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Does a small business need a 'Second Life?'

San Antonio Business Journal - by [John F. Dini](#)

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For small business owners, new technology presents a constant challenge. They usually don't have the time to check out cutting edge advances until their customers or vendors insist on it.

The virtual economy of Second Life ([secondlife.com](#)) has generated massive press coverage. With over 9 million subscribers, and nearly \$2 million a day in transactions, Second Life (or "SL" to its participants) is being used by major corporations, including [Apple](#), [Dell](#), Sears and Circuit City.

We decided to check out this phenomenon from a small business perspective.

Participants in SL create "avatars" and choose names, clothing and accessories for them.

They can buy land, build, manufacture and sell products -- all in a huge virtual universe. Corporations hold meetings, with executives worldwide attending via avatar.

Pop stars perform for virtual audiences. Companies have product demonstrations, news conferences and employee recruiting fairs in SL.

We created our avatar (\$72 for a year -- there is a free version) and dressed him as a businessman.

That wasn't as easy as it sounds. Apparently, lots of SL folks want wings and light-up eyes, but not too many lean towards Brooks Brothers. Appropriately garbed, we set out to do business in SL.

With some searching, we found an appropriate office, rented it, installed an automatic presentation to describe our services when we aren't there and hired a decorator to purchase our furniture.

In a virtual world that expands daily, consultants such as our decorator are valuable as much for their knowledge of how to locate things as they are for their artistic skills. Our total set-up cost was about \$150 in real dollars.

Like almost all SL residents, we are young and beautiful, and our office has a beach view.

There are certain benefits to creating your own reality. Our neighbors are a school board, a wedding planner, and a medical clinic.

We haven't yet figured out how electronic characters could become ill.

How do you build or promote your business in SL? It isn't easy.

The virtual universe is vast, and it's growing by the hour. You can wander for miles without meeting one of the 40,000 people who are online at any given time.

It is difficult to advertise something that exists only in RL (Real Life) unless, like IBM, you can afford to build your own island.

Most importantly, you can waste a lot of time with unqualified prospects.

It is unlikely that anyone you meet in SL is the same age, profession or even gender that they are in real life. Discovering what they actually do for a living back on Earth is time consuming and frequently disappointing.

After a few weeks, we gave up on trying to make something happen in SL.

Our office is still there (\$12 a month rent), and we will keep it for the day when there is an infrastructure that allows buyers and sellers to come together more easily.

Second Life offers interesting opportunities for promotion, education, knowledge exchange and perhaps, some day, for selling your real-life products and services.

Until its virtual economy develops analogs to the marketplace, however, small businesses will be much better off looking for oxygen-breathing customers.

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