

Story selling: how LEGO told a story and sold a toy

Jeppe Fønnesbaek, Advance, and **Morten Melbye Andersen**, LEGO, describe how LEGO found the power to turn a toy into an epic marketing story. LEGO's Bionicle range is an enormously successful experiment in innovative branding and revitalised the image of the traditional construction toy company, bringing it firmly into the 21st century

IN 1999 AND 2000 the LEGO Company was enjoying success with its two new product lines Slizer and RoboRiders. They were part of a whole new category of toys – action figures that were easy to construct and came at pocket-money prices. But, when planning the launch of Bionicle, the third generation of these toys, a whole new marketing strategy was used.

The success of Bionicle would turn out to be unimaginably huge. Although the three generations of toys were very similar in price and looks, Bionicle would greatly outperform the other toys and massively exceed the expectations of the LEGO Company. Bionicle would also earn the LEGO Company, for the first time ever, a placement in the top five of the American toy industry list.

Why was Bionicle so much more successful than the two other similar toys? In this article we describe how turning a toy into a story greatly increased emotional bonding to the product and how an integrated marketing campaign made it possible to tell that story. It is the story of how a toy company learned to market a product from the film industry. It is the story of producing a strong enough buzz about a toy to build an intellectual property and long-term success. And it is the story of how an ad agency and a client went on an epic adventure together.

The world of boys' toys

The Bionicle story started with the dilemma of a changing market. The LEGO Company's

product range during the mid-1990s for the children in the 7–12-year age bracket (LEGO TECHNIC) was characterised as having a definite focus on the constructional element of the toys. The products were technically complex and took around two to three hours to construct. These products were aimed at boys who enjoyed the constructional aspects of playing rather than, for example, the role-playing aspects. This particular target group of boys have long attention spans and are able to concentrate a lot on a particular toy. The problem the LEGO Company faced was the fact that the size of this target group was decreasing. Fewer boys were



Figure 1: A LEGO Bionicle promotional poster.

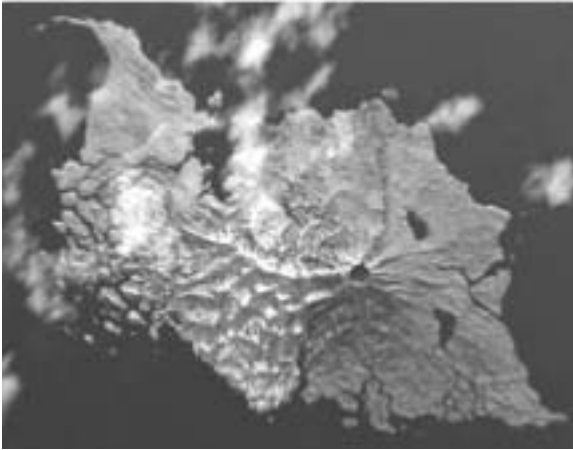


Figure 2: The island of Mata Nui - the backdrop for the mythical Bionicle adventures.

interested in the long construction time but instead sought products that offered instant gratification such as computer games. In general, LEGO faced the fact that it was in the market for boys' time. This meant LEGO was competing against everything from computer games to watching a movie to playing sports.

In 1997, the LEGO Company set up a project group that would examine the possibility of developing a product that would appeal to more physically active boys who have a shorter attention span and have less time to play. The aim of the new LEGO products was to be relevant for a greater number of older boys (7–12 year olds) and in doing so extend the length of time that these children stayed with the LEGO brand.

The result of the development process was a whole new category of toys – construction sets and action figures rolled into one. Slizer and RoboRiders, the first and second generations of figures, were easy to build, affordable and each one (six in all for each launch) came in different colours and with different play features. The introduction of Slizer and RoboRiders was successful both with respect to sales as well as in reaching their target audience.

Even as Slizer and RoboRiders were being introduced, the development of the third generation was getting under way.

Good versus evil - adding a story

With this third generation, LEGO wanted to build upon the elements that had proved successful and achieve a 15% increase in this new category, which had been built by the success of Slizer and RoboRiders.

Advance's brief was first and foremost to contribute to the product launch by developing a new visual universe that would back up and enhance the products. Having worked with this brief a significant decision was made. In relation to RoboRiders and Slizer there was a strong belief that the success of the new products could be increased significantly by introducing a story-telling element.

The idea was to create an ongoing epic story in which the LEGO products could act as the lead characters. New chapters could be introduced each year supporting new products launches but under the same brand/story umbrella. The Advance team arrived at its storytelling strategy based on several factors.

- In 1999, Advance had carried out a test of Slizer's communication message through, among other things, its packaging. This had shown that the target group was very interested in the fantasy universe that was a backdrop to the different products. The test also revealed that the children wanted to know more information about the action figures themselves.
- At the same time that the LEGO Company was launching Slizer and RoboRiders it was also experiencing success by buying into already established stories. It had become a franchise licensee of Star Wars, Winnie the Pooh and Mickey Mouse. The aim was to buy into stories that the target group of children already knew and interacted with. The LEGO Star Wars launch was a huge success, which highlighted the importance of owning good stories.

- Pokémon was another very hot product among boys. It was an example of how a game and a TV series had given a product relevance to the target group. This addition of depth to the concept had proven successful in getting children involved and made them want to become collectors.

It was believed that adding an epic story would have the following effects on the target group and the long-term launch strategy.

- The storytelling element would inject emotional value, thereby increasing the perceived value of the product and making it more attractive to buy.
- An epic story would have a very wide appeal among children across cultural boundaries as good against evil is a universal theme in the imaginations of boys.
- It would create a long-term emotional bond for boys in the target group.
- It would increase the relevance among older boys.
- It would increase the size of LEGO's target group as boys with less interest in the construction part would perceive a new attractive hook into the products.
- It would encourage the boys to collect more products as they would want the different characters in the 'story'.
- Finally, LEGO could capitalise on the continuing story development as the target group would want to know what would happen next in the story.

The project group saw huge opportunities for developing a story. The story was created in close cooperation between LEGO and Advance, and would begin:

'On the Island of Mata Nui, six mighty heroes rise against evil. To succeed they must find the Masks of Power.'

The inspiration for the name of the new product range came from the underlying theme for the

story, which would be a 'biological chronicle'. The concept was named Bionicle.

To ensure authenticity and credibility within the target group (in other words, to answer the question, 'Why would a construction toy company develop and tell a story?') a deep and detailed story was needed as a foundation. The next question, however, was more difficult: 'How do we tell the story and create authenticity around it when we have neither a movie, nor a TV series nor a book to work from?' The answer to this demanded an innovative execution of the communication and the development of an integrated marketing campaign.

Finding the power within

Neither Advance nor LEGO had ever created this type of storytelling element before. For LEGO, this meant changing its traditional product launch methods. Instead of continuing to launch a new product line each year to maintain audience appeal and gain 'newness' hype, LEGO was now going to build on an intellectual property to capitalise on a brand.

Internal marketing

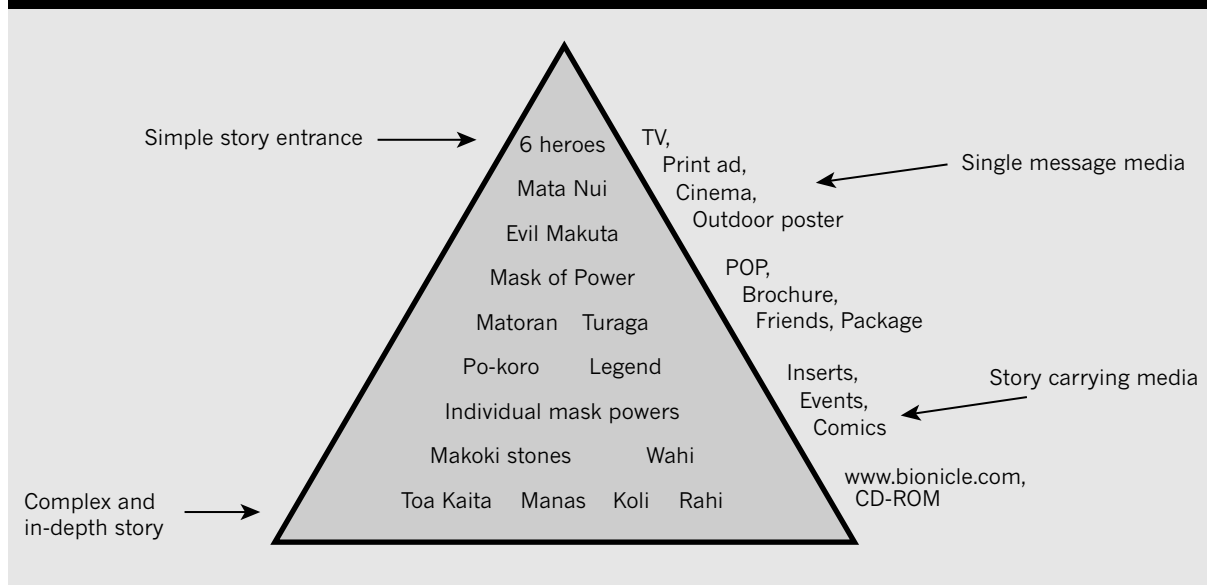
The joint LEGO/Advance team realised that Bionicle's success would to a large extent be dependent on motivation both internally and from commerce. An important element of the whole process of getting Bionicle on the market was to create understanding, knowledge and acceptance of the story, the products and a new marketing approach. The goal was to create hype even before the products reached the market.

A team made up of product developers and marketing directors from the LEGO Company and Advance spent a period of time visiting the different sales regions. Advance had developed a nine-minute promotional pitch video that told the story, introduced the products and described the marketing approach. Posters showing the 'tone of voice' had also been made.

The concept was put forward and each

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Figure 3 Bionicle media vs storybricks



LEGO sales region received a package consisting of a video, posters and products that they could use when pitching the whole thing to the commercial toy trade.

The results were astounding, with a positive internal response. A direct result of the successful concept development and internal marketing was that Bionicle was upgraded from a secondary priority to number-one priority with a so-called 'big bang' status. Bionicle was earmarked as one of the most essential growth engines in the LEGO Company for the year 2001. Along with its new status came an increase in Bionicle's marketing budget.

Marketing a toy as a movie

After gaining acceptance of the new storytelling marketing idea within the LEGO Company, the next challenge was communicating the story to the target audience.

Compared to more traditional products, Bionicle was a complicated concept to introduce to the market. A traditional LEGO Company product launch (for example, 'LEGO Castle' and 'LEGO Space') was characterised by the fact that

the children knew the generic background characters and story, and were familiar with the play universe where the product belonged.

With a concept such as Bionicle the case was different. The challenges of communicating this story of a strange and mystical universe, legends, heroes, powerful masks and a mission against evil would be enormous. It was a story so rich in detail and too complex to simply be explained with a 30-second commercial and traditional shop marketing material.

Bionicle had neither a film, TV series nor a book as a foundation. The world's children were not already acquainted with the story (as they were in the cases of Star Wars and Harry Potter) yet it would have to be communicated and appeal to millions of children from many differing cultures.

Based on the background for adding a story and the increased focus on the product line, the following communications objectives were put forward:

- create understanding of and involvement in the story
- make Bionicle and thereby LEGO cool and relevant to the 7–12-year-old target group

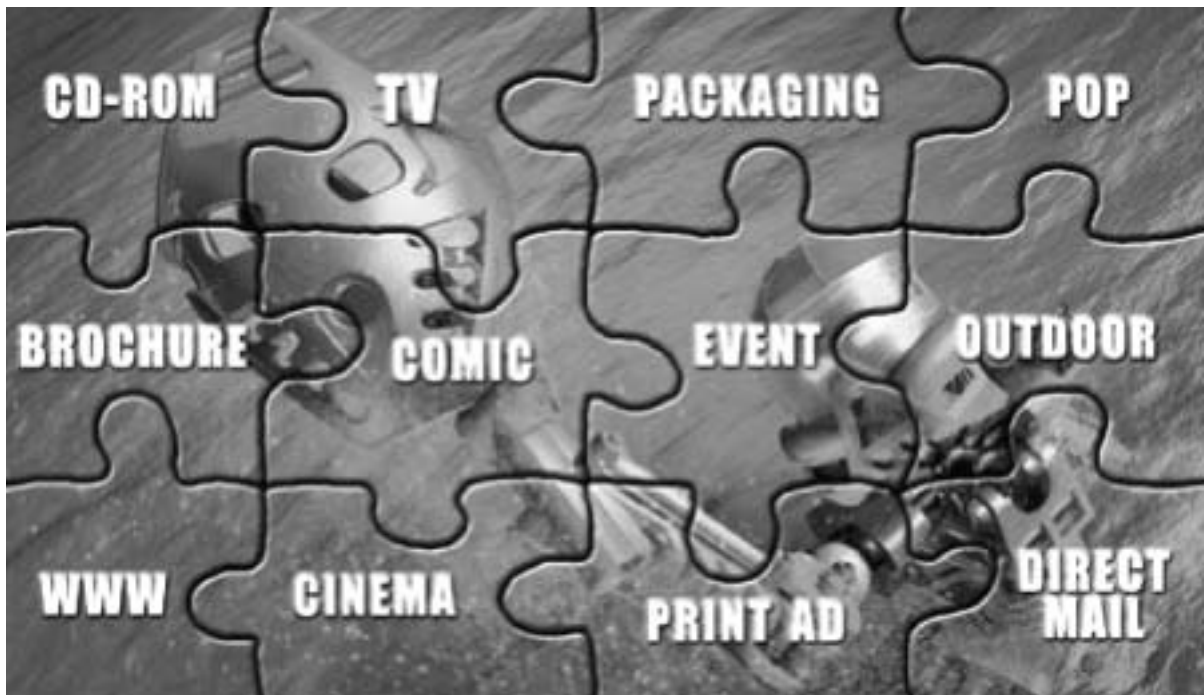


Figure 4: Bionicle media mosaic.

- promote the collecting of Bionicle products and develop a long-term fan base
- develop Bionicle into an intellectual property (IP), which could be tied in with other strong brands and could benefit other business areas such as LEGO Media, LEGO Lifestyle and LEGOLAND theme parks.

Advance looked to the movie industry to learn how to market stories. Since movies create emotional attachment, images and an entire world that children can relate to, developing a movie-like execution of the story, as well as using movie advertising media, would appeal to the target group. The movie execution style would also give the story validity, by packaging in a style that felt authentic to the target group. In other words, if you don't have a movie, make it look as if you do.

Selling the 'movie' - a multifaceted communications strategy

Executing the 'movie' idea took place through a five-point strategy. These five points were all

aimed at meeting the main communications objectives.

1. Create a simple and compelling entrance to the story

Boys change greatly between the ages of seven and 12 years, both because they are maturing fast, and in terms of the toys they play with and the media they have access to. It was important to create a simple but engaging introduction to the Bionicle story, which would capture the imaginations of the entire target group, as well as stimulate the children to want to get even more involved with Bionicle.

2. Expose the target group to a broad mix of media

A main theme of the communication strategy was to use as wide a range of media as possible in order to expose the children to the story in several different ways. Each one of the media that was chosen would carry a different part of

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Figure 5: Posters from different chapters of the Bionicle story - these were designed to look as if they were from a feature film.

the story depending upon time and the individual medium's storytelling ability.

Most importantly, a differentiation was made between 'single-message media' and 'story-carrying media' (see Figure 3). In order to create awareness of the concept, it was necessary to use a range of mass media (single message media) to communicate a coherent basic theme. These media would work in the same way that ads for a movie work, by communicating the simple introduction to the story. For the first time LEGO used outdoor posters and cinema ads.

In order to communicate the story in more detail, three main media were identified that could handle carrying the story: a website (www.bionicle.com), a CD-ROM and comics. These and other story-carrying media would work like the 'movie' itself by delivering various elements of the story. In order to ensure as wide a distribution of the CD-ROM as possible, it was included in the packaging of the first wave of products. In addition, all forms of marketing media (without exception) would refer to www.bionicle.com.

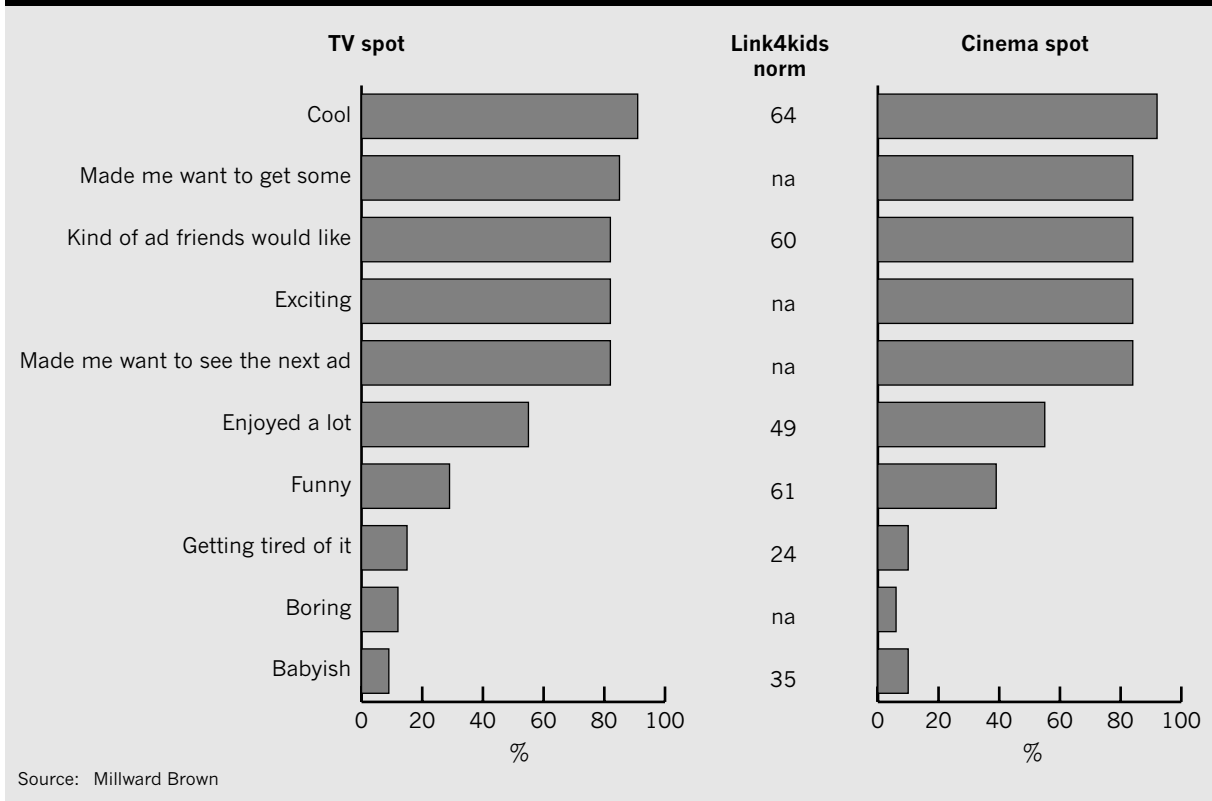
In this way, a dynamic media mosaic was created to tie the two main levels of media

together and thereby tell the story. The different media would work together to create the complete story, while the target group would constantly be exposed to new pieces of the mosaic or story all the time (see Figure 4). As it wasn't possible to control in which order the children would come into contact with these pieces, it was important that each piece of the story could stand by itself, and be understood and appreciated by the target group independently.

At the same time, the children could only get a full picture of the story by going to the different media. This encouraged them to seek out different parts of the media mosaic - in other words, the media mosaic was designed to make the kids become story collectors. In this way, the single-message approach and the storytelling strategy worked together to create media synergy.

One other essential part of the multifaceted communication strategy was to get the children to actively pass on the story themselves. This 'peer-to-peer marketing' was an important media in both creating awareness and understanding, but also in creating the buzz around the product. It also strengthened the

Figure 6 Kids' perceived experience of Bionicle TV and cinema spot



children's urge to collect. Goldstone Perl's launch evaluation in April 2001 noted: 'What is even more significant is that the boys who had "got under the skin" of Bionicle and had reached an advanced level of understanding, were the most enthusiastic about the concept and were also most avid collectors. It is surely no coincidence that the boys with the most Bionicle products were those boys who had received the CD-ROM and visited the Bionicle website.'

3. Quality, compelling graphics

When communicating with children, the success of a story or product depends heavily upon how visually 'cool' it is. So rather than merely telling the story or promoting the 'movie' through text, a range of story pictures were developed. Each picture had to tell a story by itself and relate a

different part of the overall story, which the children could then relate further, leading to the creation of their own stories.

The strategy of launching a visually movie-like story was accomplished in several ways. Posters, movie trailers and story pictures were made to look like something from a feature film (see Figure 5). It became important to give the impression that there was actually a film and the only thing left to do with it was just clip the final pieces of it together.

To support this idea, it was decided from the start to create the entire Bionicle universe in 3D. The popularity of 3D in the film industry and among children is huge, with films like *Toy Story*, *Shrek* and *Monsters, Inc.* achieving massive success. But, above all, 3D was chosen because it would allow the characters to be constructed in animated form, bringing the entire

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Figure 7: Nestlé Bionicle packaging and CD-ROM.

Bionicle universe to life and strengthening the overall visual experience.

The combination of attractive media and the movie-like execution of the media strategy would be highly effective in creating coolness, awareness and involvement.

All media rated ‘cool’ and exciting (see Figure 6): ‘Coolness is definitely not an issue for Bionicle’, Millward Brown, 2002. The Millward Brown research also showed recall of the TV and cinema advertising was strong and was linked to the message and the brand. Many of the children thought that the cinema ad was a movie.

4. Reveal the story over time

Just as with movies, in order to ensure that the children stay involved with Bionicle over a longer period of time, the whole story was released not all at once, but in phases. Again inspired by movie trailers, Bionicle would begin with a teaser phase to arouse the curiosity of the target group. This would get children, including boys who normally didn’t buy LEGO products, involved with the Bionicle story first, before the physical products were launched.

At the launch of the true products, the next step was revealed, and so on. On the bionicle.com website, new chapters of the story came out each month through an online adventure game. The

purpose of this was to keep the children’s interest throughout the entire year and in the longer term.

5. Use partners

The new marketing strategy, focused on telling the story through the movie-like media mosaic, offered a new role for potential global partners. Instead of being a part of the product launch they could become an active part of an intellectual property (IP) and play a more dynamic, long-term role. There was a large amount of interest shown by potential partners from the very beginning. Nestlé, McDonald’s, Universal Music, Upperdeck (trading cards), Nintendo, along with an array of local partners, were among those finally chosen (see figure 7).

The decision was made to let all global partners take an integrated role in the story. For example, McDonald’s was allowed to launch six new characters in the story as part of its partnership with Bionicle.

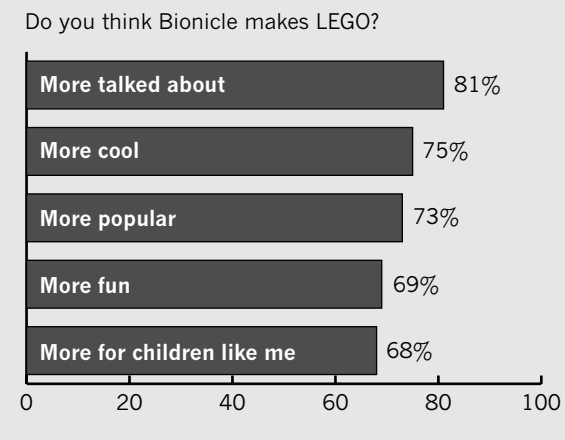
This new partnership strategy also ensured that the Bionicle campaign would be supplemented with several other media, which would carry the story forwards and add new elements to it. Finally, the partnership strategy contributed to a relevant awareness where children could find further pieces of the story.

The story continues

Long-term momentum

As one of the key aims for the whole marketing strategy was to create a lasting marketing success that would stretch over a period of years, it is important to note the successes of Bionicle since its launch year. Following the launch in 2001, the marketing strategy had given children high expectations of the year to come. And these expectations were met with the launch of 12 new products – all of which were integrated into the next chapter of the Bionicle saga.

Figure 8 Bionicle's effect upon the LEGO brand: boys 6-11



The media spending budget for 2002 was reduced by approximately 25% (with twice as many products) with the aim of capitalising on the 2001 investments. This decision also reflects the strength of the IP, which was created in 2001 through storytelling and communication. Even though the spending was decreased, objectives for 2002 and 2003 were to increase the awareness of Bionicle and at the same time build the base of enthusiastic collectors.

Benefits to the LEGO brand

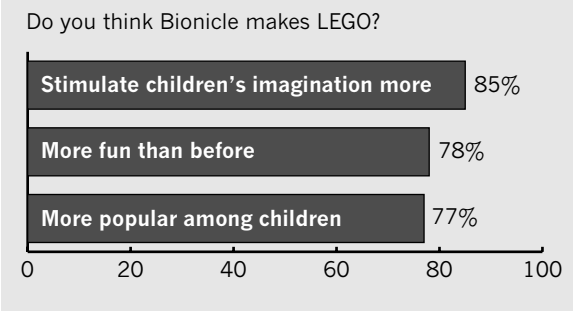
In addition to the financial benefits brought to the LEGO Company by the Bionicle campaign, the overall perception of the LEGO brand was positively affected (see Figures 8 and 9).

It is not possible to translate directly the positive perception of the LEGO brand into a financial sum. What is evident, however, is that markedly improving the target group's perception of the brand is of great importance to an established company.

Unanticipated benefits

By 2002, development of the first 70-minute animated 'direct-to-video' Bionicle film had already taken place. And a second film has recently been

Figure 9 Bionicle's effect upon the LEGO brand: mothers to boys



released. In addition, a state-of-the-art console game has been developed. The collective Bionicle product range had tripled by September 2003 compared to the range available in 2001.

The films, games and the increased product range are a clear expression of how strong the LEGO Company feels the IP built up from the initial 2001 marketing campaign has become.

Conclusion

The unique combination of partnering with a client, movie storytelling and integration of different media not only met the LEGO Company's expectations of making Bionicle a more successful toy than its predecessors. The Bionicle marketing campaign created an approach that allowed LEGO to capitalise on its launch-year success to further build the Bionicle IP and achieve long-term marketing goals. It also helped revitalise the LEGO brand and expand its appeal, as well as open up unanticipated opportunities in other industries.

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