In addition to providing updates on toy trends in the marketplace, Toy Industry Association (TIA) staff is monitoring trends in other industries that can influence future toys and games. Brief reports and observations are provided periodically to members; questions can be directed to TIA’s toy trends team.

Looking Beyond the Obvious
Adrienne Appell, TIA Toy Trend Expert

When it comes to the world of toys and entertainment, there are some obvious facts:

1. The toy industry has strong ties with the licensing industry.
2. Approximately 30% of all toys sold in the U.S. are licensed.
3. Many of these licenses – from Toy Story to Superman – are tied directly with entertainment properties.
4. From apps and books to television and movies, licensed toys reflect what’s trending in entertainment.
5. Many toy companies often pay big bucks to capture a popular license.

Now, let’s look beyond the obvious and talk about how small companies can capitalize on what’s trending in entertainment. Here are some things to think about:

Leveraging Pop Culture to Promote Your Existing Portfolio
A toy doesn’t necessarily need to be licensed to capitalize on what’s all the rage. One of the biggest trends we noticed at Toy Fair 2013 was dubbed Pop Culture Persuasion and spoke to the array of creative toys spawned from the popularity of reality programming on HGTV, the Food Network, and shows like America’s Got Talent. These toys were design-, fashion-, music- and food-themed, but very few carried licenses.

Another terrific example is what we like to refer to as the “Katniss Effect,” speaking to the crop of archery toys that seemed to hit shelves right around (and after) the Hunger Games truly took off. Not one of these products had a Hunger Games license attached to it – but they fit right in with what was trending with kids.

The takeaway for small companies? Don’t throw in the towel because you think you can’t compete in the licensing/pop culture game. Get creative and see what you may have in your current catalog or what may be in the product development phase that may tie into what’s trending or what may be the next big thing.

Looking Ahead
How do you tell what may be the next huge trend? First, take a look at the entertainment industry. A good place to start is with dates for movie releases and TV series launches. Then talk with your team and see if there’s anything on the horizon that would work for your company and brand.

2015 movie releases you may want to take note of include: The Fantastic Four, Penguins of Madagascar, Avengers 2, Trolls, Star Wars – Episode 7, Ant-Man, Avatar 2, Smurfs 3 and Kung Fun Panda.
As you’ll see, many of the 2015 releases are sequels ... a mainstay in today’s culture. When an entertainment property does well, studio executives often look to the next installment for added popularity and notoriety. Toymakers can expect that popular trends will spawn spin-offs and sequels.

Trade shows and conventions are often where new products, news and partnerships are announced, and are a good place to get the latest scoop. For example, at this year’s Comic Con – a show that has grown into a melting pot for all things pop culture – properties like “Breaking Bad,” the new “Dracula” show, and the upcoming Metallica 3-D documentary were just some of the many shows and movies receiving attention. “Game of Thrones,” “The Hunger Games - Catching Fire,” “Godzilla” and “Community” also were buzzworthy.

As spinoffs transitioned from the big screen to the small screen, we saw Cupcake Wars spawn Donut Wars – Cronut Wars could be next on the horizon!

You Don’t Always Need (or Want) to Be Number One

The iconic “We Try Harder” ad campaign from Avis capitalized on the fact that they were the number two car rental company, behind rival Hertz. Instead of trying to be something they weren’t, Avis embraced its number two status and focused on all the reasons consumers would want to choose number two. The lesson learned from this approach is that is okay not to be number one. Does not working with a licensor allow your brand more creative leeway? Perhaps your team is able to move more quickly to bring a product to market. Think about what you can offer as number two or number 20 ... and why those qualities are appealing.

We hope this article has provided some ideas and facts for companies looking to capitalize on entertainment trends and also give a sneak peek of what is to come.

About the Author

Adrienne Appell is the Toy Industry Association’s (TIA) leading trend specialist. She maintains close communication with TIA members to stay abreast of what’s new, next and cutting-edge in the toy industry and is constantly on the lookout for trends in other industries that will cross over to influence future playthings.

Adrienne can be reached at 646.520.4863 or via e-mail at aappell@toyassociation.org.

Posted August 14, 2013