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The Use of Focus Groups in Toy Testing

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Focus 1: Putting Toys to the Test

Good research methods can help make the most out of marketing efforts.

Testing is a positive step in marketing the best product you can offer a consumer. Research can only mean what you want it to mean with your toy. There are four research methods you can use to gain information to help you make your toy the best it can be.

- A focus group can provide ideas to change a prototype to make it more desirable.
- An ideation session can provide information about what new, untapped ideas are out there.
- A play session can help recognize natural play patterns.
- Scientific research can indicate trends, lifestyle changes and key issues that affect a child's life.

Toy testing can indicate the potential for product failure. A little negative information from a focus group can create a lot of opportunity for positive changes before mistakes are made. Research is important. Consider research before a new product introduction. Manufacturers benefit from research and can brainstorm for new ideas. Some manufacturers do not know why they cannot sell a product or create an interest with retailers.

Even one focus group will give new information you did not have before. Put research in your budget. The more you know about your product, the more information you can provide the retailer and consumer with in order to sell.

Be aware when testing is used as a marketing gimmick. Toy tests can be a direct means of seeing how your product is being rated by consumers. Some toy tests can give you valid information. Other toy tests are designed as marketing gimmicks that provide poorly designed test results to consumers.

As a manufacturer, you must be a gatekeeper of toy tests: how they are conducted, the methodology being used, and the results communicated to the consumer. Information you gain from studies will help educate your consumer in a positive and unbiased way.

Do not insult a consumer's intelligence or bias an opinion of your toy. Be aware that

labels and stickers that claim your toy is the best of its kind can backfire on you. Instead of communicating the strength of your product there are different types of toy tests. Some will give you valuable information but many are purely a marketing gimmick.

Associate yourself with ones that make the most sense for your company. Also be aware that consumers recognize these many tests and make purchase decisions based on the quality of testing.

- Toy tests that use children in unstructured focus groups indicating majority choice. This is not toy testing.
- Toy tests that costs you money to participate in. This will automatically bias the results and becomes a public relations effort to pay for credibility.
- Toy tests that do not use a professional researcher to conduct the study, write the methodology, moderate the research groups, analyze their results, and write the results.
- Toy tests that cannot provide results back to the manufacturer about how their product was tested. There may not really be a research process.
- Awards judged by a panel. This is purely opinion, not research. This is a judgement call and not research with proven results.
- Toy tests that invite you to participate based on advertising dollars spent with a publication.
- Toy tests conducted with small groups of children the same age.

Focus 2: Putting Toys To The Test

Focussing On The Hit

Proper focus-group studies can turn the ho-hum into a have-to-have by balancing play patterns and value.

Too often manufacturers are disappointed with end-of-year results of what they considered their 'hot toy.' They may have anticipated

their toy would become one of the best toys of the year, only to discover that children thought it was a bore. What happens next are low sales, retailers with extra inventory and upset management.

Is there a solution to this problem? Well, seeing how 'hot toy' picks are such a gamble there is really not a solution. But, there is a precaution a manufacturer can take to prevent an end-of-year disappointment.

During the product development stage a lot of time and attention should be placed on listening to children. The best method is through focus-group testing. Children are honest and speak their mind. What you sometimes learn during a focus-group is astounding. Children can provide manufacturers with input on what they like, what they do not like and provide suggested changes for improvement.

Some manufacturers hire outside research firms and some conduct studies themselves. Manufacturers should be sure their in-house moderator is trained in both quantitative and statistical research. Many times, statistical methods can reveal subtle (but significant) trends that purely quantitative methods will overlook. Statistical methods, however, require large samples, which adds to toy research and development costs. Although manufacturers never know what they will find out until the focus-group is in session, applying what they find out is what is most important.

Avoid All Bias

At the conclusion of a focus-group manufacturers may be surprised to discover that every child in their study loved the concept and wants the toy. However, in research especially, all is not as it appears. More often than not, when children are asked a question in front of their peers, their comments tend to be the same as their friends, a phenomenon called 'group think.' Cleaner results can often be achieved if children give information individually.

It is also easy for a moderator to influence a subject's answers. Children almost always want to please adults, and if they feel that liking a toy will please the moderator, they may say they like something regardless of their true feelings. Moderators who do not work for the manufacturer – usually having a limited amount of knowledge concerning the toy – are more likely to be impartial in the toy's evaluation.

Study Play Patterns

Focus-groups studies also familiarise manufacturers with a child's natural play pattern. Successful action figures become so, in part, because they satisfy a child's innate desire for action and adventure. Good construction sets encourage creativity and allow children to practice their natural desire to build and destroy. Successful dolls allow a child to role-play and fantasise. A toy's success with children can be improved if it is initially designed to accommodate a child's natural play patterns.

Once manufacturers have conducted a focus-group study and collected their results, the next step is to build a prototype and conduct a second focus-group to research not only the toy's appeal to children but its consumer appeal (packaging, perceived value, etc) with adults.

One project in which the author's company worked on was the 'Toys R Us Guide for Differently-Abled Kids.' Testing each toy for ten skills, it was found that mothers who called our office were most interested in toys that promote self-esteem and build confidence levels. Some great examples are Parker Brothers' Throw In A Row, Playskool's Mr Potato Head and His Bucket of Parts, Hasbro's Treasure Rocks, and University Games' Kids on Stage, which is a board game for 'dramatic' children with outgoing personalities.

Focus-group testing can help bring a great product to the shelf that puts smiles on children's faces and bring satisfaction among toy purchasers knowing that manufacturers are

being pro-active and researching what kids really want.

What are Kids Talking About

The author's job is to test toys and to study children on a daily basis: observing, evaluating and calculating results about thousands of children's actions, comments and reactions. Children like to know that their opinions matter.

The author has learnt what children want for breakfast, what they study in school, what after-school sports and playground activities they participate in and has asked questions such as: which video games they play with that are cool and which video games are not allowed to be played with at home, what toys they ask from Santa, who their best friends are and what their best friends have. (This indicates what they will be asking for next). I have observed the shoes they like to wear to vacations they would like to take, what kind of hotels they ask to stay in, the restaurants they like to go to and if veggie-burgers are 'ok' on a kids menu.

Kids and Their Birthday

Kids list their birthday as one of the most important days in the year. In the life of a child one of the most important dilemmas is what to ask for your birthday. Children are starting to want more expensive toys, computer software, VCR's, cell phones and e-mail, stereos and televisions and guess what? Parents are buying them. However, children actually enjoy saving their own money, going to the store and making the transaction on their own. Very independent and grown-up children is the new generation we now have.

This digital generation who have access to computers with cameras and web sites for quick information will soon mimic adult behaviour at a younger age. This independence will affect their imagination less, yet their childhood is booming short-lived.

Kids and Reading

Kids like books. 80% of children complain that their parents do not read to them enough. What parents do not realise is that they will spend lots of money on educational toys and software. They will also allow children to spend time watching educationally well-produced television shows. But, what they will not do is give too much of their own time. Children like to be read to. Our research shows that reading to a child at a young age will encourage them to listen to stories, assist in imagination of their own stories and give the child quality time, so strengthening the parent-child bond that has been diminishing.

Kids on Vacation

Kids like to play on family vacations. The author's company and Hilton Hotels Vacation Station Program teamed up for the second year to see what toys children choose to play with and evaluate. Our study found that children mostly enjoyed toys that engage in social behaviour. School age children (five to twelve) enjoyed Parker Brothers Bop It, Radica Jr. Bass Fishin' and Milton-Bradley Twister. Because of the success of the research, in 1998 Hilton had 87 of their resorts and hotels participating because so many children are visiting their properties and playing with toys.

Kids in the United Kingdom

Are they the same as kids in America? The proven rise in children's maturation is a global issue: children in Europe are behaving the same way. However, children in the UK spend only 13% of their free time playing with toys. Girls aged six to seven primarily play with plush dolls and accessories, indoor games, science and adult imitation toys and playground equipment. Television has a huge influence on children in the UK: they spend 28 percent of their free time watching it.

Even though children are more adult-like than we think, they are privy to real-life situations and quick to react to them. As we probably need to respond to this in an adult-like fashion we need to remember their minds still respond in a child-like way. ●

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Biography

Marianne M. Szymanski is Founder and President of Toy Tips Inc., an independent research firm specialising in children's products based in Milwaukee (WI). She is the resident toy guest on Good Morning America, serves as an Adjunct Assistant, is publisher of Toy Tips Magazine and toytips.com and is a Professor at the University of Southern California in the Entrepreneur Programme.



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