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Raytheon boosts math careers

Craig McGuire - 11 Jul 2006 11:26

When the National Academy of Sciences reported that the US graduated 70,000 engineers in 2004 - versus India's 200,000 and China's 500,000 - execs at defense technology and aerospace systems supplier Raytheon were concerned.

After all, the Business-Higher Education Forum cites Department of Labor projections that jobs requiring science, engineering, and technical training will increase 51% from 1998 to 2008, four times faster than overall job growth. That's 6 million job openings in Raytheon's sweet spot by 2008.

Raytheon, along with its AOR Weber Shandwick, set out to engage students on math topics.

Strategy

In a Raytheon national survey of middle school students, 84% said they'd rather clean their room, eat vegetables, go to the dentist, or take out the trash than do math.

The MathMovesU campaign aimed to show them math skills can lead to exciting careers.

"Too many kids simply do not make the connection," notes Cathy Calhoun, president of WS' Chicago office. "But when a video game designer explains how math plays a part in his work, it makes an impression."

"PR is a vehicle for creating buzz about the need for action in math and science," says Pam Wickham, Raytheon's VP, corporate affairs and communications. "It has elevated the debate and helped turn this into a national issue."

Tactics

A media outreach campaign was launched to promote the program to three primary audiences: students, teachers, and parents.

Students were given the opportunity to win a substitute teacher for a day, with events launched nationwide partnering with skateboard legend Tony Hawk, soccer star Mia Hamm, basketball great Lisa Leslie, Olympic speedskater Apolo Anton Ohno (right), and other celebrities, each showing how math plays a role in "cool" careers.

The MathMovesU program is based online, where students go for entertainment and information. At MathMovesU.com, they can win awards by answering math questions related to celebrities' careers, such as calculating the degrees of turn Hawk needs to complete a trick or the average points per game scored by Leslie.

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Organizers also secured participation from Sen. Edward Kennedy (D-MA), Rep. Jo Ann Davis (R-VA), and Rep. Silvestre Reyes (D-TX) at a Raytheon-hosted press event on Capitol Hill, relaying program information to more than 70 members of Congress.

Results

MathMovesU has generated more than 31.2 million media impressions from 964 placements in national and local print, broadcast, radio, and online outlets.

To date, 18,000 students completed 63,000 homework modules in conjunction with one MathMovesU online event, while 8 million others will learn about the program through the Time For Kids micro site.

MathMovesU.com has logged more than 140,000 visitors and nearly 700,000 page views. And, Wickham notes, "[The staff's] interest has been so strong that we actually had to create a support mechanism to match employee requests with volunteering opportunities."

Future

"The potential, we hope, is a sustained effort over many years to impact young students' perceptions of math and science," Wickham says. "We want to reach as many as possible with the message that math can be both challenging and fun, and can [also] give them an exciting future."

PRWeek's View

Convincing teenagers that math is cool is no easy task. But Raytheon and WS managed to do so by tying the subject to celebrities' careers and targeting students where they're likely to respond most: over the Internet.

This campaign demonstrated the epitome of corporate citizenship, where Raytheon recognized a serious problem for itself and the nation, and decided to do something about it.

While the Raytheon/WS PR juggernaut generated reams of media coverage, the true ROI will likely not be felt for at least a decade, when those students graduate from college.

PR team: Raytheon (Waltham, MA) and Weber Shandwick (Chicago, New York, and Cambridge, MA)

Campaign: MathMovesU

Duration: Nov. 2005 - ongoing

Budget: \$2 million (\$1 million for scholarships and grants)

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