

GIVEN THE POPULARITY OF SOCIAL NETWORKING AND GAMING SITES, OPPORTUNITIES ARE RICH, THOUGH THERE HAS TO BE A LEARNING CURVE

Can virtual worlds support real marketing?



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THE POPULARITY of web-based social networking models such as Facebook, Orkut, Biggadda, Myspace, YouTube, Fropper as well as Secondlife show that the web is becoming another parallel or virtual world that could be attractive for advertising and marketing. Online gaming is also creating a virtual world where opportunities for in-game advertising exist.

Secondlife.com is a 3-D virtual world entirely created by its residents. Started in 2003, it has millions of users with single or multiple avatars in it. Users can create identities and other content, which can be traded in this virtual world, created by Linden Labs, for "Linden" dollars.

Venkat Mallick, managing director of Level Up, a publisher of multi-player online games says, "Secondlife can actually work as a good co-ordination tool to have officials across the globe gather at a particular time. Since it also offers voice, chat and other elements, the meeting is as good as a real meeting. For many multinational companies, this would translate into a lot of savings and convenience."

As far as Indian advertisers are concerned, examples are fewer than their Western counterparts. Wipro and IBM have already opened up their innovation centers in secondlife.com. Recently, KPMG also succeeded in conducting a recruitment fair through secondlife.com. Microsoft and Cisco are

also present in Secondlife.

Shashi Simha, CEO of Lodestar Universal, says, "Globally, companies such as Coke and Nike have done some marketing activities through Secondlife. Developed markets such as Korea, where broadband penetration is very high, can also look at such virtual marketing seriously. Indian advertisers have started experimenting; there will be a learning curve. It is certainly a good avenue for advertising that may catch on in the future."

Prasanth Mohanachandran, executive director, Digital Services Neo@Ogilvy, says, "If we consider the Asian belt, if there are companies targeting consumers in Singapore and Hong Kong, it might make sense to advertise on Secondlife, as these two countries have good broadband penetration. It might make sense for, say, the Ministry of Tourism to advertise through Secondlife also."

Similar to Secondlife is a new venture, weblo.com, launched by Canada-based entrepreneur Rocky Mirza, now his CEO & co-founder. Weblo's objective is that users should be able to monetise every little web content that they have. Vantage Point, the venture capitalist firm that had also backed MSN's Myspace, now owned by Rupert Murdoch, has invested \$3.2 million in Weblo,

which is a parallel universe based on real properties and cities. It is closely based on the popular game, Monopoly.

Fropper.com is a social networking site from the People Group, which also owns shadi.com (matrimony) and makam.com (real estate). Vinesh Nair, business head, media and advertising, People Group, says, "Advertisers will look at social networking formats more seriously in the future as it will help the cause of targeted advertising. A site like Fropper.com gives an advertiser interesting user details that can help with contextual advertising."

AD ON GAMES

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Interestingly, ITC is on its way to doing something similar with bingobingo.com, which creates a social networking environment to promote Bingo. There is a Bingo campus where a user can choose a profile and then explore the campus. Bingobingo.com is being touted as India's Secondlife. Although the current format is primarily to promote the Bingo range of wafers, some sources suggest that the next phase may see ITC doing something bigger with it.

The online gaming industry in India is worth Rs 21 crore, according to a report published by IMRB International on behalf of the Internet and Mobile Association of India.

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