NASA Embraces Pop Culture

MARCIA DUNN

Editor's Note: Frankly, whatever works. Celebrity geeks like Stephen Colbert have done more for popularizing space exploration in the mainstream lately than any space-interest group I can think of.

CAPE CANAVERAL, Fla. – When Discovery flies to the international space station this week, it will deliver a new treadmill named for a TV comedian and pick up a Buzz Lightyear toy.

In another month, a wealthy circus performer will rocket to the space station. Add that to all the Twittering astronauts and NASA suddenly has a fresh, hip look that is attracting audiences that may have ignored the space program in the past.

"More normal folks," the chief of NASA's space operations, Bill Gerstenmaier, says of NASA's newer audience. Gerstenmaier admits he's a rather humdrum engineer.

Intentional or not, the stars finally seem aligned for NASA in the pop culture department.

"It doesn't do us any good for us just to go up there and quietly do our missions if nobody knows what you're doing up there," Discovery's commander, Rick Sturckow, said in a recent interview.

Discovery and its crew of seven are scheduled to blast off early Tuesday, carrying about 17,000 pounds of supplies and equipment to the space station. It is the second station visit in as many months for NASA, making it harder to drum up excitement.

Sturckow and his crewmates agree lighthearted touches — like the treadmill named after Comedy Central's Stephen Colbert, the Buzz Lightyear toy that's spent more than a year at the space station and Cirque du Soleil founder Guy Laliberte's trip —

are good ways to publicize the more workaday events unfolding in orbit.

The treadmill, for the record, is officially known as the Combined Operational Load Bearing External Resistance Treadmill, which spells COLBERT.

NASA came up with the moniker after Colbert campaigned earlier this year to have a future space station chamber named after himself. He won the online poll for naming rights to the room, but NASA went with Tranquility, as in "Houston, Tranquility Base here, the Eagle has landed."

The treadmill was the consolation prize.

NASA invited Colbert to the launch, but said he will be unable to attend. Instead, a message from the comedian will be broadcast on NASA TV on Monday evening, after Discovery is fueled for liftoff.

Gerstenmaier, who appeared on "The Colbert Report" back in March, punted when asked at a news conference last week if NASA should tap into its more human side.

"You should answer that yourself," he replied. "We're engineers. It's the Combined Operational Load Bearing External Resistance Treadmill."

Astronaut Nicole Stott, who will be moving into the space station, offered a warmer response.

"I don't know that that's what we want to keep doing, naming things after people," she said. "But I think there are plenty of ways for us to show a more human side of what's going on up there."

That's exactly what Buzz Lightyear provided in May 2008 when the "Toy Story" movie hero hitched a ride aboard Discovery to the space station as part of NASA's toys-in-space educational program. NASA's recent embracing of Twitter also has jazzed things up.

On this 13-day mission, two of the crew, Mexican-American Jose Hernandez and Swede Christer Fuglesang, will be tweeting in English, Spanish and Swedish.

Despite all the buzz surrounding Buzz's launch, though, the action figure toy's homecoming did not come up until a TV reporter asked about it last week.

"Last time I talked to Buzz, he was doing just fine," deadpanned space station program manager Mike Suffredini. "Honestly, Buzz has spent a lot of time stowed. We don't bring him out and play with him."

Disney has big plans for what it calls "the longest-serving astronaut in space." The 12-inch toy will be honored in a tickertape parade at Walt Disney World with the real Buzz — Apollo 11 moonwalker Buzz Aldrin — in October.

While that's going on, Laliberte, a former stiltwalker and fire-eater now worth a

couple billion, will be performing weightless acrobatics at the space station. He's paying a reported $35 million for the Russian space program to launch him aboard a Soyuz spacecraft Sept. 30. He will return in another Soyuz 1 1/2 weeks later.

The Canadian Laliberte, one of a recent succession of space tourists, will become the first professional artist to rocket away.

His Soyuz crewmate, NASA astronaut Jeffrey Williams, can't wait to pick the circus man's brain in orbit, to learn how better to articulate the whole space experience.

"Most of us here, we look at things very sterile, very technical as engineers or pilots or whatnot," Williams said.

___

On the Net:

NASA: http://www.nasa.gov/mission(underscore)pages/shuttle/main/index.html [1]

Source URL (retrieved on *05/24/2013 - 1:32pm*):
http://www.ecnmag.com/news/2009/08/nasa-embraces-pop-culture

Links:
[1] http://www.nasa.gov/mission(underscore)pages/shuttle/main/index.html