



Leave your parachute at home: 7 tips for real-world businesses in *Second Life*

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Overview

Media coverage of *Second Life* typically favors the opinions of industry analysts and naysayers. All too often, the concerns of regular users are overlooked. For organizations planning to establish a presence in *Second Life*, listening to community residents is a crucial first step.

In October 2007, as part of a larger survey,¹ we asked more than 800 *Second Life* residents what advice they would give to real-world organizations establishing a presence in *Second Life*. Key themes repeatedly emerged in the outpouring of responses.² If you plan to set up shop in *Second Life*, residents advise you to do the following seven things:

1. get to know the cultural landscape,
2. improve, don't invade,
3. involve and engage residents,
4. prioritize usability,
5. leave your parachute at home,
6. understand technical limitations, and
7. work with in-world talent.

1. Get to know the cultural landscape

Second Life, like any community, is populated by residents with unique cultural values and ideas. In the real world, one would never pour resources into a promotional strategy without understanding the audience. Learning about the community is even more important in *Second Life*, where a complex network of individuals, businesses and creative developers will determine the success or failure of your venture. Residents stress that you should "get to know the average avatar and understand the world around you before jumping into business."³

To avoid the most basic pitfalls, educate yourself about community norms and important milestones in *Second Life* history. "Watch and learn" and "don't jump to hasty conclusions" based on just a few experiences. Design content around the needs of residents rather than focusing solely on the aspirations of your marketing department.

2. Improve, don't invade

Second Life was built, quite literally, from the ground up. Residents created the spaces, entertainment, and education that populate this virtual territory. And, while most residents welcome real-world businesses who express a genuine commitment to needs of the community, they overwhelmingly oppose businesses who try to impose their real-world lifestyles and promotional strategies from the top down. The secret, one resident explains, is to "support the existing culture rather than trying to impose your own."

At its heart, Second Life is a collaborative experience, and leaving residents out of decision making is a serious error. Organizations must "be prepared to engage with residents, instead of creating a build, walking away and wondering why no one visits."

3. Involve and engage

Second Life's interactivity demands more of businesses than the pursuit of eyeballs or clicks. *Second Life* "is a new space" where "old ways of thinking and marketing don't cut it," and residents ask you to remember that "this is not a passive medium like radio." Steer away from push advertising methods such as billboards, suggests one resident, and "think about how you will utilize a very savvy and talented community without patronizing or undermining them."

Here, as with other emerging media, social networking is the key to successful promotion. While virtual world residents are often thought of as socially awkward geeks (with plenty of time on their hands), the opposite could not be more true. The soul of *Second Life* is connection – identification and interaction with others.

To be successful in *Second Life*, remember that "social bonds and networking" are "more powerful than any single force within the platform." As with all activities that are valued in *Second Life*, residents want you to "create relationships in the community through human presence and community building" because "people are more interesting than things" and "the social aspect of *Second Life* is more important in the long term than 'the stuff.'"

4. Prioritize usability

Residents have little patience for poorly designed content that brings their system to a halt. Just because you *can* recreate the lobby of your corporate headquarters, doesn't mean you *should*. In fact, over-engineering an office building, amphitheater or night club may turn away more residents than it attracts. One resident explains that especially on older computers, "a heavily-primmed area that takes a long time to appear" is likely to discourage traffic.

Second Life properties are built using prims and textures – digital building blocks and “wallpaper.” When highly complicated prims and textures are implemented in a space, download time increases dramatically. Residents suggest businesses avoid bogging down their presence with "scripted items [and] super high resolution textures that take forever to resolve" because “people won’t visit a place that will lag them out.” One resident suggests that your organization should "get an average computer," connect to Second Life "on an average cable connection" and "work in world for a month" to understand these issues.

When building a new space, make sure it is easy for residents to move around. Label spaces and directions clearly. While you might want residents to linger in your space, forcing visitors to wander aimlessly only makes them grumpy. Residents recommend that you make your virtual spaces "easy to maneuver" and remember that "fancy stuff is a waste of time if it causes bad lag."

In most instances, the classic principles of web usability apply equally well to virtual world design. These include:

- explicitly labeling important elements of one’s presence,
- providing visible system feedback,
- supporting a range of user navigation styles,
- using consistent metaphors,
- helping users orient themselves spatially, and
- conducting usability tests *before* launch.

5. Leave your parachute at home

Residents have harsh words for organizations that announce highly-publicized *Second Life* builds and then fail to follow through over the long haul. Launch day of your new building or campaign is an exciting time (and one that will be covered extensively by the in-world and real-world press), but the first day festivities are meaningless if a presence is not lasting, maintained, and useful. Residents ask that you "don't just plop down something and leave." Remember that a successful presence "won't happen overnight."

Abandoned buildings and poorly publicized events will not establish brand loyalty. Staffing and scheduling are key to bringing avatars through the door. Many residents recommend that you "have an online facilitator or event planner to keep interaction flowing" and, if feasible, "maintain at least a few live avatars on location at all times." One suggests that, if you are building a brand, you should remember that "live representatives at a branded site are generally far more persuasive than any number of ads or freebies."

6. Understand technical limitations

Like any emerging technology, *Second Life* is characterized by technical limitations. The software is updated regularly, and the grid tends to crash unpredictably. Residents realize that their world is in a perpetual beta state, and they warn that newcomers should "be prepared for a buggy environment."

Users will forgive organizations for technical problems beyond their control, but they are less understanding if a technical mistake stems from a problem that has been well documented. "Take the time to learn about the nuances and workarounds already used before building a promotion," advises one respondent.

Event planning in *Second Life* is restricted in ways real world spaces are not. In *Second Life*, you need to know how to plan an event the size of a large cocktail party, not the size of a U.N. summit. The number of avatars who can attend an event, or even visit an island, at any one time is limited by the technology. Explains one resident, "the limit on the number of people in a sim is a major factor [constraining] what you can do." Limits on event size often frustrate real-world businesses more than residents. When you reside in a space where interaction and collaboration are seen as more important than size or dazzle, small events make perfect sense.

7. Work with in-world businesses

While most residents cautiously welcome new businesses, they express widespread concern about the impact on the world's indigenous entrepreneurs. Millions of residents created the world as it appears today, and most have a significant stake in its long-term success. As a way of demonstrating respect for *Second Life's* cultures, real-world businesses are encouraged to "work with [in-world businesses]", "be a good member of the community," and most importantly, "make sure not to eliminate the little guy,"

In the vast world of *Second Life*, just as in the real world, you can hire experts to undertake every possible job. Need an architect to build your headquarters? A fashion designer to dress your CEO? A musician to play at your new night club? How about in-world videographers? Real estate agents? All for hire. More than just good community relations, hiring *Second Life's* creative producers can "significantly elevate the quality of your presence."

In addition to familiarity with the world, *Second Life* talents also have an established following in the space. Explains one resident, you can generate traffic by recruiting "established entertainers that are familiar with event planning and streaming." Because these performers "have an established presence, a fan base, and a crowd following," they can be counted on to draw visitors.

Endnotes

1. Aaron Delwiche and Jennifer Henderson conducted this comprehensive survey of *Second Life* residents on behalf of Orange and the agency Metaversatility. During the planning stages, we worked closely with Orange's Dominique Cardon, Helene Delahousse, Matthieu Poujade, and Celine Mouniere.
2. As a demonstration of their commitment to the community, Orange recently "open-sourced" the findings from this study by sharing the raw survey data with the general public. This generous move is a sterling example of the responsible business practices recommended in this paper. Readers are encouraged to investigate the community-oriented Orange Island in *Second Life*. The raw survey data can be downloaded, in *Excel* format, from: http://www.orange-island.com/?page_id=129
3. Throughout this paper, quoted material is taken from responses to the open-ended survey questions.

Additional resources

For insightful coverage of *Second Life* community concerns, use your favorite search engine to track down the web logs *New World Notes* (James Wagner Au), *Click Heard Round The World* (Rik Riel), and *Second Thoughts* (Prokofy Neva). To learn more about the music scene, the *Second Life Music Community Forum* and *SLmusic.org* are excellent sources of information. You can also find a wealth of information on community history, technical trends, content creation and event management in the trio of books recently published by Wiley Press: *Second Life The Official Guide* (Rymaszewski et. al., 2007), *Creating Your World* (Weber et. al., 2007), and *The Entrepreneurs Guide to Second Life* (Terdiman, 2007).

About the authors

Aaron Delwiche and Jennifer Henderson are co-founders of Elastic Collision (<http://www.elasticcollision.com>). This full-service agency develops content and provides strategic advice for organizations establishing a virtual world presence. Emphasizing education, collaboration and cross-cultural communication, Elastic Collision's service offerings include full-service development, grant-writing, strategic consulting, research, and training/curriculum design. If you would like to discuss your virtual world development plans, or if you simply want to talk about issues raised in this paper, you can reach the authors at: aaron@elasticcollision.com and jennifer@elasticcollision.com.