

Marketing Memo

KEEPING UP WITH KIDS' INSATIABLE APPETITE FOR NEW

by Nancy Zwiers

We've all heard statements like, "I can't get my son to try new foods," or "My daughter wants me to read the same book over and over and over." So it's no wonder that we are sometimes so focused on where kids are entrenched in their preferences that we forget how much kids crave "new." That's right, picky eaters notwithstanding, all kids crave what's new, what's next.

"Kids are not just 'open' to new things; they actively 'hunt' for them," says Gene Del Vecchio, author of *Creating Ever-Cool, A Marketer's Guide to a Kid's Heart*.

But don't just take his word for it—let's take a deeper look at our industry, which lives and dies based on its ability to appeal to kids.

The toy industry, in conjunction with its retail partners, re-sets the toy department shelves with entirely new offerings twice a year. While Barbie has been around nearly 50 years, it would be exceedingly difficult to find a Barbie doll on the shelf this year that was on the shelf one year ago. Mattel completely re-designs its flagship brand's product line every six months because if the company didn't, Barbie would die the death that comes from not innovating enough to quench kids' desire for NEW. The same goes for Hot Wheels, LEGO, Dora, etc.

While companies who target moms can get away with ever-green products, any company that depends on kids to influence purchase decisions knows that a heavy dose of newness is absolutely mission critical to sustain success. So, any examples we call to mind to challenge the premise of kids' desire for newness are probably depending on their heritage with mom purchasers: Lincoln Logs, Etch-a-Sketch, Cabbage Patch, etc. No matter how big or how hot a brand is, rarely can it stay the same

and have enduring appeal among kids.

From Tickle Me Elmo to Furby, once-upon-a-time hot toys and properties fade from glory, just as surely as the sun sets each evening.

How can toy manufacturers keep up with this insatiable desire for newness? Here are some tools of the trade for toy

companies looking to keep their lines fresh and ever new:

- New themes (e.g. princess or mermaid and other themes for girls; pirates-themed or racecar themes for boys)
- New aesthetic designs (e.g. new fashions for dolls, new models for cars)
- New characters (think Tinker Bell)
- New features (e.g.: JAKKS Pacific's EyeClops line, Crayola's Color Explosion)
- New sizes (e.g. mini-or large-scale versions)
- New materials (e.g. metallic Etch-A-Sketch, porcelain Disney Princess dolls)
- New license overlay (e.g. Dora Doodle Pro)
- Tie into bigger picture trends (e.g. Fisher-Price's Smart Cycle)

In other words, determine the essence of your brand and stay consistent with it, but innovate on all other dimensions.

- If your brand's content is a competitive advantage, experiment with different ways to deliver or package that content.
- If it is your form factor that is ownable, then experiment with ways to innovate variables other than the form factor.
- Remember that innovation doesn't necessarily mean "new to the world." Jerry Perez, general manager of Learning Curve West and former top executive at both Fisher-Price and LeapFrog, reminds us, "There are countless examples of products in the teen or adult space that have been cheaply and successfully 'knocked down' to the younger set. Old can often be new—it's a question of imagination, ours and theirs."

The more newness you add to your brand, the more you can turbo-charge kid appeal. Get bold and get aggressive about concept development. Remember, concept screening can help you reduce the risk of innovating your brand. Test concept boards with kids first to identify the strongest concepts before you invest precious R&D dollars to launch full development—this helps ensure you focus on concepts that will motivate kids the most to choose NEW over the tried and true. ■

This article, which originally appeared in KidzBeat Magazine, Fall 2008, a C&R Research publication, has been slightly edited for content.

