

SPARKFUN



SparkFun is an online electronics retailer specializing in open hardware. Founded in 2003 in the U.S.

www.sparkfun.com

Revenue model: charging for physical copies (electronics sales)

Interview date: February 29, 2016
Interviewee: Nathan Seidle, founder

Profile written by Sarah Hinchliff Pearson

SparkFun founder and former CEO Nathan Seidle has a picture of himself holding up a clone of a SparkFun product in an electronics market in China, with a huge grin on his face. He was traveling in China when he came across their LilyPad wearable technology being made by someone else. His reaction was glee.

"Being copied is the greatest earmark of flattery and success," Nathan said. "I thought it was so cool that they were selling to a market we were never going to get access to otherwise. It was evidence of our impact on the world."

This worldview runs through everything SparkFun does. SparkFun is an electronics manufacturer. The company sells its products directly to the public online, and it bundles them with educational tools to sell to schools and teachers. SparkFun applies Creative Commons licenses to all of its schematics, images, tutorial content, and curricula, so anyone can

make their products on their own. Being copied is part of the design.

Nathan believes open licensing is good for the world. "It touches on our natural human instinct to share," he said. But he also strongly believes it makes SparkFun better at what they do. They encourage copying, and their products are copied at a very fast rate, often within ten to twelve weeks of release. This forces the company to compete on something other than product design, or what most commonly consider their intellectual property.

"We compete on business principles," Nathan said. "Claiming your territory with intellectual property allows you to get comfy and rest on your laurels. It gives you a safety net. We took away that safety net."

The result is an intense company-wide focus on product development and improvement. "Our products are so much better than they were five years ago," Nathan said. "We