

A safe way to learn life skills

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Children with learning disabilities, geriatric patients and stroke victims will soon be able to cross streets, cash checks and shop at the mall in a Bensalem company's new virtual reality software program.

The VTree Inc. City of Life Skills program, which will be released next month, will allow users to practice those everyday activities at their hospitals, schools or homes before attempting them for real.

"City of Life Skills came out of a survey we did of special needs organizations," said VTree Inc. President Chuck Bergen.

"Overwhelmingly, they said they needed something for life skills."

The program will use a combination of computer-generated scenes and video clips shot using real people that the program users will encounter as they walk down the street, do their banking and make purchases at supermarkets and other stores.

Bergen explained that the program gives people a safe way to practice everyday tasks that can be very intimidating for adults and children with disabilities and special needs. Children, particularly, can become frightened or anxious in those public places.

"This will help desensitize them," he said. "I've heard from parents who say they'd do this at home with their kid a million times if it means they can do it one time with them for real."

To make the program as realistic as possible, VTree Inc. is negotiating with real businesses to have their images and store layouts reproduced in the program. Commerce Bank has already agreed to take part.

"Frankly, we think the program is very exciting and dynamic," said Jenny McGinley, Commerce Bank's assistant vice president and e-commerce manager. "It's a tremendous community service to an audience I think is underserved."

For a sponsorship fee, the VTree Inc. program will include a virtual Commerce Bank with the institution's signature exterior look and interior layout. There, users will be able to use a virtual ATM, write checks and fill out deposit and withdrawal slips. They can even practice opening a checking account.

"Users will become very familiar with how to complete bank transactions in a Commerce Bank," said McGinley.

The deal also provides Commerce Bank with a marketing tool, since its logo will figure prominently in the program. Bergen added that the program's users may be more likely to go to a real Commerce Bank since it will seem familiar to them.

He said he's still reaching out to supermarkets and stores to fill out the program's virtual mall.

"We don't want to have a VTree store," he said. "It has to be what's done in the real world, so we're really hammering away at these businesses [to get them on board]."

Frankford Hospitals' Bucks Campus in Falls will be using the program. Barbara Moore, Frankford's physical and occupational therapy manager, said the banking component would be particularly helpful for geriatric patients with mild dementia.

"We're excited about it," she said. "It's nice to have the technology to do that. ... We see a lot of geriatric patients who come in and, for a variety of reasons, are weaker than they used to be. Once they step outside the door, they're dealing with balance issues, distractions and obstacles."

The program will be available in various versions. Hospitals will pay \$999 for a top-of-the-line version. A version that targets school-age children will cost \$499. A home version, which is designed to supplement the institutional ones, will be available for \$39.95, Bergen said.