

Preface

Business owners: have you been worrying that the ‘real life’ world is occupied by too many competitors and predators? Do you have brilliant and creative business ideas, but are wondering where on earth you can realise your dream of starting your own business, with a limited budget? Do you own a virtual world store and wish to attract more visitors?

Consumers: are you feeling bored with browsing traditional e-commerce websites? Are you looking for a sense of the human touch, more personal assistance or fun in the online shopping process? Are you trying to learn new things, but only get the chance to see knowledge described in dry language?

Academics: do you wish to explore new research ideas? Are you interested in finding out how businesses are run in the virtual world, especially how they attract customers?

If you answered ‘Yes’ to any of the above questions, then this book will interest you. In it, we offer many useful suggestions on what you can achieve or discover in the magical ‘virtual world’.

Over the past decade, many business opportunities have emerged in the virtual world. Currently, public and private organisations are exploring many new applications in these virtual environments.

In this book, we take readers through various interesting virtual world applications, including commerce, health (both physical and mental), academia, ethics and travel. We also showcase some remarkable, yet easily replicated, examples of how innovative businesses provide virtual advisory services in these different application domains.

[Chapter 1](#) presents a background to the virtual world. It discusses the motivations behind this research and the implications of providing virtual advisors in virtual environments.

In [Chap. 2](#), virtual advisors are analysed from multiple perspectives. This will give readers a good understanding of the ‘what’ and ‘why’ issues regarding virtual advisors. The study reviews the technical background and information systems theories behind the provision of virtual advisors in the virtual worlds.

In [Chap. 3](#), this study looks at six exemplar domains of interest and reveal some existing practices in the virtual world, as well as a series of research hot-spots in laboratories. This is followed by practitioner and researcher foresights of future development trends. These examples and insights serve as a useful reference

point for practitioners who already have, or are considering, a ‘virtual presence’ in virtual world environments. The ‘best practices’ discussed here will enlighten researchers and practitioners seeking new ideas and inspiration.

Chapter 4 reveals what consumers think and suggest about the provision of virtual advisors. Semi-structured and in-depth interviews were conducted to gain a well-rounded understanding of consumer needs. Following qualitative investigations, we also undertook a series of preliminary empirical studies to examine different virtual advisor characteristics and their effects on user perceptions.

Chapter 5 provides a synthesis of the literature, best practices and empirical data collection results. It then discusses the effectiveness, current challenges, important technologies and future trends of providing virtual advisory services in various application domains. A framework for empowerment through IT advisory services in the virtual world is then proposed to uncover the implications of providing a properly-designed virtual advisor to serve consumers. We also highlight a series of important aspects for business owners to note, based on product characteristics.

Chapter 6 concludes by pointing out opportunities for the next stage of research. Through mimicking the social interactions that a customer experiences when visiting a brick-and-mortar store virtual advisors have the potential to fill a significant gap lacking in traditional e-commerce. Both practitioners and researchers will benefit from their own further examination of this topic.

This study empirically addresses the interesting idea of providing advisory services to consumers in the virtual world. To the best of our knowledge, this is the first study in the information systems literature that examines the empowering effect of information systems (i.e. virtual advisors) on consumers in the virtual world. We believe strongly that the study will benefit various reader groups.

With the support and encouragement of many experts, colleagues and friends, we have completed the first stage of our work and are currently experimenting with many features in virtual advisor design and their effects on consumers. We hope this book can serve as interesting ‘think-pieces’ to inspire further innovation and developments in this promising area.

Innovative Advisory Services in the Virtual World
An Empowerment Perspective

Li, M.; Liu, J.

2014, X, 67 p. 29 illus., Softcover

ISBN: 978-3-642-41111-3