

Toys, T-Shirts, and Tumblers: These Are Not the Paratexts You Are Looking For (Hint: The Films Are)

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Children's media represent a battlefield where the forces of education, entertainment, and advertising fight for territory. Over the years, the line of defense has shifted with advances in technology and tactics.

In the radio age, program syndicators doubling as sponsors coaxed brand loyalty out of listeners who exchanged proofs of purchase for premiums. Announcers for *Little Orphan Annie* and *The Lone Ranger* enticed young audiences into joining exclusive societies and being the first in the neighborhood to show off new trinkets. Children sent away for hundreds of different items advertised during radio programs, including character toys, membership cards, pins, and badges.

Before televisions entered the home, children would have chosen any attractive toy from the variety store shelf while their parents picked up household staples. As the new medium gained traction, toy companies discovered that a hit show delivered a built-in audience who would ask for tie-in products after seeing them advertised. For example, Disney's *Davy Crockett* miniseries (ABC, 1954–1955) enjoyed such popularity that millions of official coonskin caps sold in the first few months.

One of the more successful tie-ins came with minimal expectations. Mego Corporation acquired the toy license for *Star Trek* (NBC, 1966–1969) after the original series had ended. The risk was low, as the license cost only \$5,000, and the company planned to mold the action figures' bodies using an interchangeable design. When Mego released the figures in 1974, however, the series was in syndication and experiencing a renaissance. Forty years later, the enterprise is still lucrative.

Toy executive Bernard Loomis made several shrewd calculations that overturned conventional approaches to youth-targeted marketing. Loomis developed a 30-minute animated series, *Hot Wheels* (ABC, 1969), based on Mattel's toy car line. The series appeared commercial-free in the Saturday morning cartoon lineup. Unfortunately for Mattel, a competing toy company complained that the program blurred the line between programming and advertising. The FCC intervened, requiring stations to log part of the show as advertising time. The ruling deterred similarly questionable children's product integration for more than a decade.

Loomis joined Kenner Products and created a hit action figure based on the television series, *The Six Million Dollar Man* (ABC, 1973–1978). Hunting for similar licensing opportunities, the name *Star Wars* caught his eye in 1976. Though he knew little about the forthcoming film, Loomis arranged for Kenner to purchase exclusive toy rights. Other toy companies had already passed on the contract. Accounting for a labor-intensive development process, Kenner hadn't planned to release a toy line until one

year after the film had opened, so the company was caught off guard when box-office sales skyrocketed. Not wanting to miss out on profits with Christmas approaching, Loomis decided to supply toy stores with product packages containing simply early-bird certificates for action figures. Not only did shoppers buy thousands of the I.O.U.s, but when the action figures arrived in the mail, kids showed them to their friends, prompting the have-nots to hurry to stores, where the shelves were finally stocked.

Star Wars assured Loomis that licensed merchandise would be his bread and butter. He learned that developing a perennial line of toys situated in a diegetic universe capable of expansion could sustain a company indefinitely. Current tallies estimate \$12 billion worth of *Star Wars* toys have been sold.

In 1978, as head of General Mills Toy Group (of which Kenner was a subsidiary), Loomis met with American Greetings representatives. He pointed to a greeting-card character with strawberries on her bonnet and suggested a universe of toys, games, television shows, and hundreds of licensed products centered around Strawberry Shortcake, her friends, and their lives in Strawberryland. Her first TV special (1980) used the same tactics as Mattel's *Hot Wheels* program, but in a different legislative climate. The toy industry regarded the FCC's silence as a green light to leverage children's television as an advertising tool. *Care Bears* unfolded through a similar arrangement between Loomis and American Greetings. (Aptly, Loomis himself coined the term "toyetic" to describe a concept that offers potential for producing playthings.)

Competitors had been watching. Mattel released its Masters of the Universe action figures and play sets in 1982, ostensibly to capitalize on the success of Kenner's *Star Wars* franchise. An animated television series, *He-Man and the Masters of the Universe* (1983–1985), an animated feature film (1985), and the spinoff series *She-Ra: Princess of Power* (1985–1986) drove demand for the products. As sales declined, Mattel discontinued the toy line in 1988.

In 1982 Hasbro resurrected its classic G.I. Joe toy line, scaled down from 12 to 3-3/4 inches, eye to eye with the *Star Wars* figures. Two animated series (1983–1987 and 1989–1992) and an animated film (1987) supported sales. *G.I. Joe* rationalized the fuzzy line between entertainment and commercialism by concluding each episode with a life lesson ("...and knowing is half the battle."). *G.I. Joe* remains on active duty in toy stores and on the big screen.

Children of the 1980s and 90s are now adults, some with disposable income. They live-tweet their favorite shows, cosplay at Comic-Con, and proclaim their pop-culture identities via merchandise from ThinkGeek. Same bat-time, same bat-channel. Given the current pervasiveness of product-tied media properties, innovative marketing strategies, and a landscape littered with options for viewing and playing, how will brands win young consumers' attention?