Editorial

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This year has seen an explosion of interest in Second Life (<http://www.secondlife.com>), the virtual world founded in 2003 where residents whose images or 'avatars' walk, teleport and fly, do business and variously interact with over seven million other users from around the planet. Second Life is a fully 'monetised' world where residents can buy land, build on it, create and sell goods and services (including clothes, works of art, cars, buildings and financial advice) using real money converted into the currency of Second Life, the Linden Dollar. An island on Second Life, for instance, costs US\$1,600 plus annual land tax. Second Life real estate deals alone are estimated to bring in over US\$1m a year, not counting site commissions from converting currency. Buyers and sellers of the Linden Dollar trade over \$5m a month.

The growth of such environments would seem to give rise to some interesting implications for readers of this *Journal*. These are not so much to do with whether to acquire virtual persona themselves, but in terms of the opportunities for — and challenges of — targeting, measurement and analysis in these kinds of contexts. Certainly, it is commercial opportunity that is putting a glint in corporate eyes. For example, in 2006 Toyota's youth-friendly US brand, Scion (<http://www.scion.com/>), opened a dealership called 'Scion City', quickly followed by Pontiac and Nissan. At Scion City you can not only buy one of the real and weirdly box-like Scions but a virtual version to drive round in on the roads of Second Life. The last Chicago motor show saw several product launches simultaneously at the show and in Second Life.

Total numbers are not that big. Of Second Life's 7.7 million 'residents', a proportion fail to make it much further than registration and an initial tentative walkabout. According to the

screen counter, there may be 20,000–30,000 visitors at any one time, and perhaps in total 300,000 active users, of whom around 60,000 have premium accounts.¹ Nevertheless, with a GDP equivalent to that of a small country, Second Life demands to be taken seriously as a commercial force — particularly in terms of building brand awareness. It is their very niche-ness that makes Second Life residents so desirable as target customers. Significantly, Scion is reported to have deliberately cut sales of the (real) Scion to 150,000 to preserve the brand's cool factor.

Second Life's big attraction to business is that it opens the door to a highly desirable young demographic — the cutting-edge pacesetters of Generation Y. They are affluent, computer-literate, media-aware — and for business that is both a draw and a dilemma. For these idiosyncratic consumers hate being talked down to. There is a premium on whatever is subversively creative and oddball. Any whiff of conventional corporate hard sell spells commercial death. Companies have to work that much more smartly to raise a smirk from the sophisticated young denizens of Second Life with their 'already been there, got the t-shirt' attitude.

But Holger Wandt's cautionary article 'Second life, second identity?' in this issue of the *Journal* addresses another dimension of virtual worlds: that of digital identities and digital information. His discussion is set in the context of Dutch debate over the potential creation of a variety of electronic databases tracking citizens. He raises legitimate questions over privacy, identity theft, data quality and reliability. The old story has it that on the internet nobody knows you're a dog (even if your Second Life avatar is shaped like one).

Elsewhere in the *Journal*, our habitually rich mix of material is available to the reader. In the

first of a series of two papers, Tom Breur helpfully explores the merits of interactive decision tree building over automated processes of construction in analytical CRM. Berne and García-Uceda examine the methods used to target prospective customers for trade shows and demonstrate the importance of *non*attendees to a proper understanding of the trade show as a form of promotion. Øyvind Helgesen observes some interesting features in practitioner perceptions of how marketing works from his Norwegian experience, and Gwen Fontenot and her colleagues discuss the relative merits of different methods of gathering customer satisfaction data. Finally, from the initial merits of virtual avatars we move to levels of satisfaction with the real

thing. Spais and Konstantinakos undertake a review of the importance of body aesthetics in the marketing of sporting goods. 'If you said I had a beautiful body, would you hold it against me', goes the old Bellamy Brothers song; the answer appears to be that the majority may well do.

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Note

- 1 For additional statistics on the economic and demographic features of Second Life, see here: <http://blog.secondlife.com/2007/02/09/state-of-the-virtual-world-%E2%80%93-key-metrics-january-2007/>.