

cover story

LEGO'S EARLY MOBILE TOURS HELPED PAVE THE WAY FOR MODERN-DAY EXPERIENTIAL MARKETING PRACTICES. AFTER A SIX-YEAR HIATUS, THE BRAND IS MAKING A COMEBACK—AND STEALING MARKET SHARE, TOO.

EM TAKES YOU INSIDE THE HOUSE THAT LEGO BUILT

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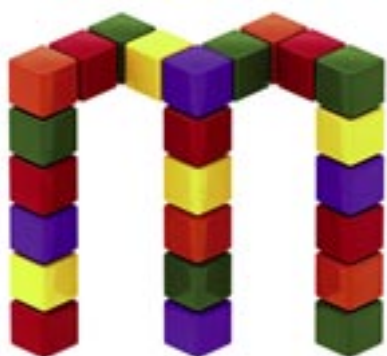
PHOTO BY KIT NOBLE

**MASTER BUILDERS:** Michael McNally, brand relations director, and Vince Rubino, event marketing manager, at LEGO headquarters.



# HE BRICK

BY SANDRA O'LOUGHLIN



Michael McNally, brand relations director at LEGO, recalls being fascinated as an 11-year-old on a shopping trip with his mom at Columbia Mall, in Columbia, MD, where the LEGO World Show

was on exhibit.

"I remember distinctly in the center court of the mall seeing the Mark Twain house, a red Victorian made completely out of LEGO bricks," the self-confessed former LEGO kid explains. "For me, that was, wow, amazing. I looked at my mom and said, 'I want to build that when I get home!'"

McNally's reaction resembles that of most kids today who visit the LEGO Experience tour, Comic-Con or other marketing events the brand has activated for 25 years under the steady hand of Vince Rubino, event marketing manager, who was working at the company at the time of the LEGO World Show. He remembers when LEGO Master Builders at the company's U.S. headquarters in Enfield, CT, created the model, which now resides in the actual Mark Twain house in Hartford.

"From day one, my job has been to take LEGO out on the road and provide consumer experiences," Rubino says. "We would have traveling exhibits with LEGO models at retail or in a large mall, and we would always have bricks there for kids to play with, to get the brand into the hand. We didn't know it was experiential marketing, but that's what we've been doing since day one."

Those traveling exhibits, which measured five feet wide and 15- or 20-feet long, incorporated LEGO models and play tables housed in a rented 24-foot Ryder box truck that Rubino drove from city to city. "I was the brand ambassador, the truck driver, I was everything," Rubino says with a chuckle. Larger scale efforts brought two branded tractor-trailers into mall parking lots and LEGO displays that extended the length of the mall.

LEGO's first forays into event marketing may seem antiquated compared to today's sophisticated setups, however, the concept was spot-on as far as going into a consumer environment and providing a brand experience. Since the early days, LEGO's core

values—creativity, imagination, fun, quality and learning—have inspired those experiences.

"It starts with the product," says Scott Moller, managing partner at Marketing Werks, Chicago, which has handled LEGO tours since 2000. "It's a quality product with a great reputation and a strong fan base. What we try to do is create an experience that matches their expectations, to give them the experience they would expect from LEGO."

Based in Billund, Denmark, LEGO was founded in 1932 on the principle of "play well" (or "leg godt" in Danish) by Ole Kirk Christiansen, a local carpenter, and is still privately owned by the family. Its experiential marketing has pretty much remained true to that concept with the traveling exhibits and play tables designed, as Rubino says, to get the colorful little bricks into the hands of fans. But, as the company grew and developed more specialized play sets such as the science-fiction inspired Bionicle collection and licensed products created in conjunction with "Star Wars" and other film and cartoon franchises, its events have evolved as well. And then there was the period, five or six years ago, when sales slid and event marketing was put on hold.

Since then, the company has reorganized, and thanks to a renewed focus on its core consumers, boys 6 to 12 and their families, LEGO has rebuilt itself into a global toy powerhouse. In the past two years, it has grown from the No. 6 toy manufacturer in the world to No. 3, in an industry that is flat to declining. And now, after a six-year hiatus, one of the pioneers of mobile marketing has returned to the discipline it helped define, sending a signal of renewal to event marketers across the country. From reaching families shopping at the malls that were popping up around the country 25 years ago, to more recent activations like the LEGO Experience Tour, KidsFest, which launched as a pilot program last year in Hartford and will travel to four cities in 2010, and this year's Summer Games Tour, LEGO is back.

#### **BUILDING THE BRAND EXPERIENCE**

"When we went into the shopping malls all those years ago, the majority of the exhibits would be local car dealers or flower shows leasing space from the mall," Rubino says. "Then all of a sudden LEGO



**OUTSIDE THE BOX:** LEGO's Click campaign targets adults with digital and social media.





came along and provided entertainment value.”

And a new audience—kids and families who flocked to the exhibits like the World Show or the Americana World Show, a display of LEGO-built Washington, D.C. monuments that ran exclusively in Simon Malls.

“Back at that time, we were doing brand building,” Rubino says. “The LEGO brand name was known, but not quite to the level that it is today. As things progressed and the brand continued to grow, we moved into brand experiences.”

After those initial mall events, Rubino activated 15- to 20-week truck tours with 52-foot tractor-trailers with side-outs and tented awnings, which he took with his LEGO models and play tables to New York’s Central Park, San Francisco’s Golden Gate Park, Chicago’s Navy Pier and other sites where his brand experiences were the only game in town. “We would have the vehicle there and people would come and have a wonderful experience,” he recalls.

Until Bionicle came along in 2000 and changed all that. Bionicle, one of the strongest product introductions in the company’s history, targeted an older, edgier kid than the typical tyke playing with LEGO fire trucks and building houses on the family room floor.

The Bionicle Unleashed tour was the first effort handled by Marketing Werks, which worked with Rubino to connect with the influencer youth market—kids into skateboarding and other action sports. The agency hired snowboarding instructors from Vermont as crew members to talk up the Bionicle story line each year for three summers at skate and water parks, little league fields, even street corners where these kids typically gathered.

Six teams of two drove graphic-wrapped Nissan Frontiers the first year and cargo vans the next, starting from Southern California then crossing the country, immersing kids in the brand and its storyline. One side of the vehicle displayed masks worn by the Bionicle characters and an interactive video featured skateboarder Andy MacDonald talking about the story. The storyline continued on the rear of the vehicle along with a diorama of the action figures. Crew members discussed the story, ran contests and distributed comic books, t-shirts, skate socks and stickers for skate decks, all items valued by the skater crowd.

“It was a pretty big leap of faith for LEGO because summer is not its peak selling season,” Marketing Werks’ Moller says. “It invested in this target in the summer months to inspire them later in the year.”

In between the Bionicle tours, Marketing Werks helped LEGO launch other toy product lines. For LEGO Explorer, it went to children’s museums and pre-schools with daylong role-playing events in which



the kids became part of the product’s scenery in a play.

The agency also promoted LEGO products based on TV and movie properties. For LEGO Galidor, a TV program broadcast in 3D and video game adapted into a LEGO theme, it provided kids in movie theatres on winter Saturdays with 3D glasses to preview a small portion of the show. In 2002, around the release of “Star Wars Episode I: The Phantom Menace,” the agency distributed LEGO sets to weary fans camping outside of theaters waiting for the movie to run.

“We said, hey, let’s take advantage of this audience,” Moller says. “They’re already ‘Star Wars’ fans. Let’s show the connection with LEGO and the ‘Star Wars’ line. People would put the sets together on the event site. There was a lot of talk value there.”

#### BRICK BY BRICK

Following the “Star Wars” and product-centric marketing efforts, in 2004 LEGO returned to more traditional bricks-in-hand brand experiences with the What We Make Tour, a mobile event with build tables and staffers facilitating contests and other games to encourage families to build together and give kids the opportunity to play with LEGO again.

“For some of them it had been awhile,” admits Leela Sullivan, vp-client service at Marketing Werks. “It reminded them of how much fun a LEGO build experience can be.”

But it would be LEGO’s last mobile tour for six years until the LEGO Experience Tour, which traveled to 23 cities in 2009 and hit the road again in 2010. The Experience Tour features a construction zone with play tables surrounding a larger one in the

**TARGET PRACTICE:** From What Will You Make (left) to Bionicle Unleashed (above), LEGO’s mobile tours engage a wide variety of demographics.

**LEGO CALLING:**

An iPhone app turns photos into LEGO portraits.



middle, with an emcee who narrates a creative story, perhaps about a fictional city on a river, and encourages attendees to build boats and bridges and other structures. A family challenge area has six families around six tables seeing who can outbuild each other and showing off their creations at the end.

"It's a positive, fun experience connected to families that is very successful because it shows that it is not intimidating to build," says Sullivan.

That same experience was a critical element of this summer's LEGO Games tour, an 11-city, 10-stop tour to promote LEGO Games, a new collection of 10 board games sold at Walmart, Target and Toys"R"Us. The action centered on a 36-foot goose-neck trailer with a drop-deck stage where an emcee encouraged families to compete in a mini-games tournament inspired by the board games. Two TVs broadcast the on-stage tournament to audiences.

Unlike its initial mobile experiences, LEGO's current tours seek out larger scale venues such as Baltimore's Port Discovery Museum, City Hall Plaza in Boston or Souldard Market Park in St. Louis, where it isn't the only game in town. "We will go to a festival or an air show with built-in traffic where we know there is going to be other brands, but we also know that our

brand is strong enough to hold its own," Rubino says.

One game on the Games Tour, *Creationary*, had players building objects with LEGO bricks and others guessing what they were. In a tic-tac-toe-like game called *Monster 4*, players rolled oversized dice to get four colors in a row. A third, inspired by LEGO's *Robo Champ* game, had them rolling the dice and dressing like robots. Families won game samples as prizes. Others received LEGO-die key chains.

Getting into board games has allowed LEGO to connect with moms and engage (at last!) in social networking, an activity prevented by the Child Online Protection Act (COPA), a law that restricts access to minors over the Internet. "With LEGO being a children's brand, we've never used social media," Rubino explains. "We can't do data collection or collect emails because of that concern."

Even event photos are generally off-limits at LEGO, with no focus on individual faces, either of children or adults, without a release form.

Now, however, with the emphasis on moms (and dads!), LEGO launched [facebook.com/legogames](http://facebook.com/legogames) as a way to network with parents. The company also has partnered with *Family Fun* to create a 16-page mini magazine filled with activities and ideas for family game nights. Kids, on the other hand, can follow the brand on LEGO's website, [lego.com](http://lego.com).

**THE COMEBACK**

Before this renewed emphasis on brand experiences, however, by 2003-2004, LEGO's empire had crumbled into a pile of bricks. A struggling economy and competition from high-tech computer games, coupled with a strategy that took the company too far from its core product line—kids' construction toys—brought the fun and games to a crashing halt. During that time event marketing, except for a presence at toy trade shows and Comic-Con, was mostly put on hold as the brand rebuilt.

The year 2006 saw LEGO on the National Mall in Washington, D.C., with *Creation Nation*, where 15,000 people filled an outline of a map of the U.S. the size of a basketball court designed by LEGO master builders with their own LEGO structures. It also marked a return to event marketing that was about LEGO the brand rather than a specific product line or theme.

"Event marketing has always been a tried and true strength for the LEGO brand; however, there was a period of time when the company reprioritized and scaled back to help rebuild the business," Rubino says. "Now that things are stable again, event marketing is being used not only as a hands-on experience for our core consumers, but as a growth platform to help bring new consumers into the brand."



Creation Nation will live again at this year's LEGO KidsFest, a three-day LEGO-themed festival that launched as a pilot program last November at the Connecticut Convention Center in Hartford (LIFE Marketing and Events, Hartford, handles.) Rubino expected 12,000 attendees at that event; instead, 25,000 people waited up to three hours to get in and play, and another 10,000 were turned away.

The KidsFest event featured life-sized and miniature LEGO models, displays and trainscapes built by LEGO fans, hobbyists and clubs; build, race and play tables and ramps; a LEGO video game gallery, live stage demonstrations and LEGO competitions; a celebrity building contest, fashion shows and live entertainment. This year it will take place in Boston, Chicago and New York City as well as Hartford.

"One of the great things about the LEGO brand and the bricks themselves is that they can lend themselves to so many different ways of creating experiences and activations," McNally says. "Opportunities for creating the live experiences are still evolving."

A case in point: LEGO's digital and social media Click Moments campaign, with applications for iPhone and iPod touch, a LEGO Click fan page on Facebook and a website and blog at legoclick.com, all targeting an adult audience and celebrating those unpredictable light-bulb moments when great ideas "click" (Pereira & O'Dell, San Francisco, handled). A three-minute branded video based on a fictional inventor's experience of tapping into his inner child to solve a problem, just as a kid taps into his creativity when playing with LEGOs, went viral on YouTube and spawned that word-of-mouth frenzy that every marketer desires.

"It was a nice way to quickly have people remember what it was like to build with LEGO and also then connect that to what is happening to their kids as they are playing with LEGO," McNally says. "You can call it a viral video, but you can also call it a virtual experience where with a very simple idea you are able to engage

and create a reaction that translates into behavior." It was so successful, LEGO is exploring Click phase two.

And virtual isn't far behind. At this year's Consumer Electronics Show in Las Vegas, LEGO unveiled the LEGO Universe Massively Multiplayer Online Game (MMOG), connecting the brand to thousands of players around the globe and bringing its iconic little bricks online. Attendees at the experience created characters, explored MMOG and did some virtual building. In Germany, LEGO is into augmented reality with the LEGO Digital Box, where consumers can hold up the LEGO set they would like to buy to see a 3D virtual model of what they can build with it.

Despite dabbling in the digital, however, LEGO remains very much a kids' brand. Other than facebook.com/legogames, which targets moms, it doesn't have an official Facebook page and is not officially on YouTube or other social media sites. Any content about the brand is posted by fans, and is not sponsored or endorsed by the company. And, at LEGO, that's just fine.

"Not every parent likes their child having a cell phone," Rubino says. "Not every parent wants their child on the Internet. Again, it could be something that could be super-duper popular, but we're not going to chase after it because of the trust parents have in this brand."

More down-to-earth initiatives include LEGO retail stores where kids can hold birthday parties and take classes with master builders. The brand is also working on new video games and an option for a feature film with Warner Brothers. A five-year partnership with the Children's Museum of Indianapolis will bring a LEGO castle "adventure" to children's museums around the country.

Amazingly, in a world where being cool means high-tech and plugged-in, kids remain satisfied with a physical LEGO experience. Thanks to nearly 25 years of honing its craft, LEGO's event marketing team is poised to deliver. **EM**



#### BIGGER THAN LIFE:

LEGO's first-ever KidsFest event (left) had to turn away 10,000 people. The LEGO Games tour (right) transforms board games into life-size fun.



