

**“I WANT THAT!”:  
The impact of current trends and practices shaping the  
advertising of toys to children in the global marketplace**



**Study Results  
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## **"I WANT THAT!":**

### **The impact of current trends and practices shaping the advertising of toys to children in the global marketplace**

The Canadian Toy Testing Council (CTTC) is an organization that cares about children. The Council is a national, non-profit organization that has worked to benefit Canadian families through educating consumers about toys since 1952. The Council concentrates primarily on testing hundreds of toys each year and publicly reporting the results (CTTC *Toy Report* published annually; see [www.toy-testing.org](http://www.toy-testing.org)). However, the organization also undertakes studies in other areas of importance to families, including literacy. In this case, through first-hand media monitoring and focus group testing, the Council has taken a hard look at the reliability in advertising toys to children via television, print and the Internet.

#### **Parents Frustrated by Fad Toys**

Over the past few years, the Canadian Toy Testing Council has received hundreds of inquiries from our members, parents, consumers, reporters and other organizations with regard to children about the negative influences surrounding the advertising of toys to children. The Council recognized a significant shift in the nature of consumer inquiries from requesting information on specific toys or recommendations on age-appropriate toys, to complete frustration related to toy advertising, especially the "fad" type toys. Consumers appeared to be upset and felt they are being taken advantage of by toy advertising directed at their children--with just "have-to-have" toys.

Canadian consumers now spend in excess of \$1.5 billion on toys each year. The toy industry spends millions on toy advertising directed at purchases for children. Most parents remain unaware that their young children now qualify as big business for advertisers, with the catalyst being the advertising of toys to children. (Toy manufacturer Mattel's chief executive Robert Eckert was paid a salary of over \$12.5 million U.S. last year, according to the April 11 edition of the *Ottawa Citizen*.)

Advertising will probably be a child's first introduction to what it means to be a consumer in the global marketplace. While advertising can help children appreciate the diversity of available choices, they do need to be provided with the necessary skills to

enable them to make wise consumer decisions. Children are being exposed and influenced by various forms of advertising as never before. With a significant increase in television networks, an influx in print media together with e-tailing via the Internet, kids of today are constantly bombarded with advertising from all angles.

### **One Big Commercial**

In recent years, marketing and advertising strategies to promote such toys as the Tickle Me Elmo doll (1996) and the Furby electronic creature (1998) tended to create an unrealistic consumer demand. In some cases, during the "mad dash" for the "have-to-have" toy, consumers were actually physically injured. Numerous consumer and media inquiries about these much sought-after toys have created a consumer frenzy, with some people wanting them without even really knowing what they are.

One of the fastest-growing advertising trends has been cross-market merchandising movies, cartoons, television shows, etc. with toys. *Space Jam* (1996), which featured basketball superstar Michael Jordan along with co-star Bugs Bunny, was a merchandising event with products from 200 licensees selling weeks before the film's release. Industry observers predicated *Space Jam* would generate \$1 billion in retail sales. The Canadian Toy Testing Council has seen this concept explode over the past few years when Council representatives visit the national and international Toy Fairs in Toronto and New York City. It now appears inevitable that when a new children's movie is released, so there will be a whole new line of toys. In effect, an advertising campaign is launched for the toys together with a two-hour commercial... the movie! In addition, product placement in movies and on television is becoming more and more pervasive; the understanding is that when the main character in a movie or on a television show touches or uses a product, companies expect maximum returns.

The new teen flick *Josie and the Pussycats* (released in April 2001, and itself based on a comic book and TV cartoon), takes a somewhat satirical jab at this type of promotion to children, all the while displaying onscreen the very products it is supposedly lampooning. In his review of the movie, critic Jay Stone writes:

"With the look and tone of the campy Archie comics from whence it sprang, *Josie and the Pussycats* carries an obvious message to a surprising audience. Glitzy and silly, the film tells its viewers--mostly pre-adolescent girls--the secrets of product placement and

hero-worship. It reveals the connections between rock music, trendy clothes and mindless faddism, all the while clothing itself in outfits by Christine Aguilera, hysteria by the Back Street Boys, and humour by the Monkees." (*Ottawa Citizen*, April 11, 2001).

In his review of the same film, "How logo can they go?" critic Liam Lacey writes:

"The idea that the movie itself is one big commercial is also a joke, which allows *Josie and the Pussycats*' most singular achievement as a movie--the maximization of product placement in the service of a plot. Almost every scene features prominently displayed logos: McDonald's in the shower; the Revlon hotel room; a box of Tide holding up a lamp; "MTV.com" written large on a wall; Target stores and Motorola advertised on stuffed toys or the window of an airplane. Strange how satirizing product placement and consumer culture these days seems to involve wallowing in it at the very same time." (*The Globe and Mail*, April 11, 2001).

### **Gotta Buy 'Em All**

The recent Pokemon (meaning "pocket monsters") craze is another example of how a successful media tie-in can fuel the desire for toys and games--to the point of being an obsession. In this case, there are over 152 different characters that are marketed as trading cards and toy items too numerous to list. The marketing phrase directed at children is "Pokemon--Gotta catch 'em all!" Unfortunately, serious injuries occurred among children fighting over Pokemon toys, and the situation came to the point where many Canadian schools banned such toy items.

Interestingly enough, a successful toy which is not based on any existing media may in fact become the subject of a TV cartoon or movie. Donkey Kong Country, an animated show produced by Canada's Nelvana studios, is based on the popular computer game of the same name. The result is constant cross-promotion--the series creates interest in the toy, and vice versa.

### **Consumers of Tomorrow**

Advertisers try and reach children at a young age because they comprise a very profitable market. It is estimated that Canadian teenagers spend a total of more than \$80

million dollars a week on consumer goods and services. Young kids of today are the consumers of tomorrow.

A pizza-sized satellite dish that delivers about 150 channels is already on sale, and some cable companies predict they'll be offering 300-400 channels in the next few years. Just imagine the number of commercials! In 1998, the amount of commercial television content reached record levels, according to a survey by the American Association of Advertising Agencies. Prime-time, early morning and daytime commercial time all increased with daytime reaching 15 minutes and 58 seconds per hour of commercial time.

In the 1999 Canadian book *More than Meets the Eye: Watching Television Watching Us*, authors John J. Pungente, SJ and Martin O'Malley write that "the people who make commercials grind a much more conspicuous axe: they want you to buy something, usually something you don't need, probably something you don't even know you want." The book goes on to say:

"Gene Del Vecchio, in his 1997 book *Creating the Ever-Cool: A Marketer's Guide to a Kid's Heart*, mentions that the Children's Television Workshop, the originator of *Sesame Street*, has helped educate more than 120 children worldwide. Eight percent of the American population visit a McDonald's on an average day. Two Barbie dolls are sold every second in the world. 'By all measures, this is success!' Del Vecchio exclaims. 'People who helped create and develop brands such as these understand what most others do not. They understand the timeless, emotional needs that all children share.'"

### **At Home and School**

Some of our children are now even exposed to advertising in the classroom through televised school newscasts. In 1999, a national survey conducted by the Angus Reid Group found that 53 percent of respondents agreed that it would be all right to accept corporate donations, such as computer equipment, by public school boards in exchange for allowing advertising in classrooms (Angus Reid Group, *The Globe and Mail*, June 22, 1999). In 1995, Assumption Catholic Secondary School in Burlington, Ontario entered into a deal with Coca-Cola. In return for allowing Coke to provide all the pop in the school, Coke provided the school with prizes for draws, promotional t-shirts, guest speakers, videos, sponsored the school's charity walk and donated a school sign. Neither the school board nor the students saw anything wrong with this arrangement. Without

such sponsorship, such items would not have been available. Also in 1995, Rocky View School Division No. 41 near Calgary allowed advertising to be placed on 160 school buses, citing the need for the money from the advertising (Pungente, John J. and O'Malley, M.; *More than Meets the Eye: Watching Television Watching Us*; 1999).