

Consumers in virtual worlds: is there a tangible relation with brands?

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Abstract: Consumer activities are constantly changing. They've begun to move their interests to the virtual, looking at the internet as a new and interesting space to be. With easier access to information and communication technologies, the consumer requests from social networks space to exist and coexist. From the current social being emerges a new digital social being. The outcome of this research tries to seek how brands should re-strategize their marketing given consumers' fast changing multimedia habits. We believe brands should realize that they are no longer the "conversation" leaders. Consumers are now in the control of the propagation of messages. Thus brands need to put aside the holy branding and follow the information flux coming from the users' conversations taking place in virtual worlds. They can support this new approach making use of more engaging experiences of their products based in interactivity and simulation. Support of these new media must be seen as complementary to current use of traditional media. The study we present tried to understand the new media use done by brands and understand if the models were supportive enough for the new digital social audience. An analysis based on interactivity models of McMillan and Downes (2002) and Shedroff (1999) designed to find problems and make suggestions to support actions of enhancement of the relation brand-consumer.

Introduction

According to Reis (2007a) brands generate respect and are always seeking new ways of strengthening the relationship with consumers. Brands need then to prepare themselves for the new profile the new so-called 2.0 consumer, a person who devotes most of his free time surfing the web, creating virtual relationships and staying online. Thus having a consumer who spends part of his/her time in online social networks, seeking information / entertainment on the Internet, we believe brands should try

to extend marketing strategies to this group. But how can they create an effective relationship? The question arises when we see current migration from real to virtual and when "[...] consumers pay more attention to the Internet than other media because of the interactive nature of this medium compared to television, radio, press and outdoor advertising. People spend more and more time online [...], even at the expense of the prime time television." (Rita & Oliveira, 2006, p. 30)

These authors also indicate that individuals use the internet to develop five types of activities: entertainment, relationship with other individuals, seeking information, demand for multimedia and transactions. In this context, it appears that the attention of the individual seems to be fragmented between the real and the virtual world. As a result brands should adapt themselves to these new channels and take a step forward into the digital world.

The approach of brands to consumers is difficult when we realize that consumer's attention within this new media channels is highly selective. This is the all time fight, but we see that companies are in some way forced to take advantages of the "more efficient means of communication, able to more quickly achieve the objectives" (Scatolim, 2005, p. 2). In order to explain how consumer acts online we present current studies that present some suggestions and perspectives on the new trends of the Web (blogs, Twitter, forums, sharing and social networks). For example, France and Carvalho (2008) report that the change in consumption habits and profiles of individuals required from companies to seek "[...] in the alternative media solutions to escape the commonplace and clichés, especially when it is important to conquest the involvement of consumers" (France & Carvalho, 2008). We believe that "[...] the web 2.0 is the realization of the dream of any advertiser: the dream of reaching each one on its individuality by giving answers to their concerns and desires" (Jewelry & Gonçalves, 2007)

Advertising is the visible face of the objectives of any brand and injects in the minds of consumers a "sense of gratification and unconscious protection" (Freoa, 2006), or fit it into a process of reward for having acquired a brand.

However, some of them seem unaware that individuals are social beings who want to interact and participate. The digital consumer of today controls what he wants to see either in time or in space (multiple channels). They control the conversations with other online consumers, the information given by the RSS Feeds, they establish relations and provide environments within the virtual space. In this scenario, we understand that the era of direct transposition of the advertisement broadcast from traditional media (TV, Radio, Press, etc.) to the virtual environment, the hyperlinks, the animated stories and video online seems to lead to a new era of social media and social networks. Following this new paradigm must emerge new forms of communication that can take part of the digital flow without resistance.

The widespread of internet access, the 3d virtual worlds, the sharing and redistribution of information by bloggers and micro bloggers catapulted what was already taking place: relationship and conversation. Jones (2008) states that now "agencies need to be thinking about how to influence, inform and stimulate the conversations that are already taking place". Therefore brands need to re-establish the relationship with the new digital consumer.

Brands and consumers: seeking a new approach

With the development of information and communication technologies the interaction between consumer and brand has become much simpler and faster. Lately interactive advertising agencies are becoming the solution for brands being online. However, we recall that brands ability to relate interactively with the audience is not entirely new and recent. We believe that the internet medium in which audience are spending more time has certain characteristics who distinct it from traditional media (press, television, radio, outdoor, cinema, etc.). Throughout internet users can find varied information in a faster way than the traditional newspaper, find and buy products, preset preferences and communicate with one click. "Moreover marketers can potentially provide consumers with a more enjoyable experience by offering such services as information, entertainment [...]" (Pavlou & Stewart, 2000).

Therefore, the natural interactive ability of the Internet medium provides brands to create a strategic relationship with their audience. Thus, according to Rosenkrans (2009) "Internet interactivity and its implications for the emerging electronic marketplace require greater understanding as well." The author conducted a study to evaluate and measure the effectiveness of a Rich Media¹ ad in

¹ Rich Media is a format used on the Internet for advertising and uses technologies such as video streaming, flash, etc. It allows immediate interaction with users.

comparison with static online ads. He found that the first gathered more users' membership than the latter. In this context, the study of how the user engages with the advertisement of a brand in the online environment has brought new opportunities for strategic brands. In view of the fact that the study of Rosenkrans is indicative of favorable factors in dynamic formats, such as generating memory in the minds of users rather against static formats, we'll see how relevant these factors are likely to help the relationship between brands and consumers.

An ad in the dynamic online environment has a predisposition to be able to help solve the problem of consumption and "increase customers' involvement and satisfaction, and promote trust through reciprocity in information exchange, technical assistance, information and reduction of Asymmetry" (Pavlou & Stewart, 2000). We perceive in this context that a brand that is capable of creating interaction with your audience must also create surroundings and above all make a call-to-action.

It is important at this stage, to understand consumer behavior in the Internet and combine interactive capabilities for a possible positive and effective relationship with the user. It is perhaps one factor that brands should take into account. Thus, understanding the reasons for which the user seeks information on the Internet, such as how to select and take advantage of them is central to understand the effects of the advertising communication of brands. Shelly & Thorson (2000) said "[...] structure alone cannot explain what drives individuals to enter cyberspace, and how they react to the physical features of Internet cyber ads once the journey has begun." One of the perspectives presented points out the use of online ads from users in order to pursue its objectives. So, Shelly & Thorson propose a model of analysis that combines structural and functional aspects of the Internet in an attempt to explain the reasons why users use the medium,

The availability and location of advertising in the Internet is still controlled by brands, however it is in the control of the flow of information that we see the reversal of roles. The consumer controls the flow of information and the type of messages distributed by the brands. They have the ability to control and select the desired content, distribute and communicate with other users (Rosenkrans, 2009). We notice that consumers are taking more pro-active actions on what they see and hear.

Users "surf" the Internet with a defined objective. Thus controlling all the steps to achieve this. So, Shelly & Thorson (ibid) round saying that "[...] users are in the driver's seat throughout the entire online experience - interacting with websites, ads, Advertisers, other consumers and so on [...]." The experience that users feel when being online is certainly started by them.

At this point, brands must monitor and understand how users move in to new means of dissemination and promotion and see how these will fit the users demanding and knowledgeable of what they want. They must find a place that is common to the "2.0" consumer. As Vasques (2007) said "[...] able to merge completely with the most traditional media with the more imaginative, surprising or more up to date, such as www, virtual reality, programming and high tech devices. Far from it is just a field of communication, these "new" type of media are at the reach of the anonymous citizen [...]."

The digital consumer demand interaction in a digital interactive environment and their searches includes also relationship with others. McDonald (2009) points to new data to explain how users surf on the Internet: the social object theory². Explains that any communication originated on the Internet is around some kind of object. Illustrates this with comparison between sites that create social networks (e.g. LinkedIn, Facebook) and sites that create social spaces where there are objects (Flickr, Delicious, Twitter). That is, objects for which users are interested and have shared and commented, objects (Flickr - photos, Delicious - bookmarks; Amazon - books, Myspace - music) that cause people to register on these sites.

These are objects that may attract the attention of the digital consumer? But how? The interactive capacity of the internet medium, especially in virtual worlds can be a form of interaction with brands.

Interactivity on Virtual Worlds: the new recipe

Using only traditional media to spread brand messages is to exclude an increasingly large proportion of contact with the consumer. According to a study by the ITU Internet Report (2006) realize that "Globally, more hours are spent consuming digital media, such as the internet, than any analogue media, including television and radio. Digital technologies are transforming businesses and governments, and changing the ways we live and interact "(p.20). And the mass of information technology, access to internet communication applications are putting advertisers and marketers on hold. Used to talk to consumers and not with consumers, brands must redefine its relationship with this new type of audience. More than breaking a reaction "to the traditional media of advertising" (Moita, 2007) must develop an intimate relationship with the consumer. A new consumer who divides his time between real and virtual world. Thus, in this context, we see that brands are unleashing the control of the "conversation" with its target

² "I believe a great digital social object is one that is highly portable, and can be easily copied and reproduced in as many channels and formats." McDonald (2009)

audience to engage them and facilitate the relationship. Brands can offer, in exchange of user's attention, entertainment, information and interaction with requested desired products.

In this context, brands can provide positive experiences to users using the capabilities of virtual worlds. Smart *et al* (s.d., p 6) and Hemp (2006, p. 3) characterized these virtual spaces by the ability they have to fulfill objectives (multiplayer games, with defined goals) and social environment (social space filled with relationships, exchange information and products and entertainment). We will focus our study in the virtual space with a social environment. To Vedralshko (2006, p. 60), the virtual worlds such as Second Life ® is not governed by specific objectives, they have areas that are only intended to represent and simulate real-world metaphors

The Second Life ® is also known as an MMOSG area (Massively Multiplayer Online Social Game) which can provide in real time socialization and interaction, but with the fantasy of a game. Gunn (2000) defines it as "[...] something superficially similar, a meeting point for socialization that happens in a game with goals. However, the Second Life ® is radically different in one important aspect: the whole world - sights, objects, events - is created by people and belongs to them".

This environment encourages users through an avatar to explore, create objects and relate freely among others. This idea will be important to understand how brands are behaving in such spaces.

The interaction in Second Life ® is made in real time and based on dialogue between avatars and three-dimensional objects. The user actions are also relevant to understand the affective and effective relationship that brands can create with their audience. According to Tucherman and Accioly (2007), users are looking for a space in virtual worlds where time and space limitations do not exist. These spaces recreate intuitive interfaces for present mental models of the users. User experience and reality representation in virtual worlds are variables that make the experience seamless and positive. That is, users create mental representations when they interact with Second Life® and try to understand their relationship. If they are established, the mental representation is stronger and user feels that the system is intuitive. Thus, accordingly to Norman (2004) who studies the design of virtual spaces, objects must conform to user expectations. In this context, the objects displayed in the virtual spaces must be identified and establish relationship with its users. If we think about them as objects that create meaning and memory, the relationship can become more intimate and positive. An aesthetically appealing object can create, according to Norman positive feelings and curiosity. However, they should be controlled and create value for the experience that users are experiencing. Thus, we point out the concept of interactive

and virtual experience of the product as a recipe for a more satisfying feeling in the users mind, because they realize that there is a benefit to interact with the desired object. If this object belongs to a brand, then the relationship can happen.

Chen *et al* (2005, p.31) says that "interactive environments where customers experiences products directly" through "virtual reality, *telepresence* or virtual direct experience" (op. cit., P. 30) enhances the effectiveness of communication between brands and consumers.

However, there are degrees in virtual experience that covers what we call poor or rich, or indirectly and directly experience. What distinguishes them is also the level of realism provided by the degrees of interactivity. So what Jiang and Benbasat (2004) called the Virtual Product Experience can "increase the attitude towards the brand and the intention to purchase" (p.2). For this, users should be able to experience brand products (visual control) and testing their functions (functional control). Below (Figure 1) we can see how technology components can provide a virtual control available in virtual worlds.

Virtual Control Technology

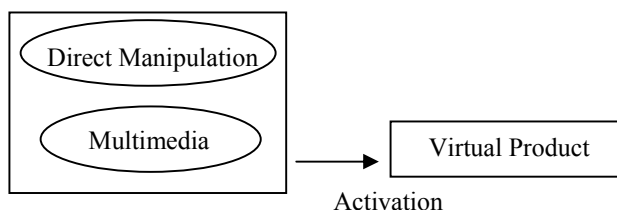


Figure 1: Virtual Control and its technological components (Jiang & Benbasat, 2004, p. 5)

The virtual worlds simulate an environment in order to provide feelings of telepresence. Steuer (1993, pp. 11-14) describes telepresence as the joint of space interactivity where it's possible to change content and form, and sharpness in the way virtual worlds represent their content. In this context, the virtual control becomes significant by directly allowing manipulating variables such as sound, audio, image or video (Multimedia), to ensure that consumers find relevant information about a product. By allowing manipulation (Direct Manipulation), brands can be positively engaging for the user, reflecting once again what he knows of real world: the consumer can go to a virtual store and choose from a virtual corridor a brand so he can interact with a three-dimensional simulation (Virtual Product). Basically, consumers can after this experience actively "talk" about it in their social networks.

Therefore, we present an analysis model to evaluate the degree of interactivity on objects offered by a brand in the virtual world Second Life ®.

Methods and Analysis

The virtual experience of the brands attributes and their ability to influence a digital hyper-social consumer can be achieved through the ability of virtual worlds on creating interaction. The experience reflects satisfaction when users can experience brand products in such spaces.

We noticed that with all the interaction possibilities, control and social relationship creates a consumer who demands new and more "hype³" things and quickly can ignore what he doesn't like or ignore what is no longer suitable for his group. Meadows-Klue (2007) states that "media literacy evolved into digital media literacy, and another step-change took place, this time in audience's shift to manage and select their own exposure to marketing messages."

Chen *et al* (2005) and Sundar and Kim (2005) say that Internet is now a new environment with the ability to capture consumer's attention through interactivity. This concept has been widely studied by authors like Sims (1997), Ricante (2001), Salen and Zimmerman (2004), and Primo Cassol (sd). They defined the concept as the reciprocal participation within two agents. In this context, we adopt for our model the models of McMillan and Downes (2002) and Shedroff (1999), which will be explained below.

In order to identify how users perceive interactivity, McMillan and Downes did a study on the different views of what is interactive. They set dimensions to demonstrate levels of interfaces interactivity. Divided into two parts:

a) Who builds the message?

1 - Communication Direction

When there is a process of interaction, there must be an exchange of messages in both directions. The degree of interactivity is higher in bidirectional communication.

2 - Time Flexibility

If communication time look closer to real and it is controlled by the user, the degree of interactivity is larger.

3 - Sense of space

³ Concept derived from English word hyperbole, which means what people are speaking and which is in fashion - <http://pt.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hype> [online]

The space should provide familiarity and sense of belonging

b) Who uses?

4 - Control Level

If the interface allows control the higher will be the degree of interactivity

5 - Response Degree

Immediate levels on the communication perpetuated the actors will define higher degrees of interactivity.

6- Communication Purpose Perception

If the purpose of communication is merely the exchange of information and not persuasion interactivity will be higher.

Shedroff (1999) presents a model capable of evaluating the quality of interaction between players. Quality he divides into passive and interactive. He states that in the passive side there is no user action in the selection of paths or content processing. On the opposite side, the user action is richer and they can transform content and objects. Within these dichotomous variables, the author identified several components to assess.

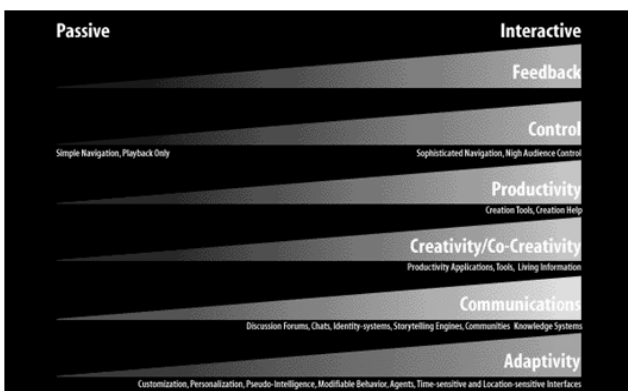


Figure 2: Interactive Components of Nathan Shedroff (1999)

1) Feedback - number of returning from the interface or by the players.

2) Control - amount of control given to the player within the sequences and actions of the interface.

3) Creative Experience - possibility of sharing something created by the user

4) Productivity - possibility to create something.

5) Communication Experience - possibility of relationship and communication between users

6) Adaptability - interface ability to adapt the behavior of the user.

The author states in his study that levels of satisfaction for the interface must have the components listed in the interactive part.

In this context, we will show from an adaptation of the models mentioned above, our analysis model. We support the research to verify the implementation of the following hypothesis:

H1 - The higher the degree of interactivity, on dimensions like bidirectional communication, direct experience, control, perception of communication objectives and brand experience felt by the user, the better will be the relationship between brand and your audience.

The bidirectional communication dimension wants to check if there is feedback between brands and consumers in the virtual world Second Life. This experience should give a sensation of immersion and both visual and functional control. In this relationship brands must be purely informational and be distributed among other users.

The study aims to understand if brands strategies in virtual environments create affinity with target audience. We set an analysis grid to assign degrees of interactivity to the objects displayed by brands in their advertising strategy.

We defined the observation instrument – analysis grid and divided it into five sections: Communication Direction, Space, Control, Perception of communication objectives and felt experience. The grid was composed of fifty closed questions. The application of the instrument was made to the objects of Nokia store in Second Life ®. The analysis was performed on objects found in the store on 04 September 2008. We evaluated nine objects: N78 BOXED Developer Kit (consisting of a virtual mobile phone with access to three brand sites and a t-shirt to the avatar), Free-Nokia Phone Chair (user is able to offer to another user), free T-shirts; MetaVoter (the user can say if he like the store); Exhibitor mobile phones; Avatar Robot (user can sign up the Nokia group); Post Teleport (user teleportation to various spaces in Nokia island); Suggestion Box; Public Feedback (display of various cellular models where user can vote)

The selected objects result in choosing a space in the virtual world Second Life that had as sole purpose the dissemination of its brand. The brands produced in these

environments adapted forms of communication and techniques to the particularities of the virtual world and the way of being of the world residents. Thus, through the model of analysis and consequent grid analysis we tried to found out if objects, arranged in the Nokia's shop, on Nokia Second Life Island had a greater or lesser degree of interactivity.

Nokia Brand implemented in Second Life® areas of distribution of their products, information and ways of communicating with the consumer. Nokia island is the main area, however the brand has also spread through this metaverse several kiosks and shops. Therefore, the objects analyzed and defined above were found in-store and at Nokia store entrance on Nokia Island.

The observation instrument was divided into five sections, which relates to the dimensions determined in the analysis model with the aim to understand if each object of the Nokia brand has greater or lesser degree of interactivity. For each segment⁴, closed questions were designed for the objects found in the sample. The model provides a non-interactive side of the objects and a fully interactive side. Thus, we define a dichotomy between the A side – Passive B side - Interactive. If the analyzed object is in part A of each dimension is taken as null in terms of degree of interactivity. If the object is positioned entirely within the B side of each dimension is taken as an interactive object.



Outcomes

In the analysis made to the Nokia store objects, we saw for the dimension of Communication Direction that objects create direct brand contact. We believe that this dimension is paramount in the relationship that the brand can create with the consumer, but more than half of the objects do not allow two way communication (N78 BOXED Developer Kit (1), Free-Nokia Phone Chair (2); free T-shirts (3);

⁴ Communication Direction dimension, Space Dimension, Control Dimension, Perception of the Communication Objectives Dimension and Brand Experience felt by the user Dimension

Exhibitor of Mobile (5) and Teleport Post (7)). Objects MetaVoter (4), Avatar Robot (6), Suggestion Box (8) and Public Feedback (9) allows communication between the brand and consumer.

In the dimension of Space, we found that most objects simulate a space similar to what the consumer knows the real Nokia store. Objects produce telepresence. Object 4 were the one that raised more scores, having the capacity to provide an immersive space.

With regard to the dimension of Control, where there may be a control of the objects, the study found that there is total control both at a functional level and at the visual level (only object 9 does not have the total score)

The next dimension (perception of the goals of communicating brand) objects 1, 2 and 7 have total score. We found that most objects have an objective: communication information (although they do not have maximum score). We know that the brand / consumer relationship is much more effective if consumer feels that communication don't have a commercial and persuasive purpose.

Dimension User experience felt on items 5, 6 and 7 do not allow any kind of experience. The creative and sharing experience didn't happen. The examined objects do not scored enough to interpret the experience as perceived positively. Since we wanted to ascertain the degree of interactivity and virtual experience 'felt' experiencing these objects, so that the relationship between brand and consumer happens, we assumed that objects in this dimension were not interactive.

Conclusions

Nowadays there is a new type of consumer. A consumer that uses information and communication technologies in an increasingly active way. And somehow this action increasingly occupies most of their time. However, we realize that individuals have not changed their intention, they still want to belong to a group, ensuring their individuality. They certainly want to create relationships, find types of fun and purchase products and services. What seems to be happening is the way they do it and how they are now using the internet and for what purpose. In this context, we discovered a consumer / user able to use the Internet to achieve goals, whether in their work and family, whether in the emotional and private area. With the release and mass of technologies and applications on the Internet, the number of users increases every day, reducing the number of viewers of television, radio listeners and press readers. But is in the cross media era that consumer of today coexists. Where their social networks, information *mashups* and cooperation sites have been the reason in which we see the evolution of the social man to the digital social man. With this trend, the information available is

highly widespread and unavoidable need for a screening, which ultimately generates a kind of deeper knowledge and expertise among the users.

The social individual who lives in a community is giving way to another type of relationship where there seems to exist no space for effective knowledge and intimacy between the parties involved. This period is marked by the transition of social and real individual to a person ever more avatar and virtual.

The era of active digital individual are telling brands that the well known and tested formulas and effective proven strategies are no longer the most appropriate to the 2.0 consumer. Instead of imposing a message to large groups, brands must think its advertising strategy by "entering the conversation" with consumers. The activity happening in online spaces with significant number of users shows brands that their actions must work for the creation of interaction with their audience and offer something in exchange of their attention.

Brands are quickly realizing that they are not starting the conversation; it is because the consumer is increasingly controlling the flow of information, the choice of how and when he receives it. This has created a new paradigm in communications, in other words it is redefining concepts such as space and time

Brand advertising strategies are following consumers' migration to the virtual world and are seeking in interactive strategies the solution to find this new consumer. But is the convergence between what is traditional with what is truly dynamic virtual and interactive? Are the brands taking advantages of the capabilities of interactive media to create real interaction?

The study chose the virtual world Second Life ®. We tried to understand if a brand (Nokia) strategy was, throughout interactive, immersive. We also wanted to check if the consumer could feel an immersive environment and be able to experience the brand object.

The research found that brand objects in the virtual store in Second Life were not fully interactive; the feeling to try these objects has fallen short of expectations. We found that the Control Dimension gatherer greater consensus. The examined objects have a more or less interactive control, conveying the feeling of power play the product. However, in the dimension Communication Direction only four of the objects examined had two way communication. The ability to return the message was not enough to test the ability of the brand to create relationship with a consumer.

Objects were able to in the Space Dimension, provide feelings of belonging and 'telepresence'. Already in the dimension Perception of the Brand Communication Objectives we find results about the importance of designing objects with informative intention and not with

an intent and persuasive communications. Objects that have the propensity to report only bring users closer to the brand.

The Experience Perceived by the user dimension objects should be allowed to share creatively and communicatively. However, only one subject (Public Feedback) enabled the sharing of what had been built to other users.

The virtual worlds are spaces that can bring the brand to their audience. The interactivity concept should be considered as a vector capable of uniting the consumer to the brand. These spaces want to simulate the real, involve the user and produce real feelings. On the other side they need to allow objects to be transportable between applications and virtual spaces. These objects should be free and offered to other consumers.

The social consumer creates successful social interactions around an object. If this object belongs to a brand, advertising communication can be shared and spread over thousands of users in virtual worlds and their social networks. If this object is transportable between channels and formats, the brand may ensure the conversations focus within web surfers.

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