

space several times a week, and they open their doors to the public for a competition once a year.

The public event, called the Autonomous Vehicle Competition, brings in a thousand to two thousand customers and other technology enthusiasts from around the area to race their own self-created bots against each other, participate in training workshops, and socialize. From a business perspective, Nathan says it's a terrible idea. But they don't hold the event for business reasons. "The reason we do it is because I get to travel and have interactions with our customers all the time, but most of our employees don't," he said. "This event gives our employees the opportunity to get face-to-face contact with our customers." The event infuses their work with a human element, which makes it more meaningful.

Nathan has worked hard to imbue a deeper meaning into the work SparkFun does. The company is, of course, focused on being fiscally responsible, but they are ultimately driven by something other than money. "Profit is not the goal; it is the outcome of a well-executed plan," Nathan said. "We focus on having a bigger impact on the world." Nathan believes they get some of the brightest and most amazing employees because they aren't singularly focused on the bottom line.

The company is committed to transparency and shares all of its financials with its employees. They also generally strive to avoid being another soulless corporation. They actively try to reveal the humans behind the company, and they work to ensure people coming to their site don't find only unchanging content.

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SparkFun's customer base is largely made up of industrious electronics enthusiasts. They have customers who are regularly involved in the company's customer support, independently responding to questions in forums and product-comment sections. Customers also bring product ideas to the company. SparkFun regularly sifts through suggestions from custom-

ers and tries to build on them where they can. "From the beginning, we have been listening to the community," Nathan said. "Customers would identify a pain point, and we would design something to address it."

However, this sort of customer engagement does not always translate to people actively contributing to SparkFun's projects. The company has a public repository of software code for each of its devices online. On a particularly active project, there will only be about two dozen people contributing significant improvements. The vast majority of projects are relatively untouched by the public. "There is a theory that if you open-source it, they will come," Nathan said. "That's not really true."

Rather than focusing on cocreation with their customers, SparkFun instead focuses on enabling people to copy, tinker, and improve products on their own. They heavily invest in tutorials and other material designed to help people understand how the products work so they can fix and improve things independently. "What gives me joy is when people take open-source layouts and then build their own circuit boards from our designs," Nathan said.

Obviously, opening up the design of their products is a necessary step if their goal is to empower the public. Nathan also firmly believes it makes them more money because it requires them to focus on how to provide maximum value. Rather than designing a new product and protecting it in order to extract as much money as possible from it, they release the keys necessary for others to build it themselves and then spend company time and resources on innovation and service. From a short-term perspective, SparkFun may lose a few dollars when others copy their products. But in the long run, it makes them a more nimble, innovative business. In other words, it makes them the kind of company they set out to be.