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What Works

Clicking for Smart CSR

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Clicking for Smart CSR

National Instruments' partnerships not only energize science education, but also boost the company's brand and employee morale

By Abby Rubin

The energy makeovers unfolding in Atlanta in April 2007 were pretty standard fare: a house received a solar panel on its roof, a hybrid sedan replaced a gas-guzzling truck, and wind turbines appeared on the horizon. What was exceptional, however, was that 9- to 16-year-olds were executing these green upgrades using Lego robots, on Lego models, in Lego landscapes.

The kids were finalists in the FIRST Lego League challenge, an annual competition that brings together teams of students from all over the world to show off their engineering chops. And powering their robots was sophisticated software developed by National Instruments (NI), an Austin, Texas-based scientific equipment company.

For the past 10 years, NI has been as inventive in its philanthropic partnerships as it has been in its product development. The company's collaborations with Lego, the nonprofit FIRST (For Inspiration and Recognition of Science and Technology), and the University of Texas at Austin's DTEACh program not only encourage schoolchildren to pursue science, technology, engineering, and math (or STEM, for short), but also cultivate the next generation of NI product consumers.

"We are operating in our own enlightened self-interest," explains Ray Almgren, NI's vice president of product marketing and academic relations. NI wants "to make kids familiar with our technology so that when they're in a position to make a buying decision, they'll buy our software," he says.

In the meantime, volunteering at Lego robotics competitions and in classrooms inspires NI employees' loyalty. And the association with Lego has raised NI's profile among partners and consumers. "No amount of money [that NI] could throw at a marketing program would deliver the same kind of brand recognition," says Almgren.

An engineer readies her robot at the 2008 FIRST Lego League World Festival. Her team, the Power Peeps of Swartz Creek, Mich., placed third.

Connecting with Partners

Founded by three young researchers working at the University of Texas in the early 1970s, NI makes highly specialized software and hardware for businesses and governments. For example, physicists at CERN (the European Organization for Nuclear Research) use NI products to prevent particles in an accelerator from straying out of their intended paths, managers at Microsoft use NI products to test new Xbox 360 controllers, and engineers at biotech companies use NI products to develop medical instruments. Last year, 25,000 companies in 90 countries used NI software and hardware. The company now employs more than 4,500 people, operates in nearly 40 countries, and posted revenues of $740 million in 2007.

Unlike its products, NI's early forays into philanthropy were less than precise. The company's volunteer efforts were "a typical smorgasbord" of employee-led, mostly local initiatives, says Almgren. Although NI matched employees' donations and offered paid time off for volunteering, the company had not yet determined which charitable causes needed its uniquely talented workforce and specialized products.

Abby Rubin recently earned her MBA and MA in education from Stanford University, where she co-led the Graduate School of Business' Public Management Program. She now works for Tipping Point Community, which supports poverty-fighting organizations in the San Francisco Bay Area.

Then one day in the spring of 1998, an engineering professor at Tufts University named Chris Rogers and a representative from Lego's education division telephoned Almgren. Rogers was a Lego buff, and had figured out how to use NI's LabVIEW (short for Laboratory Virtual Instrumentation Engineering Workbench) software to control Lego robots. Although Lego had already developed its own software for its robotics line, Mindstorms, the software was incompatible with Apple's Macintosh operating system. Lego wanted to know if NI would license its software for use in Mindstorms.

"It was completely out of space for us," Almgren recalls. "We don't do toys."

Yet NI did have a mission to support science and engineering education, which at that time it pursued mostly by making scholarships to university students. Working with Lego would allow NI to extend its educational impact to children worldwide. And so NI agreed to license the software "for almost nothing," says Almgren.

Almgren also offered Rogers a grant to create more educational software. Instead, Rogers asked NI to donate the money to a local organization committed to hands-on science and engineering education. After some research, NI found DTEACh (Design Technology and Engineering for America's Children), a program at the University of Texas' Cockrell School of Engineering that helps elementary, high school, and college instructors teach STEM more effectively.

CSR IN A SNAP

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> "It's one thing to go build a house with Habitat for Humanity. But if you're an engineer and can help design the house," that's more fulfilling, says Almgren.

Today, NI works with DTEACh to help teachers use Mindstorms robots in their lesson plans. The company not only donates its products, but also sends more than 140 employees—some 10 percent of its Austin workforce—to volunteer in classrooms throughout the Austin area. "Science and math in K through 12 are where a lot of American students are doing the worst, yet many teachers don't feel well equipped to teach these subjects," explains Amanda Webster, NI's community relations manager. The NI volunteers help teachers make STEM more fun, engaging, and relevant to students' lives. "Even kids as young as 7 years old are learning how to program," she says. "It becomes second nature to them."

NI's collaboration with Lego also led to the partnership with FIRST and the FIRST Lego League competitions. Once again, NI contributes both products and volunteer mentors to teams and events. These robotics competitions are "more interesting than a traditional science fair," says Almgren. "There are elements of teamwork, competition, and a tough challenge—like athletics."

Also like athletics, the robotics competitions teach kids that they can improve their STEM skills, says Almgren. "Kids will practice shooting free throws for hours and then tell you that they can't get better in math." Yet the exciting, team-based competitions inspire children to practice, learn, and indeed improve in the areas of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics.

STICKING WITH NI

Teachers and students are not the only people benefiting from NI's community partnerships: Employees also get fired up from volunteering their unique skills, says Joel Sumner, an NI research and development manager and DTEACh classroom mentor. After all, not many people can teach a classroom of students how to build and program a Lego robot. "The kids are so happy when they see me, because they weren't going to be able to do robotics otherwise," he says.

"It's one thing to go build a house with Habitat for Humanity," agrees Almgren, "but if you're an engineer and can help design the house, that's a more fulfilling thing to do."

This fulfillment feeds higher morale on the job, says Almgren, helping to make NI one of *Fortune's* "100 Best Places to Work" for the ninth year in a row. Mark Finger, NI's vice president of human resources, similarly points out that turnover at NI is "typically 50 to 60 percent lower than the industry average." In 2007, when the high-tech industry had a median turnover rate of 17 percent, NI had 8.6 percent. Because engineers are in high demand, Finger notes, "someone will always come along who will pay more." But NI has figured out that helping engineers contribute their skills to the community is also worth a lot. "You can't recruit out of here," says Almgren. "There's a wall around this place."

NI's commitment to improving STEM education also strengthened the company's relationship with Lego. When Lego was considering contractors for a later edition of Mindstorms products, Lego executives happened to visit when NI was hosting a DTEACh event. At the event, several hundred children were exhibiting projects they built using Lego Mindstorms, such as a mousetrap, a city with automated streetlights, and a three-tiered Barbie alarm clock. Some students even spoke with the Lego execs directly, asking for new features and changes to their existing products.. The event "ultimately pulled us into the No. 1 position" for the contract, says Almgren. "Without [that], we would have been just another corporate face."

NI is continuing to deepen its commitment to its strategic partners. In April, the company announced a multimillion-dollar in-kind donation to FIRST over the next five years. And employees such as Sumner are asking how NI can replicate its community outreach program elsewhere: "How do we get this in Chicago and Oklahoma City? NI's not there, we can't be the ones to do it, but someone should."

Although replicating NI's mentoring program may take time, corporations can immediately apply NI's findings to their corporate philanthropy. NI's charitable work draws on the company's core products and skills. In contrast, most companies practice philanthropic strategies that stray from their business strategies. By aligning its philanthropy to its business, NI enhances its community, entices consumers, and inspires its employees' dedication. ■