

Grad provides a new way to play

Tony Maher didn't play with Legos as a kid. "I grew up on a ranch in Jordan Valley, Ore.," he says. "I played with tumbleweeds."

But with the help of Legos, Maher's company has developed a unique way to teach technology to K-12 students.

PCS Edventures, the Boise-based company for which Maher (BA, political science, '70) is president, packages software along with the building blocks to form learning labs in homes and schools around the country. Students use Legos in the lab — alongside Internet-based instruction and feedback — to learn about physics, engineering, robotics and computers.

PCS delivers its curriculum over the Web with the help of 22 database programmers, Internet specialists, curriculum writers, instructional designers and graphic artists in the Boise office.

With labs in 25 states, the venture has been successful enough that the company went public with an initial offering of stock in August on the Nasdaq Over-The-Counter exchange.

PCS wasn't Maher's first business venture. A former Boise State football player, he taught and coached football at Boise's Capital High before partnering with four other entrepreneurs to start the Sandpiper restaurants.

Maher longed for a deeper understanding of business, but couldn't afford to return to school for an MBA. So he devised a plan. He tracked down two of the most prominent businessmen in Boise at the time — Bob Halliday and Fred P. Thompson Jr.— and convinced each of them to hire him for a short time.

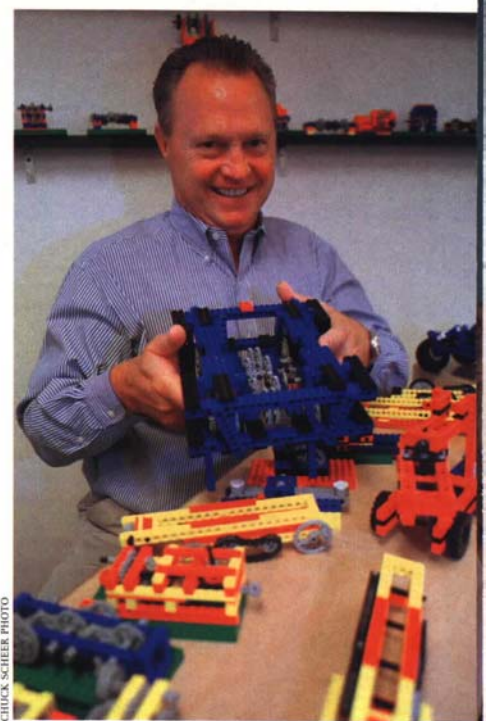
"I wasn't horribly bright, but I was willing to learn," he says. "The only stipulation was that I got to work closely with them."

He struck out on his own a few years later and acquired National Ramp Co., a small manufacturing company that he grew and then sold in 1989, before joining PCS.

At the time, PCS was a single learning-enrichment center that exposed students to science after school. PCS grew to 13 centers, but Maher decided to sell them and switch to a computer-based method of instruction by reformatting the curriculum and packaging it for delivery over the Web.

"We didn't want to compete with the schools," he says. "But we wanted to stay consistent to our vision that children who involve themselves in the learning process retain the knowledge much longer than if they just listen to a lecture."

— Sherry Squires



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