

## VNUNet – Virtual answers to real-life ills

By Fran Howarth, Principal analyst, Quocirca Ltd

Online virtual worlds are just for teenagers and twenty-somethings, right? To some extent, yes, but not entirely.

Organisations are starting to explore the benefits of using virtual worlds not just to share information, hold meetings and allow employees to learn new skills, but to provide an interactive multimedia online environment to reach out to customers.

Probably the best known virtual world is Second Life, a site in which there were 12.6 million 'residents' as of July 2008, a growth of 900 per cent over the previous year.

Large corporations that have already set up a presence in Second Life include IBM, which is using the virtual world to collaborate with clients and partners, offering a place where they can meet with IBM representatives, learn about products and services, and access technical support information.

However, at this point, corporate 'islands' in Second Life rather resemble the early days of the internet, when websites were largely collections of static information such as product brochures and contact details.

They are rather desolate places to visit, and few companies even staff their islands with a support avatar.

One organisation that aims to change this is CIGNA Healthcare, a US-based health service organisation that provides a wide range of healthcare products and services to individuals.

Faced with ever increasing healthcare costs, CIGNA claims that the only sustainable way forward for its business is to prevent people becoming sick in the first place.

The company is therefore investing in new products and services to engage with its

customers in order to encourage and support individuals to make lifestyle changes to improve their health. It defines this as its "health advocacy strategy".

In order to do this, CIGNA needs to reach out to those consumers who will be its clients of the future, instilling its messages into the younger generation now so that they can benefit from making healthier life choices throughout their lives.

But the organisation has found it hard to engage with this target audience through traditional channels, such as marketing brochures and information on the internet.

Rather, the younger generation is growing up well-versed in the use of technology, eschewing email in favour of faster instant messaging, and favouring social platforms such as Facebook and virtual worlds where they can collaborate and interact with friends, as well as meeting new contacts.

The idea is that, if you want to engage with this audience, you had better go where they go and meet them on their own ground.

CIGNA is using Second Life to try and better engage with this new generation. Currently it is at the pilot phase, but already the experience is a good one, with features that are informative, appealing and fun.

It is providing interactive content, including virtual seminars and workshops during which participants can interact with the presenter or their peers, and interactive information displays to help individuals build out their knowledge of nutrition and healthy eating.

And there are games where the consumer is challenged to choose which of the foods displayed are the healthiest.

For the present, CIGNA is concentrating on building out resources related to nutrition.

This centres on educating consumers to make healthier food choices, helping them understand labelling and nutritional values for different foods, and building tailored programmes to help them to manage their weight.

Over time, the functional areas covered will include stress management, sleep, fitness and nutrition, with a possible foray into substance abuse and dependency in the future.

CIGNA's Second Life presence represents just part of the organisation's larger entry into the world of new media, but it is already showing what can be done with social and virtual media to extend the reach of an organisation to new markets or hard-to-reach consumers.

The company realises the importance of getting the user interface and experience right for attracting the younger audience, allowing interaction with their peers and health professionals in an accessible, fun and largely anonymous manner.

CIGNA sees the benefits as well. Not only are costs being reduced through the ability to get its message across to multiple consumers at one time, but it will be able to extend its brand reputation to a whole new audience.

While social applications and online communities are unlikely entirely to replace existing communications channels, they provide CIGNA and similar organisations with the opportunity to reach out to new audiences in a way that not only promotes their own services, but those of the collective social good.

## About Quocirca

Quocirca is a primary research and analysis company specialising in the business impact of information technology and communications (ITC). With world-wide, native language reach, Quocirca provides in-depth insights into the views of buyers and influencers in large, mid-sized and small organisations. Its analyst team is made up of real-world practitioners with first hand experience of ITC delivery who continuously research and track the industry and its real usage in the markets.

Through researching perceptions, Quocirca uncovers the real hurdles to technology adoption – the personal and political aspects of an organisation's environment and the pressures of the need for demonstrable business value in any implementation. This capability to uncover and report back on the end-user perceptions in the market enables Quocirca to advise on the realities of technology adoption, not the promises.

Quocirca research is always pragmatic, business orientated and conducted in the context of the bigger picture. ITC has the ability to transform businesses and the processes that drive them, but often fails to do so. Quocirca's mission is to help organisations improve their success rate in process enablement through better levels of understanding and the adoption of the correct technologies at the correct time.

Quocirca has a pro-active primary research programme, regularly surveying users, purchasers and resellers of ITC products and services on emerging, evolving and maturing technologies. Over time, Quocirca has built a picture of long term investment trends, providing invaluable information for the whole of the ITC community.

Quocirca works with global and local providers of ITC products and services to help them deliver on the promise that ITC holds for business. Quocirca's clients include Oracle, Microsoft, IBM, Dell, T-Mobile, Vodafone, EMC, Symantec and Cisco, along with other large and medium sized vendors, service providers and more specialist firms.

Details of Quocirca's work and the services it offers can be found at

<http://www.quocirca.com>