

Are We Selling Novelties or Toys?

by Nancy Zwiars

Novelties exist to appeal to our desire for newness, but once the novelty wears off, the value evaporates. A toy's reason for being is to deliver play value, giving kids endless hours of fun. That leaves parents starting to question the value of the toys they buy.

How many of you have heard parents describe toys as “junk” in recent years? We appear to be caught in a vicious cycle: the consumer is unwilling to pay because of low perceived value, so price points get suppressed to unrealistically low levels; then cost reductions are made to hit these very low price points, so the quality of the toys suffer, further reinforcing parents' perceptions that toys aren't worth the money.

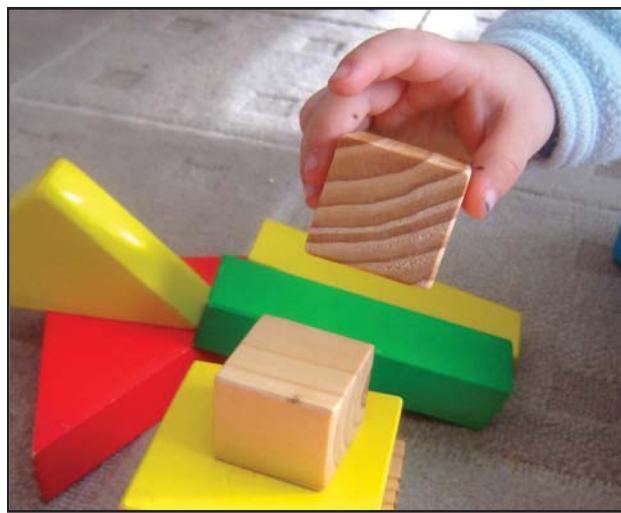
Why are consumers not willing to assign more value to the toys that cost so much to make? One hypothesis is that we are focusing too much on creating novel features that drive desire versus focusing on evoking natural play patterns that deliver play value. Play value can be measured by the amount of time a toy engages a child in active play over a sustained period. Simple building blocks have proven play value that parents are willing to pay for. They know their child will get hours and hours of play and they assign an appropriate value to that level of play value. A simple box of crayons also delivers powerful play value.

It appears we are preoccupied with novelty and newness, more than play value. We care about what we measure and we measure what we care about. Many companies spend money to evaluate how effective a commercial or package is in creating desire in a kid. Conversely, how many of us truly evaluate the play value of a toy? How many of us attempt to understand how much play value a toy truly delivers? Granted, hand-made prototypes are difficult to include in play testing, but early production samples afford that opportunity.

Novelty isn't bad, but putting novelty value before play

value is a problem. We all know what novelties are worth in the marketplace—not much. Our industry's preoccupation with driving desire above driving play value will hurt us in the long run. We are very good at seducing kids with exciting features, but after these kids experience the novelty of the feature, what then? The novelty wears off quickly and if true play value is not delivered, the toy ends up in the closet, never to be played with again. And, parents are left feeling like the toy was a waste of money and they start perceiving it as a cheap novelty.

So, what can we do to restore play value to its rightful place in the value chain?



1. Understand core play patterns better by gender, age, and category. This requires training and development of designers and marketers.

2. Understand what kids can ergonomically handle in a toy. We tend to forget how young a 3-year-old child really is—small motor skills are still developing.

3. During development, evaluate a toy's play value and emphasize aspects that contribute most to its play value. During the inevitable cost-reductions, protect

the hands-on play value.

4. Conduct post-production play testing to hone your understanding of a toy line's play value so you can sharpen your judgment and apply it in the future.

Do not turn your back on features but don't use them as a crutch. Play value is king to sustained and profitable success. ■

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