



Blue Rain Marketing LLC Case Study

- **Avatars Prove to be Effective Sales Agents**
- **Drive a 500% Increase in CTR**
- **Reduce Cost/Click-Thru 75%**
- **6 Tips for Using Avatars on Landing Pages**
- **How to Estimate Your Avatar ROI**

Joe Dodson
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Executive Summary

Humanity Online's Digital Sales Agents deliver significant, increases in advertising effectiveness and reductions in marketing costs. The Blue Rain case produces:

- 500% Increase in Click-Through Rates
- 75% Reduction in Cost/Click-Through
- Potential to Deliver Significant Increases in Marketing ROI

Blue Rain Marketing LLC, a consulting firm specializing in marketing program development and execution had an assignment: attract prospects and get them to register and become active members of the OneNote user community. **OneNote** is a software package for free-form information gathering and multi-user collaboration. It had developed a dedicated user community but had never become a mainstream application. Some users and developers felt it 'had never been marketed well.'

Blue Rain developed an online marketing program that used PR, email, paid search, and standard online display ads to generate traffic to their site. With a significant budget and big goals the campaign was designed to take advantage of the growing interest in social applications on the web. The campaign theme was "I Heart OneNote" building on the enthusiasm that many users had for the product. Blue Rain even built a Community site for OneNote. They also created a character named Marcus OneNote. Marcus was used in some of the early ads and became the 'host' of the community web site.

Blue Rain called in Humanity Online to create an animated Marcus that could act and interact with prospects and members of the OneNote community. Humanity Online describes their avatars as Digital Agents. They have developed a unique skill and a unique and inexpensive process that they used to give Marcus the power to act, to react and to interact with visitors to the OneNote ad and landing page. This makes it possible for Marcus to share the enthusiasm for OneNote that its current members feel for the product. Three versions of each ad were produced and used in the tests.

The case also provides evidence that the gains delivered are not just a temporary effect due to the novelty of using avatars in online ads. The report offers tips on how to use avatars (Digital Agents) to maximize their impact. And it includes an Avatar Program ROI Calculator you can use to estimate the ROI you could achieve using your own marketing performance as a baseline.

The author concludes that Digital Agents have the potential to change the way business is played on the web.

Avatars Proven to Increase Advertising Effectiveness and Lower Costs

Deliver 500% Increase in Click-Through Rates

Reduce Cost/Click-Through by 75%

James knows how to attract customers to a new product. He had done it for many years at Microsoft. He even wrote a book about it¹. But his latest assignment was different. A new online advertising campaign for a major client was generating a respectable response rate, but James knew it could be better.

James Mastan founded **Blue Rain Marketing LLC**, a consulting firm that specializes in marketing strategy, market research, marketing plan development, and marketing program execution. In order to increase online response rates for the client, Blue Rain Marketing funded and developed an independent trial marketing program to test new online marketing approaches, determine which were most effective, then apply those techniques to the real-world client marketing campaigns. Blue Rain Marketing chose to build this internal pilot around a Microsoft product - OneNote. **OneNote** is a software application that serves as an "Electronic information organizer." Users of OneNote love the product and are extremely loyal and



Blue Rain Marketing is a Redmond, WA based company started by James Mastan, Founding Principal. James has over 20 years of marketing experience, with 14 years of marketing experience at Microsoft. As Director of Marketing at Microsoft and other firms, James led the development of business strategy for several Microsoft products including computer hardware and software and the launching of many different types of products in various customer segments and industries.

passionate about using it. Typical user sentiment is reflected in quotes such as: *"Best kept secret product at Microsoft"* and, *"I only bought Vista so I could continue using OneNote."* Many users felt and Blue Rain Marketing knew that One Note 'had never been marketed well.' The combination of a fanatically loyal user base and an under-marketed product made OneNote a prime target for a trial program designed to test cutting-edge marketing techniques.

"I Heart OneNote" Campaign

The core of the campaign rested on building an on-line social networking community site for OneNote users. A website (www.iheartonenote.com) was created that allowed community members to share tips and tricks about OneNote, upload OneNote files, participate in discussion forums, share photos, and use other social community functionality. To build the site membership Blue Rain Marketing developed a multifaceted online marketing campaign to build the base of active OneNote users. The campaign was focused on attracting prospects, getting them to register, and become active members within the IHeartOneNote user community.

Blue Rain used an integrated marketing mix of tactics such as PR, email, paid search, RSS and standard online display ads to generate the traffic to the site. To further market the site a Facebook page and a Twitter account were created, a viral video was produced, and a concerted effort was instigated to reach out to influential bloggers who might be interested in the new OneNote community. Display ads were also developed for the two most frequently used online ad formats (300x250 and 728x90). The campaign ran for 15 weeks. Display ads were placed on several ad networks including AdBrite, CBS, Google



Officially **Microsoft Office OneNote** is a software package for free-form information gathering, and multi-user collaboration.

OneNote's interface is an electronic version of the familiar tabbed three-ring binder which can be used directly for making notes, but also to gather "pages" printed or sent from other applications.

OneNote was originally marketed by Microsoft as a companion to Tablet PCs and it has support for pen interfaces. However, many use it as a general note-taking platform. Source: Wikipedia.

and Value Click. These ads also ran on multiple websites within the networks' content inventory. The campaign delivered over 80 million impressions. The cost per click-through, CPC, ranged from \$0.19 to \$0.83 for the display ads and averaged \$0.98 for the paid search ads.

With a modest but materially significant budget the pilot the campaign was designed to take advantage of the growing interest in social applications on the web and to test various social marketing techniques for efficacy and potential application to other clients.

Blue Rain also created a composite persona of a typical OneNote user (Exhibit 1). Based on this persona, a fictional character named Marcus was created and visually developed in an anime style. The Marcus persona became the 'host' of the community web site, answering member questions, generating blogs, product tips and tweeting via the Twitter account.



This visual representation of Marcus was also used as a visual element in some of the early trial display ads.

"Marcus was becoming a key player in the whole campaign. But all we had was a one page description and a pencil sketch. We needed someone to give him a voice and animation. We needed someone to bring Marcus to life."

J. Mastan

Humanity Online Brings Marcus to Life



Blue Rain called in Humanity Online to create an animated Marcus that could act and interact with prospects and members of the OneNote community. Humanity Online describes their



avatars as Digital Agents. They have developed a unique skill and a unique and inexpensive process that they used to give Marcus the power to act, to react and to interact with visitors to the OneNote ad and landing page. This

"These are so cool! It's great to see Marcus come to life."

Janinne Brunyee, Director of Strategy, Blue Rain

makes it possible for Marcus to share the enthusiasm for OneNote that its current members feel for the product. Humanity Online produced three versions used in the tests: Static images in GIF (1A and 1B), animated images without sound (2A and 2B) and animated ads with sound (3A and 3B). See Exhibit 2.

Research has shown that avatars can enhance the online shopping experience (Holzwarth, et.al. Journal of Marketing 2006). Using avatars as company representatives to provide information and entertainment can lead to more satisfied online shoppers. But can they also increase sales? Can they also lower the cost of conversion? Can they increase the returns on your marketing investments? These questions were not addressed in either of the two studies described in the Journal of Marketing article.

The Results: Avatars in Ads

The ads with the Humanity Online created Marcus delivered significant results, raising click- thru rates and lowering conversion costs. The results provided insight into what there was about the avatars that delivered the gains in performance.

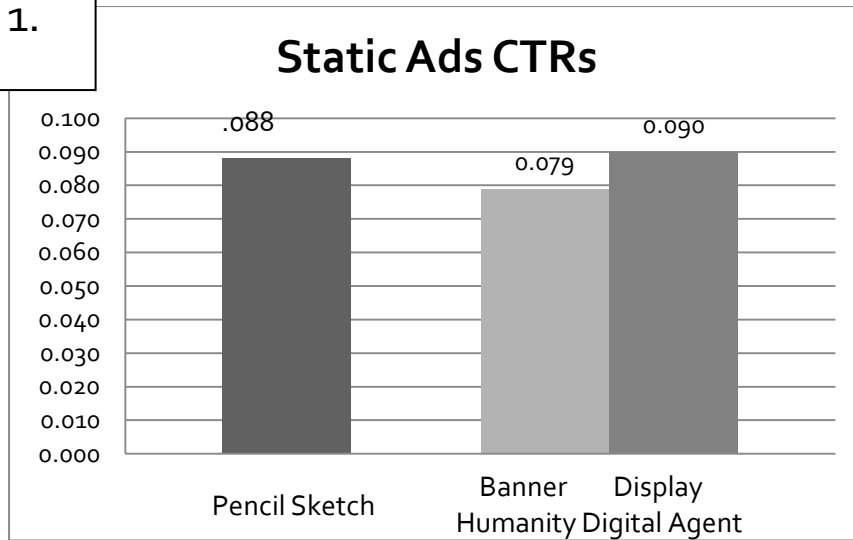
The first finding was that moving from a static black and white pencil sketch to a

"It's Crazy! The CTR for avatar ads is on average over 3 to 4 times higher than static or flash ads. One specific avatar ad had a CTR 5 to 6 times higher than the other ad formats."

James Mastan

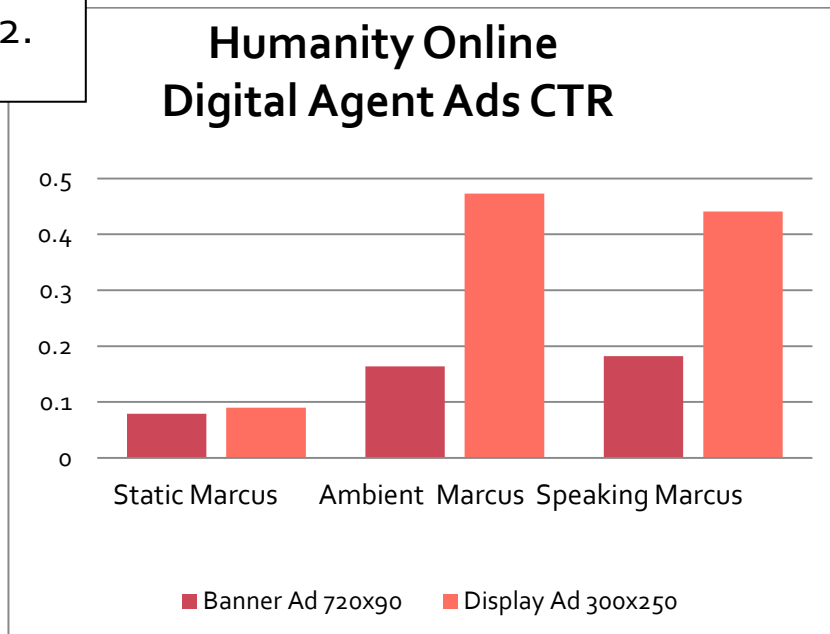
static color rendering had no noticeable effect on the customer, see Chart 1.

Chart 1.



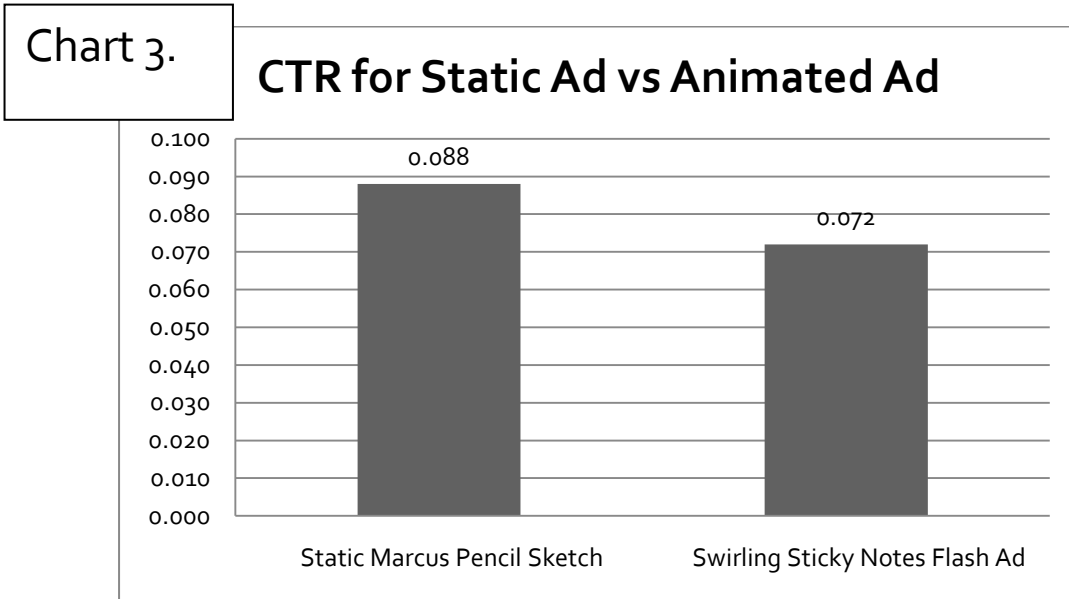
A real jump in performance comes when the images are animated. See Chart 2.

Chart 2.



Movement catches the eye. Research has shown humans are particularly sensitive to change, changes in temperature, environment, etc. But movement alone does not explain the significant jump in the ad performance. Blue Rain ran two animated ads as part of the campaign before the avatars were introduced without any significant improvement in click-through rates. One animation called

“Swirling Notes” (Exhibit 3) generated fewer click-throughs than the static ads. See Chart 3. Something else must be going on.

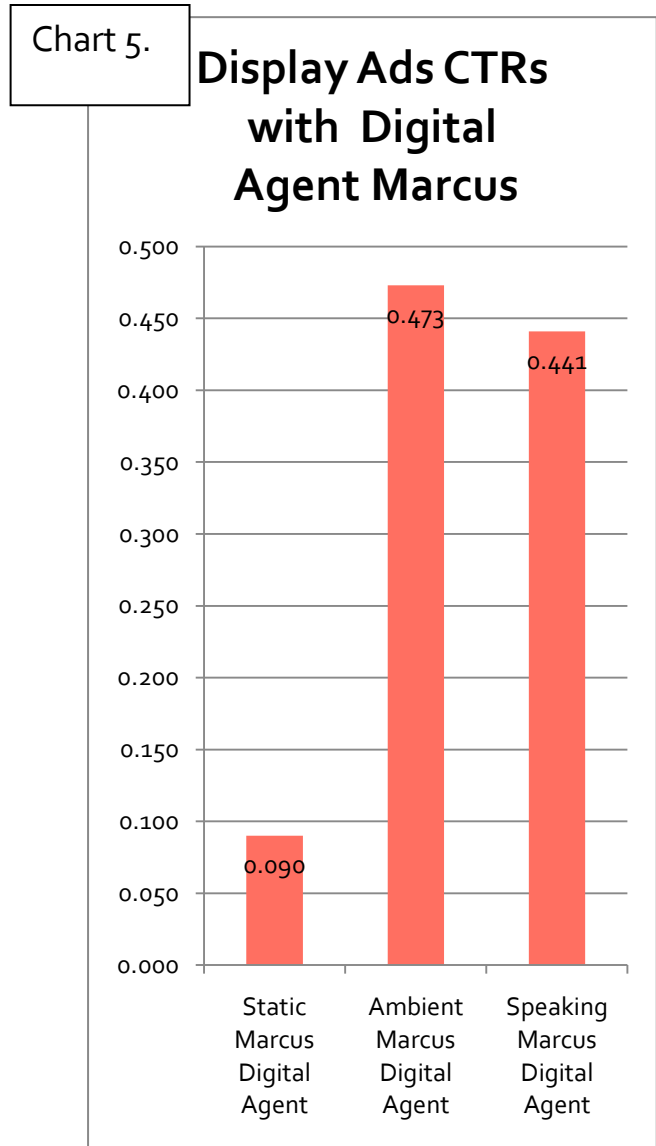
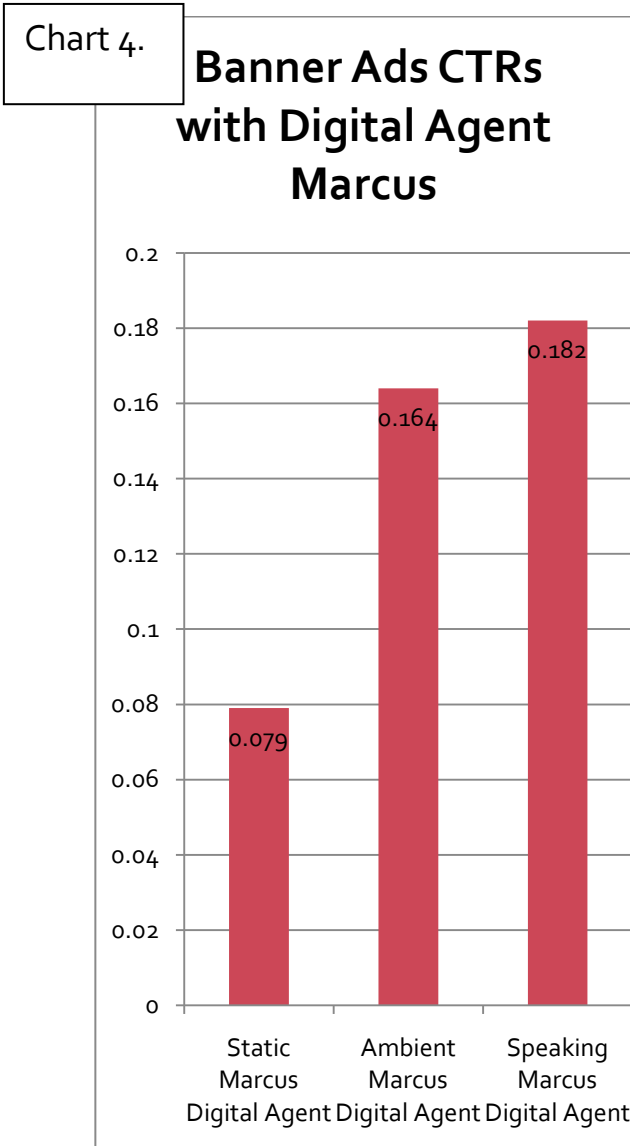


Work done by Byron Reeves at Stanford University and Reeves and Nass (2002) offers an explanation. In his review of human responses to technology Reeves finds that interactive online characters “can be perceived as realistic and well-liked social partners in conversations that simulate real-world experiences.” Most ads are one-way communications that generate little or no interaction with the viewer. Most online ads are too. They come out of the broadcast mold of ads that traditional TV, radio, newspaper and magazine advertisers have used for over the past sixty years.

But humans are social beings. Reeves explains that online interactive “characters can express social roles, emotions, and organized personalities that match learning goals, company brands, and transaction needs. Characters can increase the trust that users place in an online experience.” These interactions almost always involve talking. But the ambient Marcus ads did not have audio.

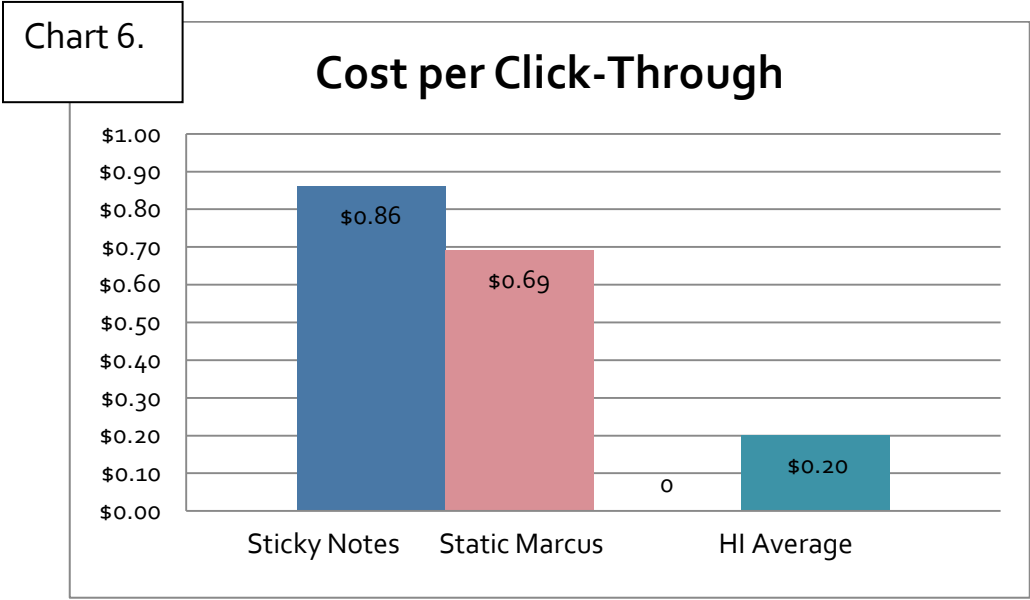
Words are without a doubt a critical communications tool. But research has shown that a lot of communication can transpire without a single word being spoken. Information is conveyed with body language and facial expressions (For

example, a scowl versus a welcoming smile). A lot of communication can transpire without a word being uttered Mehrabian (1971).



The computer is a communications medium that can deliver a multifaceted interactive experience. But an online experience can include more than words. As Reeves says “New media offer primitively compelling simulations of social interaction, using interactive pictures of social actors and social places that are real enough to suggest a full range of human responses.” In other words, an interactive Digital Agent can do more than an ad, as they did here for the OneNote community campaign with a 3 to 5 times increase in click-through and a 75% cut in cost per click-through.

Some users may be concerned that the extra click-through is the result of the novelty in the use of avatars. In which case, the benefits are only temporary. And the goal should be to use them quickly before the novelty wears off. I doubt that the use of avatars will fade quickly and believe there is some data to support this view.



The Blue Rain project was focused on the advertising and maximizing the power of the ads to generate interest in becoming an active OneNote community member. If the extra click through is generated solely from their novelty, I would expect the conversion rate to go down. It's easy and there is little risk in clicking to learn more about a product/service. Novelty is less likely to deliver conversion. But the conversion rate for the Humanity Online Digital Agent ads was "the same" as the conversion rate before they were introduced. This means that the added click through will generate a proportional gain in conversions. This produced the significant drop in cost per conversion as well as cost per click-through that Blue Rain saw.

It's also worth noting that Humanity Online's Digital Sales Agents also 'beat' the incentive programs tested as part of the campaign (See Exhibit 3). Cash incentives are a traditional sales tool often used to boost market response in order to meet short term sales goals at a significant increase to acquisition costs.

On the Landing Page

Online ads are able to get prospects to click, a decision that requires an action, but no commitment from the visitor. The landing page, however, has to

6 Tips For Using Avatars on a Landing Page

1. Start by building a clear image of the target prospect. Caution: Don't describe a 'typical' user. Create a profile of your perfect converter. Write a persona with as much detail as possible. See the Marcus Persona (Exhibit 1) for an example.
2. Construct your landing page and the avatar to appeal to this ideal prospect. Focus on this user. Trying to appeal to everyone will insure you appeal to no one.
3. Leverage your known and trusted brands (E.g. the Safeco gecko). If you don't have one, research has shown that an avatar can increase trust (Reeves).
4. Automatically start the animation of the character on the first visit. Give the visitor mute and replay control by providing player controls on the screen. Use a "Keep Alive Loop" at the end to keep movement and life on the page after the script.
5. Include an offer and a call to action. You can start small and build to a big commitment. Take advantage of what Cialdini (2009) calls "consistency" –the strong drive for a person to act consistent with prior statements and commitments.
6. Consider ways to make the video fun and viral. Give it some pass along value.

convince them to stick, to make a commitment (to buy, to download, and to register). This is driven in large part by the appeal of the product/service and the offer being made. The landing page is a critical success factor in conversion. While this was not the focus of the Blue Rain study, HI believes that Digital Agents can significantly improve landing page performance and recommends six tips that will insure success. See '6 Tips for Using Avatars on a Landing Page.'

Data gathered by Marketing Sherpa suggest conversion rates are low, between 2 to 8% for search and email lists – with an average of 3.8 %. This includes all types of conversion (opting-in, registering, and buying or subscribing, etc.). Using Digital Agents on a landing page can have a significant impact on the conversion rate. Gains in conversion rates will have the same magnitude of impact on a company ROI as the change in CTR delivered. This is due to the multiplicative nature of these factors in the calculation of the marketing ROI. See Chart 7.

The ROI

In the current economic environment companies are examining every expense closely to insure that each and every activity undertaken is contributing positive cash flow and meets or exceeds a target ROI for the company. That is particularly true in marketing. CMOs are requiring more rigor than ever, requiring a ROI assessment for each existing marketing program and any new marketing expenditure.

Equation (1) is the formula for calculating the return on a marketing investment, ROMI, in its most basic form.³

(1) $ROMI = (\text{Incremental Gross Margin} - \text{Marketing Investment}) / \text{Incremental Marketing Investment}$

A straightforward calculation of the incremental cost and the incremental benefit of a marketing expenditure is the best way to justify introducing any new program, like the addition of avatars. ROMI is calculated as a percentage. When the incremental gross margin delivered just equals the incremental investments ROMI equals 0.

For our online advertising example, we can explicitly break out the key components of sales.

(2) $\text{Gross Margin } \$ = \text{Impressions} \times \text{CTR} \times \text{Conversion Rate} \times \text{Conversion Value}$.

ROMI can be used to improve corporate profitability by assessing the incremental value of any new marketing investment. The process involves comparing the ROMI for each new initiative to the current marketing programs and investing only when a new initiative exceeds the current ROI or a target ROI set by the marketing department or the company.

The OneNote campaign did not target a revenue goal. But with a few assumptions we can illustrate how to estimate the value of incorporating Digital Sales Agents into your marketing program.

Step 1. Gather the data on the key factors for your current marketing investments.

Fill in the data for your baseline column in Table 1. The spreadsheet will calculate the ROMI for your current program. If you don't have data use industry averages, which can often be found online or estimated.

Step 2: Get an estimate of the cost of adding avatars to your marketing program. Then the tricky part: estimating the gains in performance that may be achieved with the addition of avatars to your marketing program. You can a) talk to companies that have experience with using avatars; b) do a trial or test program if needed to assess the gains achievable for your marketing programs; or c) you can also use managerial judgment to assess the likelihood of achieving a 10%, 20%, or even 40 % improvement in one or more of the key variables driving the ROMI. Chart 7 then provides an example of the impact these changes can have on your marketing program⁵. It uses the hypothetical values shown in Table 1 as the baseline.

Table 1: Avatar Program ROI Calculator⁴

	<u>Baseline</u>	<u>With Avatar</u>	<u>Incremental</u>
Adv Budget	\$250,000	\$250,000	
Avatar Expense		\$30,000	\$30,000
Campaign Expense	\$250,000	\$280,000	\$30,000
Impressions/\$	200	200	
CTR	1.0%	1.5%	
Click-Through			250,000
Conversion Rate	2.5%	2.5%	
Conversions			6,250
Cost/Conversion	\$20.00	\$14.93	\$ 4.80
Conversion Value	\$25	\$ 25	\$156,250
ROMI	25%	67%	421%
Input assumptions are designated by a beige box.			

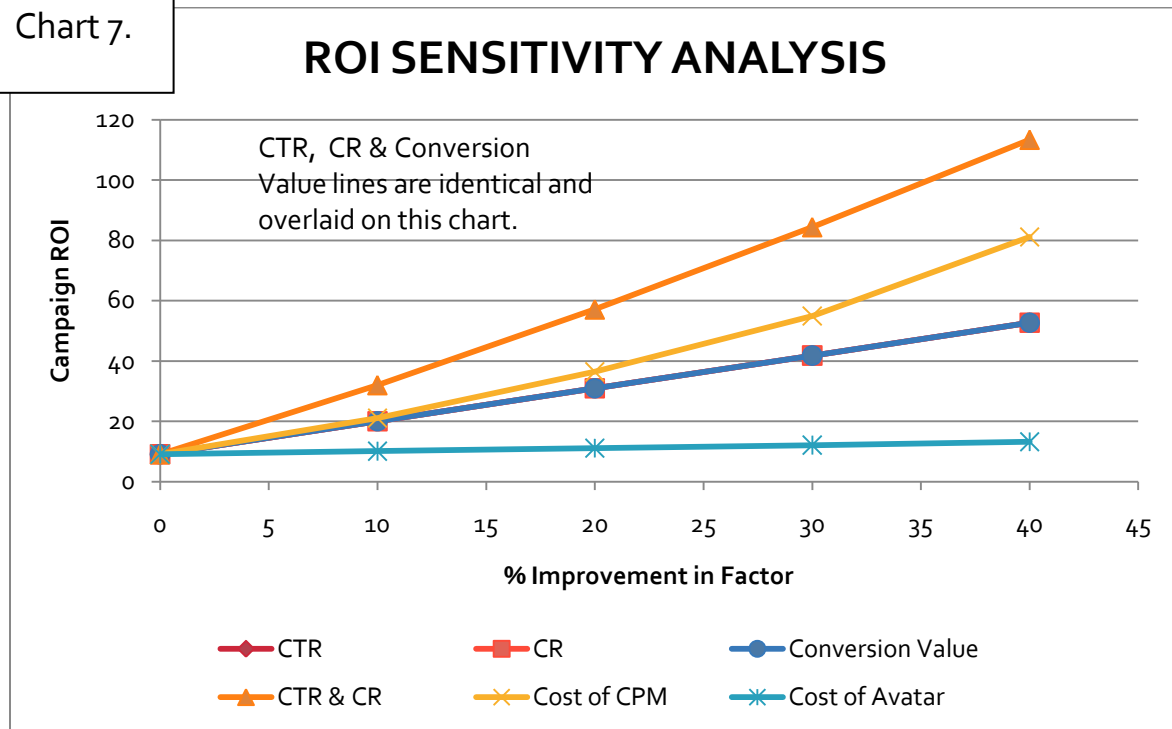
If the use of avatars were to produce no gain in performance then the ‘With Avatars’ ROI equals 11.6%⁶, a drop in ROI. The Blue Rain case vividly illustrates the potential opportunity an advertiser has to achieve sales growth by improving advertising performance and lowering costs thus improving profits by using avatars with the capabilities delivered by Humanity Online Digital Sales Agents.

Wrap Up

In their book The Game Changer, A.G. Lafley and Ram Charan describe how companies like DuPont, GE, Honeywell, HP and P&G have been able to increase

revenues and lower costs to significantly improve operating margins, cash flow and revenue growth by using game changing innovations. They characterize a

Chart 7.



game changer as visionary and someone “who sees innovation as a social process and understands that human interaction-how people talk and work together- is the key to innovation, not just technology.” Many of these same words describe what avatars like Humanity Online Digital Agents do. They recognize that humans are social beings. They realize that humans seek out interaction and are looking for technology to learn how to interact, to ask questions, to listen for the answers, to talk and to understand what they want –instead of trying to understand what the computer wants. Companies like Humanity Online are developing Digital Agents that have the potential and are now demonstrating the ability to change the way business is played on the web.

Footnotes

1. Product Launch The Microsoft Way, 2008.
2. Avatar is the terminology most frequently used in the academic literature to describe digital representations of humans. The companies that make them for business applications (sales and marketing, customer service, etc.) often use the term ‘digital agent’. In this report I have followed this convention and refer to Humanity Online avatars as a Digital Agent, but use the Avatar label when making statements that refer to any avatars beyond those produced by Humanity Online.
3. A useful source for more information is Marketing ROI: The Path to Campaign, Customer, and Corporate Profitability, by James D Lenskold (2003).
4. A copy of the ROI Calculator can be obtained by contacting Dan Lykken at Humanity Online
5. Chart 7 was built with a slightly different set of assumptions than those listed in Table 1: Adv budget \$100,000, Avatar Expense \$50,000, Impressions/\$ 100, CTR 1% and 2%, CR 3%, and a CV \$40.
6. Note that the absolute values for ROI would change, but the relative impact of each key factor would not change with a different set of assumptions for the Baseline ROI.

Glossary

CM: Gross Contribution Margin equals sales price minus variable costs.

CPC: Cost per Click. Average of online media expense divided by the number of ad views that click to learn more by clicking thru to a landing page on the advertiser’s web site.

CM: Contribution Margin. Net Profit from a sale/subscription after removing the marginal cost of producing the product/service.

CPM: Cost per thousand potential viewers of an ad.

CTR: Click through rate. Percentage of viewers of an online ad that click on the ad to see more information or buy the product/service advertised.

Conversion Rate: Percentage of viewers of an ad who click to see more information and subsequently go on to buy/subscribe/register for the product/service advertised.

Conversion Value: The dollar value of a customer to the advertiser. For a product manufacturer it is most likely the gross margin received from the sale of a product. For service provider it could include the customer lifetime value of the cash flows of an average customer.

Impressions: Number of viewers or number of times an ad is viewed.

ROMI: Return on marketing investment.

SEM: Search Engine Marketing. Online marketing that seeks to promote a website by increasing its visibility on search engine result pages.

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Exhibit 1: Marcus Persona

Age: 27. He's been in the corporate world long enough to not be intimidated by his bosses. He's a "no-drama" kind of guy who has a tendency to be the calm in the middle of the storm. Particularly good since his current boss, Roger, is just one big storm all the time.

Gender: Male. *Physical Characteristics:* Skinny and lanky. He looks like a hipster, but he dresses nice when he comes to work. On weekends, he's most likely in fitted jeans and a T-shirt with his favorite band on it (or for product - OneNote). He has floppy hair, and he could also have glasses. Not unattractive, but we're not talking Tom Cruise either.

Marital Status: He is unmarried, but he is not un-dateable.

Social Status: Marcus has a few close friends that he sees at his local dive bar a couple times a week. A better writer than speaker, he's a bit awkward around women.

Personality: He is a hard-working man, and he is good at his job. He is always looking for ways to increase efficiency and make life a little bit easier for everyone else who has to be around Roger. Including Roger.

If Marcus were to take a personality test, this is what would come back:

Marcus is analytical yet personable and interested in underlying principles. He tends to believe that work is the greater good and that play has to be earned. He values his free time, which is used to "recharge" his batteries. He is dependable and responsible, with a high sense of duty. Despite his quiet demeanor, He tends to thrive on excitement. He tends not to trust strangers and is concerned about his family, reputation and job.

Practical and measurable tasks are what he does well, making him successful in quality and administration. With an understanding of how mechanical things work, He may well be skilled at using tools and working with his hands. Offering a stabilizing presence in the organization and accepting his roles and responsibilities, he sees this as simply doing his duty - "doing what should be done". Because he lives by principles and rules, Marcus is very consistent and dependable. Correctness, analysis and logic are all-important to him. Marcus is precise, cautious, disciplined, painstaking and conscientious in his work, yet prepared to try anything once.

Marcus is a systematic and organized thinker, with highly developed analytical skills. He tries to use logical principles to make sense of the ideas that constantly arise in his mind. He values the development of his intellectual awareness and the opportunity to learn, improve and grow. He prefers to discover, learn and understand the principles which underlie the information about the world he has perceived through his senses. He takes his commitments and obligations seriously. He may find it hard to express his ideas as clearly or as concisely as he experiences them.

He is most content in work that is of practical service to the organization and others. Marcus gains great pleasure from improving upon existing techniques with the objective of maximizing efficiency and cost effectiveness. He likes concrete facts, has a good memory for detail and usually learns best from "hands-on" experiences. He will go to great lengths in order to fulfill his sense of responsibility and obligation.

Key strengths: Pays great attention to detail. Prefers a "Hands-on" approach to problem solving. Sensible and matter of fact. Appreciates and welcomes creativity. Good powers of concentration. Objectivity. Resilient and resourceful.

Weaknesses: May not express his opinions as quickly as the situation warrants. "Every silver lining has a cloud." May project a weak image, thus his invaluable contributions may be overlooked. May be slow or unwilling to express his true feelings - unless it's in writing.

Exhibit 2: Ads Used During the Campaign

Banner Ad (720x90)

Display Ad (300x250)

Before Avatar:



With HI Avatar:

1. **Static Marcus Digital Agent:** A static gif file with a banner and display ads. The ads changed to a color life like, non moving image of Marcus. These ads produced results similar results to current pencil drawing of Marcus and served as a benchmark for comparing the results with a moving, speaking avatar in the ads.



2. **Ambient Marcus Digital Agent:** Banner and display ads, with animated head and face movement of Marcus, but no sound or lip movement, clicking on the ad linked directly to the landing page where the animated messaging auto played with sound with a supporting call to action to register as a member of the OneNote community.

3. **Speaking Marcus Digital Agent:** Banner and display ads, with Marcus's character auto starting in the ad space with full head animation and fully speaking with the lip sync. But the initial audio was muted. Clicking on the speaker button present on the ad, turned on the audio and replayed the full spoken message in the ad space, (referred to as an engagement). An additional click was required to go to the landing page where additional messaging auto played with sound, with a supporting call to action to register.

Contact Dan Lykken, VP Sales and Marketing, Humanity Online 206-200-5432 to get a copy of the animated and the speaking Marcus Digital Agent ads.

Exhibit 3: Some Other Relevant Elements of the Campaign

☐ The static generic baseline ads for the campaign.



☐ Two animated Flash ads used during the campaign.



a. Swirling Sticky Notes

b. Girl on a Bench

☐ Various Incentive Programs to foster registration.

- Sweepstakes: \$200 & \$500 prizes
- Points & Levels program to encourage applications of OneNote. \$20 gift card for each new level achieved
- Refer-a-Friend program with \$200 incentive.

TELL-A-FRIEND CONTEST IS NOW LIVE - ENTER TO WIN \$200 AMAZON.COM GIFT CARD

posted by MarcusLovesOneNote

BREAKING NEWS: It's noonish on June 4th and I have just kicked off our first ever **www.iheartonenote.com Tell-A-Friend Contest.**

To enter, all you have to do is to share the homepage link (you'll need to copy the whole link not just the www.iheartonenote.com part - the stuff at the end too) with your network.

About Joe Dodson

Joe has a PhD in Management Science from Purdue University. Joe was in the agency business for 10 years at NWAyer. He was involved in creating marketing programs and advertising for AT&T, DeBeers, Kraft, Ralston Purina, 7UP and JCPenney. He also has been on the client side of the ad business at US West and Air Touch Cellular.

Joe has published articles on marketing and Advertising in the Journal of Marketing, Journal of Marketing Research, Marketing Science and Management Science. He has been invited speaker at Industry conferences

Joe is currently a Lecturer at the University of Washington's Foster School of Business. He teaches MBA and executive MBA classes on Marketing New Products and Innovations, Marketing High Tech Products and Services, Service Marketing & Management, and Advanced Marketing Strategy. See www.joedodson.com for more details.

Joe is also an advisor to Humanity Online.

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