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Le go my LEGO!

by Joe Pine & Jim Gilmore

Last year's Experience Stager of the Year award winner is the best example we know of a company whose experience portfolio encompasses all ten levels of our Location Hierarchy Model.

At the 2002 thinkAbout in Mountain View, California, we announced the winner of our 2002 Experience Stager of the Year award: The LEGO Company, headquartered in Billund, Denmark. We bestowed the honor on LEGO because it stages the richest portfolio of marketing experiences of any company we've encountered. It integrates a staggering number of differing kinds of experiences that drive demand for its ubiquitous LEGO building bricks in the hearts (and on the floors) of most every kid (or kid at heart) in the world. Consider all the worlds of play it stages.

The toy company – which was founded in 1932 by Ole Kirk Christiansen, a simple maker of wooden toys before inventing the magic plastic bricks – first shifted into the experience business way back in the 1960s. Families just started showing up at its factory in Billund to see the place that made the toys they loved so much. So, the plant's workers began displaying their own model creations, including the first Miniland, a miniature landscape created with LEGOs. In 1968 this became its original, flagship LEGOLAND theme park, and a generation of European kids fed their fire for those little plastic building bricks at this homespun experience.

In the 1990s, the founder's grandson, Kjeld Kirk Kristiansen, decided to take the experience to more kids, and began opening up larger, more engaging LEGOLANDS in major experience hubs across the world, including outside London, Los Angeles, and Munich. These venues introduce more youngsters to its brand, create an emotional attachment to that brand, and thereby drive demand for its unique building block toy system. (When it opened LEGOLAND in Carlsbad, California, sales of its toys went up over 15% throughout all of Southern California.)



The company also has a few LEGO Imagination Centers at other experience hubs, including the Mall of America and Downtown Disney, which echo the LEGOLAND experience by exposing kids to its toys in an interactive, playful atmosphere. In addition, it placed Mindstorm experiences in better Science & Industry museums that attract youngsters and their parents (not to mention their teachers). These LEGO owned and operated experiences increase demand for its toys bought at all retail outlets, some of which (such as at F.A.O. Schwartz and the new Toys 'R' Us flagship store in Times Square) have a dedicated presence by LEGO with derivative themes of its own experiences. And, of course, boxes line the shelves of virtually every toy store in the developed world.

LEGO further mirrors this physical portfolio with a virtual one. It uses the Internet to let consumers access LEGO via children's sites, toy retailer sites, and search engines all over the World Wide Web, produces and places derivative experiences on sites like StarWars.com and HarryPotter.com, presents its own major platforms for distinct product lines (such as the ongoing storyline at www.bionicle.com), employs the

drawing power of experience portals MSN (where LEGO supplies content for its kids pages) and AOL (keyword: bionicle), and then stages its own unique, immersive experiences at its flagship site, LEGO.com. The online experiences at its virtual flagship include story contests, consumer-created movie events, imaginary worlds to be explored (that grow monthly), and a mass customized product section. The overall goal of LEGO's experience portfolio: enhancing children's creativity and imagination by stimulating

them to make their own designs from LEGO elements. Remember, at its heart, LEGO is a manufacturer – but one whose very being is centered in the experience of play. As Senior Vice President Brad Justus told the thinkAbout audience upon accepting the EXPY, “The concept of experience is in the DNA of LEGO. Children playing with our toys are creating their own experience; they are ‘empowered’ to learn through play and thereby enhance their imagination. The exact same mechanisms apply to our LEGOLAND parks, and to our flagship website LEGO.com.” And, we're compelled to add, to every experience in LEGO's rich, award-winning portfolio.

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