



## **BRANDING IN VIRTUAL ONLINE GAMING COMMUNITIES**

**By**  
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To be important, or even relevant, in an online community, members must build their status by adding value to the community. This is true in both social networking sites, like MySpace, and in the 3-D virtual realm of massive multiplayer online games (MMOs), such as Second Life (SL). To reach “in-world” participants, marketers must discover and then play by the rules of the virtual gaming community or risk being ignored.

So how does a brand enter the virtual gaming marketplace? Although not much has been written academically on the exact subject, a few related academic papers and recent articles and blogs shed light on the characteristics most likely to enhance or detract from a brand’s credibility “in-world.” These sources provide valuable information about how a brand can succeed “in-world,” but do not address how to leverage a brand’s presence in a virtual gaming community into a profit center for the brand. The discussion below highlights the top five guidelines for brands entering virtual gaming communities.

1. Understand that the virtual world functions as a “third place” for members to casually socialize and hang out, and, as such, members must choose to participate in brand activities. So far, brands have respected that virtual gaming community members don’t want to be “trapped” by advertisers. In fact, the only “real-world” brand to use billboard advertising in SL is a non-profit. However, that doesn’t mean that avatars don’t interact with brands “in-world”. MTV’s 3-D gaming site Virtual Laguna Beach (VLB) incentivizes interaction by rewarding members with in-world currency or cool accessories for their avatars, resulting in 80% of their community members voluntarily interacting with brands.
2. Build status as an “in-world” community member by adding value to community members. GM is giving avatars a shot at designing cars that would appear on GM’s virtual SL land, thus providing a value-add by increasing the social capital of those selected designers. A VLB contest by P&G for its Secret brand encouraged avatars to spill their secrets “on camera” and then the footage was shown at the VLB cinema, creating an opportunity for the avatars to “show off” to the community.
3. Be Authentic. A brand must be aware that players are familiar with their “offline” brand as well and that to adopt values inconsistent with that brand to win over the community diminishes the brand’s credibility. For example, Cingular created an avatar in VLB who promoted parties and served as the central hub of communication. Cingular’s avatar was consistent with its brand image and well-received, whereas, American Apparel drew avatar protests for commercializing SL.
4. Get to know the culture and community members before establishing a presence. Brands must understand the “in-world” culture and how what the brand does affects that economy. Toyota angered SL avatars by giving away Scion cars for free, thus

compromising the SL independent car-making economy. Brands claiming “firsts,” such as the “first SL radio station,” also drew fire from the avatar community because the brand showed arrogance and a lack of research. Most businesses conducted in the real-world have already been developed on SL, so offline brands must be additive to and respectful of that economy.

5. Understand that brands operate at a disadvantage “in-world” because they already have a “real world” reputation—for commercialism. In-world, new community members must establish status by developing a reputation and may benefit from the anonymity with which they enter (Lampel); however, brands entering virtual gaming communities are often ignored by SL avatars because avatars believe brands are there just to advertise. In fact, “in-world” car manufacturer Need 4 Speed attracts nearly three times as much traffic as Nissan’s island.

Hosting contests in VLB or promoting cars designed by avatars may create branding value, but how do brands actually convert virtual world experiences into real world purchases? If brands choose to offer real-world purchase incentives, will avatars react negatively? Dell is one company that has succeeded by inviting avatars to visit the Dell island to personally customize their laptops, which will be sent to their real homes. However, this is an authentic, fun and value-added proposition for avatars, which may not translate to other brands.

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