

# Interview: Jan Beyer

## *Community Operations Manager EU/Asia CEE Community Support*

*By HispaBrick Magazine®*

*Picture by Jan Beyer*

A few years ago we interviewed Jan Beyer, of the CEE Team (Community, Engagement and Events) to take the pulse of the AFOL community (see HispaBrick Magazine® 005). After this time there have been changes in the department and in the way it works with the communities so we have contacted mister Beyer again so he can explain the changes.

**HBM:** Can you give us your assessment of the AFOL community at this moment?

**JB:** The AFOL community is in very good shape and growing – I see an increase in the number of LUGs (especially in Eastern Europe, Asia and North America) but also the member count of most LUGs is growing.

Unfortunately the number of active AFOLs seems not to have the same growth rate – mostly the same AFOLs have been active over the past years and the number of new very active people is not very high so we all together need to find ways to increase the number of actively participating AFOLs. I have seen several LUG anniversaries over the last couple of years and more are upcoming so it is nice to see that more and more LUGs have been around for 5 or even 10 years and to celebrate this.

Eventwise I see a growing number but more because we work with more and more LUGs – I think there will be a limit somewhere soon – but it is an extremely nice feeling that you – if you have plenty of time and money – could visit an AFOL event around the world every single weekend! Finally I must admit that I am very proud to see the growth in size and activity level but also the increase of cooperation and interaction between the LUGs on an international level over the past 10 years I have been around with the LEGO® Group and involved in working with all of you around this fantastic hobby.

**HBM:** The crisis is affecting many markets, like the South of Europe. Does the support you give to communities depend on the market conditions of each country?

**JB:** Luckily I cannot see the effect of the financial crisis so much among the AFOLs yet – and I certainly hope this will stay like it is but of course it makes it not easier to finance an expensive hobby or organizing events if the financial situation is not good – but until now it has been going surprisingly well. The support is not dependent on the market conditions but on the size, impact and activity level of the LUG/Event that will get the support.

**HBM:** You are the LEGO representative for the communities in Asia. What can you tell us about the fans in Asia?

**JB:** In general the AFOLs in Asia are not very different from the AFOLs in the rest of the world – some LUGs are incredible big (the biggest we know has over 75.000 members) but they also do physical gatherings (with smaller portions of members) and build MOCs for display and also like special LEGO products as all other AFOLs.

But of course there are some slight differences – the building style is sometimes very different – in Asia a lot of people build more from inside to outside instead of bottom to top and also in a smaller size due to limited space, the forum life is very important due to the large number of members – same with online contests.

The Asian AFOLs are all very friendly and extremely active and involved – they love to talk about the LEGO hobby, their MOCs and a lot of activities around the LEGO products – so in general I not see huge differences.

**HBM:** South Korea is probably the country with the largest number of LEGO fans in the world. However, the communities there are mostly unknown to the rest of the world. Why do you think that is?

**JB:** My immediate idea about this would be that South Korea is a very proud but also very closed culture due to the heritage and the history of the country – also the amount of AFOLs who speak English fluently is still fairly low. But I am working a lot with the AFOLs in South Korea and our local LEGO office to get them more interested and integrated in the worldwide AFOL community and increase the interaction with them – I see a big chance and advantage for both sides in this.

**HBM:** How are things going in China. The country is a huge market, but there is a lot of competition from clone brands.

**JB:** Things are going well in China – it is true that several clone brands are produced and also sold in China but the Chinese people are very much (if they have the money) into high quality Brands and that fits very well for the LEGO Group. The competition situation seems worse in other countries – so the Chinese produced toys get transported to foreign countries and sold there – but of course you can get the clone sets in the country too.



China is a huge economy with big potential for the LEGO® Group.

There are not so many AFOLs in China – mainly in the 4 biggest cities – and they are not really organized so much yet – lately LUG China was founded and has around 15 very active members but the number is growing. Overall I would guess that there are around 1000 – 1500 AFOLs in China – mostly organized in an online forum.

**HBM:** What characteristics must a fan community have to be recognised by LEGO?

**JB:** The LEGO Group has no special rules yet so for the moment we work with all Fan Groups who want to work with us and are willing to cooperate. But I would say that as a minimum for being a LUG I would expect a group of 10 members and at least a form of online presence like a website or forum (not only a Flickr or Facebook group) so a certain serious effort can be seen. Also the will to organize or participate in a physical exhibition of MOCs would be certainly expected.

**HBM:** One of the first changes in the relationship between the LEGO Company and the fans was the Ambassador program. What were the reasons behind the change in the selection method, from LEGO taking the decisions to the communities choosing their Ambassadors.

**JB:** The Ambassador program is still considered as a very important group of representatives from a lot of LUGs around the world and has still a lot of relevance for our team and the LEGO Group. Due to the nature of the program (represent your community/LUG to the LEGO Group) we felt it was wrong that

the LEGO Group choose the representative of a LUG instead of the LUG members choosing their representative so that got changed.

**HBM:** In this change it seems that the Ambassadors lost “weight”, no longer participating in more or less secret projects and reducing their task to being the liaisons between the company and the fans. Why was this change made?

**JB:** I would not call it that they lost “weight” but the issue was that at the beginning the Ambassadors had to sign an NDA (Non Disclosure Agreement) to be able to tell them any “secret” things and this NDA made most of the Ambassadors silent to their LUGs so they were not talking with their fellow members anymore and though they could not represent them properly anymore. So that was changed but without NDA we cannot unveil the “secret” things. Also the Ambassador forum changed slightly from a discussion space to a permanent question and answer session and that is not the main focus of the program – we would rather like to see high level discussion among the Ambassadors to bring forward the crucial points in the Community and discuss potential solutions.

**HBM:** What is the current state of the program? What are the expectations for the future?

**JB:** Current state is that we have close to 100 Ambassadors in the program and from those around 80 participate actively and regularly in the forum. So the Community is well represented but not as active as we would like to see it. Discussion wise I would say that I would like to see – as mentioned before – more discussions among the Ambassadors around the

Community and relevant topics rather than asking a few questions and waiting on input from the LEGO® Group but I must also admit that we in the CEE team have always struggled with putting enough time into the program to participate from our side but we can all only use our time once and we need to get better to prioritize and find a way to ease the workload but also be involved more in the program as we have been.

For the future I still see the relevance of the program but we are currently looking into a change in setup and also into new technical solutions to make the program better and even more worth to participate.

**HBM:** How does the LEGO Company view the considerable increase in events and conventions organised by fans we have seen in the last couple of years?

**JB:** Of course the LEGO Company is very pleased to see this increase due to it is a very valuable activity and inspires a lot of kids and adults and show to a broad audience what is possible with LEGO bricks. Also the LEGO Company has significantly increased the support for events over the past years to help all AFOLs to organize the best possible events. But as the Operations Manager in charge, I also see the little downside of this because I see an increase in Events which compete with each other in time, resources and/or location and also I see that the pressure on the most active AFOLs is growing – nobody has unlimited vacation and money. So overall it is great with the little issue we all need to be aware of and collaborate on to find solutions for the future.

**HBM:** Can you explain how the new support system for fan events works?

**JB:** Of course – first of all let me say that we now have split up the support into LUG support and Event support. All LUGs can ask for support – if they do events or not which gives the LUG loose bricks and sets according to size of the LUG and their activity level. That is new and have not been done before. Event support also gives some loose bricks and sets as support depending on various criteria around the event and some offers (loose bricks, LEGO sets) that can be bought in addition to the free support. The event needs to be announced to the CEE team at least 3 month before the date with the complete filled in event support form because we need to have some time to agree and process the support. This all is running as a test and we will take all feedback we get into consideration to tweak next year's support program.

**HBM:** Compared to previous years, have you noticed an improvement with this system?

**JB:** Yes, it is much more structured and now the Event organizers have a good idea about what support they can get – also similar sized events get similar support worldwide so there is an improvement in this too. The only disadvantage is a slightly bigger workload for the CEE team and also that some of the LUGs are not clear how to organize this. Especially the 3 month in advance timeline has given some headaches but we look into improvements for next year.

**HBM:** How does LEGO assess the use communities are making of the new system?

**JB:** I think for the moment it works fine – we have given LUG support to almost all LUGs we work with (a very few could not manage or didn't wanted to fill in the form) and also we have

given a lot of support to events (some LUGs have been very good in sending the Event support forms – others a little less good) – though I had expected more event support requests – but the year is not over yet.

**HBM:** What feedback have you received from the communities?

**JB:** Until now the big majority has been very happy with the new structure so it is very positive – only the 3 month in advance announcement of the events has been for some event organizers a slight issue but we need the time to fulfill the order of materials so there is not really any chance to change that in this running year.

**HBM:** LUGBULK has become essential to the communities. Is it available in all countries where there are fan communities? If not, are you planning to make it available for all in the future?

**JB:** It is available for the whole world so every LUG fulfilling the criteria is able to participate.

**HBM:** Are you happy with the results?

**JB:** As far as I can see all AFOLs are very positive about LUGBULK and also putting the bricks they get to good use. However, internally it is still a very manual and heavy process so I constantly need to fight internally for the needed resources and work to solve problems which suddenly arise like VAT issues, shipping rules, customs issues – but luckily my colleague Kim and I have been able to pull this off until now.

**HBM:** The LUGBULK rules are clear and binding. Are they respected?

**JB:** Beside that some people never read any rules and are suddenly surprised about things that were clearly stated in the rules everything is fine and as far as I can tell well respected. We all want to see this program continue so I recommend all to stick to the rules.

**HBM:** Will there continue to be LUGBULK in the coming years? Will there be changes?

**JB:** We decide each year if we do LUGBULK again but for the moment I see no issue why it should not continue next year. There might be slight changes – especially the growing amount of participants and participating LUGs as well as the growing order size gives us issues regarding packing and delivery. So we might need to put some changes in place here but we decide first after this year's round of the LUGBULK program.  
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