

Phil's Forum 7/31/07 Just Gotta Play

Sometimes you just gotta play.

I finally ordered this new building toy called Wedgits. Why? I played. Guess what? It was fun. Yeah, and my son, Parker, liked them, too. It didn't take him long to figure out the trickiest tips for building cool geometric contraptions.

Of course, I'd had the catalog for Wedgits on my desk for two years. Last month I attended the American Specialty Toy Retailers Association (ASTRA) conference and I played.

The first session of the ASTRA conference was a huge play group with 12 tables full of unique toys. Every fifteen minutes for a couple hours we rotated through the tables learning and playing. I built the Las Vegas Stratosphere with Kapla blocks (which we now sell). I dug for dinosaurs (which we've always sold). I learned about water molecule cohesion from Science Wiz (another of our new companies). And I built with the Wedgits.

And I had fun - which was surprising to many of the exhibitors there. They couldn't believe that I was more interested in playing than in worrying about costs, profit margins, shipping, case pack sizes, etc. Then again there were plenty of retailers not playing, not having fun, and spending way too much energy sweating out those details.

Not me. When you ask me to play, I play. I don't need a whole lot of encouragement, either. Got a new game? Show me the rules. If they're easy and quick, I'm in. Need a tester for a new stomp rocket? Show me where to jump. Want to know if that toy airplane will fly across the tradeshow floor? Let me give it a rip.

To me, the play is more important than all those other details. If a toy has play value, then costs and margins will work themselves out. But first and foremost, a kid has to love it. And since they usually don't let kids into these trade shows, I get the job. Yes, it's one of my better perks.

And when I play I look at how fun the toy is, how many different ways there are to play, how easy or hard, and how much I get to use my imagination. The cool thing is that those same factors of play that appeal to me also appeal to children. In 2005, Playthings Magazine invited a number of children to test a variety of new toys. They also asked the kids, "What makes a good toy?" Here are the top four answers given by the *true* experts of toys, the children, in the November 2005 issue of Playthings Magazine.

Kids say a good toy:

1. Makes me use my imagination
2. Has many different ways to play
3. Makes me want to invent a toy myself
4. Does not break easily

From the mouth of babes comes the wisdom of the ages. And we've got a whole store full of toys like that - many of them "Phil-tested". Anyone wanna play?

Happy Shopping

Phil Wrzesinski