

Down to a science

Stocking the items students need for projects and letting teachers and parents know you have them can build your customer base

BY SUE BRETTINGEN

Selling educational products isn't exactly rocket science, but it may take a little extra effort on your part to let teachers, parents and students know you have the materials they need to create that mousetrap racer, elevated bridge or robot. And now that school has been back in full swing for several months, students are tackling all types of projects in earnest, whether it's for a classroom assignment or for a Science Olympiad entry.

The Science Olympiad is an event that involves primarily middle and high school students competing in categories that require knowledge of various science topics and engineering skills. For example, students might design and build a robot capable of performing specific tasks on a prescribed playing field. Science Olympiad competitions occur at a regional, state and national level; the first national event was held in 1985.

Hankering for a hobby store

Steve Slaven has been involved in the Science Olympiad for 17 years. He teaches eighth grade at Winamac Community Middle School, which

takes its name from the northwestern Indiana town where it's located. With a population of about 2,400, everybody pretty much knows everybody else in Winamac, Slaven said. "People say, We look forward to the Science Olympiad coming. It's one of the most entertaining programs we have all year."

Despite having just a handful of businesses, the community is very supportive of the students and the Science Olympiad, Slaven said. The local hardware store, for instance, stocks as many materials as it can to help the kids prepare their entries. The owner of a welding shop provides building space for certain projects. A local electronic recycling store donates old VCRs, CD players and other useful parts that find their way into robots. But, Slaven admits, the best thing his students could have would be a hobby store.

"Hobby stores typically have a better variety of wheels - things that would probably work better than what we find in hardware stores," he said. "We use what we have available. What we use for wheels are typically CDs and

records. I've got some old LP's, and someone came up the other day and said, "Can I have one of those big CDs?"

"For bridge building, we use a lot of balsa wood. We use that Zap glue. It's great stuff. Something else a hobby store would have - and we don't have access to here in town - is debonder. I think kids would use as much of that as they would glue."

For now, Slaven wanders the aisles of the nearest Lowe's, which is 40 miles away, or the nearest Menards, which is 53 miles away, getting ideas for materials. He encourages his students to do the same, particularly if they're fortunate enough to get to a hobby store.

Reaching out to schools

Al's Hobby Shop in Elmhurst, Ill., is in its 61st year of business serving the Chicago metro area, but its staff is on an ongoing mission to make people aware of the store's existence and to inform teachers, students and parents that it's a valuable resource for educational supplies.

Carol Van Dyke, one of the store managers, said that late fall is a time

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of year when business for educational and science products picks up.

"Right now, at the high school here - York Community High School - the kids are doing mousetrap racers," she said. "I think in years past they've been able to buy the kits and assemble them. Well, now they have to build them from scratch... It's neat to see some of the kids coming in with ideas off the Internet. Some kids are coming in with their moms, and they're just taking ideas from the packaged kits and then buying their supplies, and we're helping with that."

Pinecar derby activities will start after Christmas. The store is also a popular destination for fourth graders who are required to build a diorama as part of a course on state history.

"I wish the schools would let us know so we were better prepared and had more staff on hand to help the parents and the kids with their projects," Van Dyke said.

Van Dyke said Al's Hobby Shop has received positive feedback for their efforts. "We've actually gotten letters from parents, thanking us for helping them, because our staff is very knowledgeable," she said.

"You have to let people know you exist and that you have what they need. The Internet - that helps. We do have a Web site. But that's my goal - to reach out to the schools and let them know we're here, what we have, and we have knowledgeable staff to help them with their projects. It's not just buying things. It's knowing how to put them together to make them work."

Making your store a hot spot

The Hobby Shop in Dayton, Ohio, owned and operated by Randy and Tracy Kastl, recently got into the thick of the Science Olympiad by participating in the Centerville (Ohio) Coaching Academy, a workshop that prepared teachers to coach students in preparing for various events. The store set up a table at the event and sold materials applicable to the projects, such as balsa wood, rubber band winders and Tamiya kits.

The Science Olympiad is just one of the ways The Hobby Shop has made itself known to teachers, students and parents. The store has also worked with educators to help their classes with robot- and model-building activities, and Randy has made presentations to Boy and Cub Scout troops.

Kastl said, "As a hobby shop, we try to be as open to schools and programs that encourage the involvement in hobbies. We realize that hobbies are beyond enjoyment; they're also a learning experience, and it's just kind of great that people will have the experience of learning as well as having fun in the process."

Because it's been able to tap into that, The Hobby Shop has developed a regular clientele. "We're starting to become the hot spot for a lot of different teachers," Kastl said. "We try to assist them in picking out the right products for their students and for their needs. We give discounts to teachers, and we accept purchase orders that usually help bring business in. A lot of the teachers have really gotten to know Randy by name, and so

when they need something or have questions, they call and ask for him. He's been very good at building relationships. And we work to do a quick turnaround time... In today's busy world, that's invaluable."

She added, "We've been managers and owners of the store for 11 years, and if you really work to be helpful and go out of your way, it really does benefit you in the long run because the teachers pass the word on to their other teacher friends and educators."

Kastl gives credit to staff for making the store prosperous. "A lot of our success has to do with making sure we hire people who sincerely are very into the hobbies themselves, but also have the outgoing personality and genuinely just want to help customers," she said.

For more information on how to promote your store as a resource for Science Olympiad projects, contact Jenny Kopach at 630-792-1251.