

Survey Research in Virtual Worlds



RTI International's survey expertise is supported by an organizational commitment to embrace innovation. RTI exemplifies this commitment through an initiative in the online virtual world Second Life, where our virtual interviewing facility provides the opportunity and functionality to design and implement data collection efforts with a global population of Second Life users.

The Social Web and Second Life

The online social world is a virtual space made up of real people forming relationships, making decisions, spending money, and developing opinions. The social web (also known as "Web 2.0") continues to grow and diversify as users blog, tweet, update Facebook statuses, and spend substantial time in immersive virtual environments like Kaneva, Farmville, Club Penguin, World of Warcraft, and Second Life. As in the real world, researchers interested in using virtual worlds for data collection and online research must understand the unique cultural and social norms of each virtual environment, develop strategies for communication, and tailor their research methods according to each unique group of users.

RTI maintains a research facility in Second Life, one of the largest online virtual worlds, with more than 28 million registered accounts. In Second Life's 3-D graphical interface, users—known as "residents"—design virtual representations of themselves (avatars), and engage with the world to socialize, design residential spaces, and participate in an in-world virtual economy that depends on the sale and purchase of user-created content. As a global phenomenon—with 60% of residents outside the United States—Second Life offers researchers the ability to reach a broad spectrum of the international population.

Virtual World Survey Research Methods

RTI has sponsored several research and development initiatives to derive best practices for survey research in Second Life. Our staff have tested a variety of survey methods in the virtual environment, including respondent recruitment techniques, in-avatar interviewing, and self-administered kiosk surveys.

- Respondent recruitment methods include classified ads in Second Life, online user forums and blogs, word-of-mouth referrals, and networking among targeted groups. Other recruitment strategies include using interactive kiosks with which avatars engage to receive more information on how to participate in a survey. Interested participants can also receive a link to an eligibility survey that they can complete in their own web browser.
- In-avatar interviewing involves RTI staff avatars conducting scripted interviews in the RTI virtual interviewing facility, much like in-person interviews.
- The virtual interviewing facility also hosts self-administered surveys, in which avatars interact with an automated survey interface delivered at a kiosk.
- RTI is also conducting studies on the utility of virtual worlds for cognitive interviewing, recruiting and gaining survey cooperation from hard-to-reach populations, and collecting information on sensitive behaviors.



RTI's virtual facility in Second Life



A small interviewing room located in RTI's virtual facility in Second Life

Technological Capabilities

RTI built its virtual interviewing facility in Second Life in 2008. The space includes two small interviewing rooms for one-on-one interviews and two large interviewing rooms for focus groups and other meetings. RTI's capabilities include the following:

- A variety of effective recruitment methods that yield respondents who vary by age, country of residence, education, and overall virtual world experience among other relevant factors
- The ability to host self-administered surveys that automatically pay respondents in Second Life currency and yield fast results
- In-avatar interviewing that gives researchers the ability to control variables related to interview setting and interviewer appearance that are not possible in real life
- Avatar interviewer training sessions that cover the fundamentals of in-world field interviewing, probing techniques, and practice exercises.

The Second Life environment is continuously evolving. RTI's expertise provides researchers with the ability to develop and tailor survey methods to collect accurate and timely data.

Research Highlights

RTI has presented and published findings from Second Life research related to recruitment effectiveness, the effect of avatar behaviors on real-life health behaviors, social presence in virtual world surveys, and the effect of interviewer image in in-avatar surveys. Findings have been presented at the American Association for Public Opinion Research, the European Survey Research Association, Presence, FedCASIC, and the Midwest Association for Public Opinion Research. This research has also been published in the *Journal of Virtual Worlds Research* and *Social Science Computer Review*.

More Information

Real Life: Elizabeth Dean
Program for Research in Survey Methodology
Second Life: Frances Meriman
919.541.7445
edean@rti.org
www.rti.org/secondlife
RTI International
3040 Cornwallis Road, PO Box 12194
Research Triangle Park, NC 27709-2194 USA

RTI 7006 R1 0412

