' 'Gang of Girls' – is essential both for community as well as marketing. Interactive virtual worlds can also be integrated with existing online communities such as Facebook (*YoVille – Flash based virtual world application on Facebook which has about 1,50,000 daily users*).

That brings us to another potentially interesting application of virtual worlds – distributed virtual worlds or embeddable virtual worlds.

Using Embedded Virtual Worlds...

So far most of the popular virtual worlds like *Second Life*, *There*, *Gaia*, et al are client-based as opposed to browser-based applica-

tions. But with the growing popularity of the medium, a need to embed these virtual worlds into browsers is growing. This is especially relevant for web marketing and network marketing purposes. Just as social networking platforms like 'Ning' and Google's 'Open-Social' make it possible to host a social network on your own website/portal as opposed to walled gardens like Facebook; distributed virtual world platforms created using Flash, Java, *et al* allow virtual worlds to be hosted on a company's or an individual's website.

This leads to the usual networking effects witnessed in social networks wherein a friend can be invited to hop onto your virtual space on your website which is in turn connected to a whole grid of such spaces allowing for both public as well as private virtual experi-



Marketers need to realise that their efforts failed because of the message and not the Virtual medium!

ences. Embeddable virtual worlds are in the early stages of development and their growth will have a significant effect in using virtual worlds for digital and interactive marketing.

Myths and problems...

In 2006, when *Second Life* was on its upward media popularity curve, many companies jumped onto the bandwagon of establishing their 'presence' on *Second Life*. This amounted to little more than just a nice-looking static 3D space, very much resembling an extension of themes and concepts used in

the companies' existing 2D websites. The expectation was 'if we build it... people will come', completely ignoring the basic fact that a user needs a compelling reason to visit a virtual location just as he does to visit a company's website. This saw many major companies like American Apparel, Wells Fargo, Armani, Dell, *et al* launch huge campaigns and see them fail.

It led many prominent advertising agencies to believe that virtual worlds like *Second Life* were not meant for marketing purposes and led to a backlash in the media. The failure, however, was not of the medium as much as of the message. Virtual worlds offer the great chance to engage your target audience in an interactive and immersive brand experience. They allow you as a marketer to create a narrative and ask your customers to participate in it. Such an experience is not possible in any other online digital medium to this extent. Instead of leveraging the huge interaction and narration capabilities

of the medium most of the failed campaigns tried instead to create 'pretty places' and sell their products blandly using the kind of video and banner based marketing popular on the 2D web and this expectedly backfired.

Brands like Coca-Cola, L'Oreal, Orange, Pontiac and Starwood Hotels succeeded wildly in their *Second Life* campaigns because they chose to take an event based and community based approach to the medium. They provided an experience or utility which people demanded in virtual worlds while blending it with the brand message. Indeed Coca-Cola has launched a new campaign in *Second Life* for its Nestea brand by sponsoring a concert in *Second Life*.

To conclude, the future of Virtual marketing or V-marketing (*as we might call it*) is bright, but only as long as marketers realise how to use the medium and its strengths instead of blaming it on the real-life non-existence of the medium. **4Ps**