

[PRINT THIS](#) · [CLOSE WINDOW](#)

From the Aug 9, 2010 edition

0 tweet



SHARE

**MAIN STREET**

# Science not a game for firm that helps develop, distribute children's kits

By **Chris Barrett**  
PBN Staff Writer

The headquarters of Thames & Kosmos in a former Providence soap factory appear as if someone decided to drop a toy store in the middle of otherwise commonplace office furniture. Periodic tables adorn the cubicle walls and a model windmill sits on the conference table, itself sporting a painted periodic table. Shelves upon shelves hold rectangle boxes with parts to build everything from a crane to a solar-powered helicopter. In a small room downstairs, containers with spare parts almost reach the ceiling.



PBN PHOTO/JAIME LOWE

But Thames & Kosmos is not a toy store hawking items found at the bottom of a Happy Meal. Instead, this 9-year-old business works with a German company to repackage educational science kits for a U.S. audience and then sell them across North America, to the tune of 250,000 to 300,000 kits a year.

CHANNELING SCIENCE: Ted McGuire, president and majority owner of Thames & Kosmos, says the company offers merchandise for children - and their parents - interested in a product that stimulates the mind.

"We see ourselves as battling the trend for kids to sit inside and watch TV or play video games or be on Facebook," said Ted McGuire, the company's president.

The army in this battle consists of eight employees working with Franckh-Kosmos Verlags-GmbH & Co. KG, a German company that has been building science kits since 1922. The employees at Thames & Kosmos take the kits and arrange for the translation of the German instructional manuals into English and then polish them up to American children. They then develop marketing to sell them to toy, museum and specialty stores across North America.

And if battle victories are measured in areas conquered - Thames & Kosmos is winning the war. The company counts retailers in 49 states, as well as Canada and Mexico. The product line has ballooned from offering only a hydrogen-powered car to a full suite of about 60 kits.

Last year, the company left its leased space in Portsmouth in favor of its own building on Friendship Street in Providence. And this year, McGuire plans to hire at least one new employee.

"What's fascinating is when we started in 2000 science kits and science toys was not an [industry] category and just now is becoming a significant category in the toy store," McGuire said.

The reasons, McGuire said, are unclear. The relatively small company lacks the mammoth research departments found at huge toy companies. But McGuire likes to believe Thames & Kosmos offers merchandise fitting a niche for children - and their parents - interested in a product that stimulates the mind and remains interesting for more than a single afternoon.

The company has also tapped into popular culture, most recently working with Kosmos to design two original kits to compliment Conn and Hal Iggulden's best-selling "Dangerous Book for Boys."

McGuire has also worked to keep the products at the higher-end of the market, with most kits selling for \$20 or more and many above the \$50 mark.

"We don't want to lose our identity by doing the same kind of stuff everybody else does," McGuire said.

The identity took some time to take root. Sixteen years ago, McGuire's mother, Jane Holdsworth, opened a small, nonprofit museum and accompanying retail store in Newport as a spinoff of Connecticut's Thames Science Center. When stocking the store in 1999, Holdsworth stumbled across Kosmos. A formal collaboration began the next year and in 2001 the first - and only - Kosmos science kit hit the store's shelves with a price tag of \$150.

"We weren't really sure if it would go over well," McGuire said.

Unknown at the time to Holdsworth, Kosmos had tried to enter the U.S. market at least twice, once in the 1970s and again in the 1980s. Neither attempt gained any traction.

But the new century proved friendlier. In 2002, Holdsworth started stocking a second kit, this one a model house with environmentally friendly features such as solar panels and a wind generator.

McGuire arrived in 2002 to lend a hand after doctors diagnosed Holdsworth with cancer. After her death the following year, McGuire, then just 24, took over the company that by then was offering a full line of Kosmos products. He shuttered the museum and retail store to focus on the distribution side.

Although unsure if he would continue, McGuire expanded the company's customer base over the course of the next two years and established relationships with people around the globe. The former product-development manager at Adobe Systems found fun in the relationships and developing the science kits.

"I grew into really loving it," McGuire said. "I never really had to decide what I wanted to do. It just sort of happened naturally." ·

## **COMPANY PROFILE**

### **THAMES & KOSMOS**

**OWNERS:** Ted McGuire, president, Peter "Jed" Wilcox and Gail Holmes

**TYPE OF BUSINESS:** Developer and distributor of children's science kits

**LOCATION:** 301 Friendship St., Providence

**EMPLOYEES: 8**

**YEAR ESTABLISHED: 2001**

**ANNUAL SALES: WND**