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Working the Wonder Stuff

Science toys have growing appeal for kids

By Pamela Brill -- Playthings, 10/1/2007

Chalk it up to an innate curiosity for all things that bubble over, cause an electric spark or light up before their very eyes: Children are fascinated by the wonders of science.

Inspired by a combination of sci-fi movies, TV shows and real-life natural disasters, a new generation of budding scientists is forming. Industry insiders are encouraged by this notion of making science a fascinating—or, in kid speak, “cool”—subject once again.

According to Renee Whitney, vice president of sales for Be Amazing!, Salt Lake City, the science toys category is currently on an upswing. “We saw this about eight years ago, then it tapered off and now it’s in demand again,” she tells Playthings, citing the popularity of shows such as Discovery Channel’s *MythBusters* as a catalyst for this cyclical market trend.

“Shows like *CSI* and other thrillers solved by science have definitely increased the appeal of science products and have fueled an entirely new line of investigative science products,” says Grant Cleveland, president of Cleveland, Ohio-based Dunecraft.

Action Products of Orlando, Fla., is also seeing consumers’ obsession with forensics translate over to the sales of its Curiosity Kits Junior Bureau of Investigation Fingerprint, Evidence and Deluxe Investigation kits, all of which are doing very well at retail. “We’re delighted to see this ... appreciation for science kits,” says Debbie Serkin, brand director.

Ted McGuire, president of Thames & Kosmos of Portsmouth, R.I., believes the popularity of such TV shows and movies have helped make lab research “more glamorous and attractive.” Hollywood aside, though, current events are also paramount in fueling this phenomenon. “For example, after an earthquake, people are more interested in learning the science behind earthquakes,” he adds.

Television channels devoted exclusively to nature attract attention from young viewers, contributing to their interest in protecting their natural surroundings. “The whole green movement has everyone thinking about how we can save the environment, and science is a huge factor as it can serve as a cause or a cure,” says Frank Adler, executive vice president of Uncle Milton Industries, Westlake Village, Calif. (see “Going Green” sidebar).

No matter the source, the science market is experiencing its own series of mini trends, and the toy industry is playing a pivotal role in sustaining this interest for kids of all ages.

Getting the girls

Despite past stereotypes that more boys than girls have a natural proclivity toward science, science toy makers are noticing a larger representation of the female persuasion in this area.

“Historically, science toys have been more oriented toward boys,” notes Cleveland. In contrast, he points to the craft side of the business, which is largely girl-centric. “While I don’t think the ratio will be that extreme in science, girls are an under-served segment of this market,” he adds. In response, Dunecraft has developed toys that will appeal to the female audience, such as its Fairy Triad and Princess Garden products.

Other manufacturers are following suit with science toys specifically designed with girls in mind. Uncle Milton’s Rainbow In My

Room, an extension of its Moon In My Room product for ages 3 to 12, taps into girls' fascination with color by projecting a rainbow on bedroom walls and ceilings. "Girls love rainbows and this product truly delivers," says Adler. "It stimulates kids to want to know more."

Be Amazing's Whitney says that, while it's more of a challenge to manufacture science toys for girls over boys, it's something that Be Amazing embraces wholeheartedly. "Both boys and girls need to be engaged in learning about science," she tells Playthings. The company's Lab of Luxury line teaches the science of smell and touch by letting girls create bath bombs, lip gel, peppermint foot scrubs and other spa products, while boys can grow bacteria and make slime using the popular Yuck! and Ooze! kits.

ToyOps of Pensacola, Fla., also produces science offerings aimed at the female audience, namely its new Luxury Soap and Heavenly Incense Science kits for ages 8 and up. However, "We've found that girls enjoy the 'gross science' kits just as much as boys do," reveals Allison Goldberg, spokesperson.

Even though more girls are demonstrating an interest in science, they are not the only ones to which manufacturers must market their product. Says McGuire, "Girls already love science as much as boys," pointing to recent feedback indicating that just as many girls use Thames & Kosmos physics kits and chemistry sets as boys. "It's usually their mothers and grandmothers buying the science kits who have to be convinced."

In response, the company has created a line of science kits designed to make science appealing to girls and their mothers, focusing on areas like perfume, cosmetics and visual arts. McGuire, however, is careful not to make general assumptions about the different genders. "The last thing I want to do is perpetuate false stereotypes that girls play with perfume kits while boys play with physics kits," he says. "When we were considering making the box for a new science kit pink with princesses all over it, it struck me that we were actually just excluding boys rather than including girls."

Knowledge for all

Rather than divide their focus, some manufacturers opt to craft product that is gender-neutral. Wheeling, Ill.-based Elenco's Tree of Knowledge line includes two kits, My Senses and Heart Beat, which aim to teach kids the wonders of the human body. National sales manager Walter Larsen attests to the broad appeal of these products for kids ages 8 and up, noting that they sell well for both boys and girls.

Adler says that an equal number of boys are buying Uncle Milton's Moon in My Room as girls, while Cleveland notes that Dunecraft's new Micro Terrariums, Header Cards and Grow Your Own Lily Pad all have a more general focus that's appealing to children of both genders.

And to help perpetuate this concept of science for all, Action Products is gearing up to deliver a line of licensed science toys and activity kits in conjunction with the American Museum of Natural History. "Each of the items is being created hand in hand with the museum itself," says Serkin. "We are thrilled to be creating products that will generate interest in science for both boys and girls." The line will launch at next year's Toy Fair and bear the museum's 'Ology' brand.

Littlest Einsteins

Kids love to imitate others as part of their play and toy makers are helping jump-start their education by exposing them to science sooner rather than later. At the same time, they are also making a conscious effort not to leave out teens who can better understand the science behind the science, but whose attention may be diverted by electronic gadgets and other hi-tech entertainment options in their lives.

"Engaging kids at a young age is very important for the [science toys] category," says Adler. "Older kids and tweens need to have a big 'wow' factor to hold their interest versus all the other entertainment choices they have."

But when it comes to developing science product for the younger end of the spectrum, manufacturers are cautious about just how low they drill down. "Science kits for children below the age of 5 are dubious because children this age are pre-logical," says McGuire. "You can't have science without logic." Instead, kits that address this demographic introduce younger children to science experiments and procedures with the help of an adult. Thames & Kosmos' Little Labs line addresses the age 5 to 7

demographic by simplifying the concept of the scientific method's pattern of question, hypothesis, experiment and conclusion.

Similarly, Be Amazing adheres to guidelines recommended by the National Association for the Education of Younger Children, including measuring, exploring and observing. Whitney explains how a popular activity—combining diet soda and Mentos candy—can teach kids science in a unique way. “Our Great Geysers kit takes kids through the scientific method as they use numerous variables to test different soda geysers,” she says, adding that it's also a favorite of older kids curious about the ‘why’ of something.

Experimental properties

Recognizing the allure of friendly faces, Dunecraft is working with Nickelodeon to present themed terrariums based on such properties as Dora the Explorer, SpongeBob, Diego and The Backyardigans. “We are using the power of a known brand to introduce youngsters to our planting kits,” says Cleveland.

To target teens, the company has released themed growing kits, such as the Gothic Garden and Witches Woods, which have already garnered attention from Web-savvy shoppers, including a number of bloggers.

Hands-on learning

No matter the age of their customers, manufacturers and retailers alike agree that science can appeal to any child if given an opportunity to experience it firsthand. Independent toy shops across the country find that taking product out of the box especially helps pique interest.

At Learning Express in Hillsborough, N.J., store owner Rick Grossman co-merchandises related science and nature toys. Books about butterflies may be positioned alongside Insect Lore's Butterfly Garden. “We like to have a garden out that is filled with butterflies to show how the product works,” he tells Playthings.

Food for thought is the theme at The Village Toy Shop in Easton, Mass., where kids can sample a confectionery they've made with the Thames & Kosmos Chocolate Making Kit or a concoction from the Soda Pop-Up from Scientific Explorer. “Parents are surprised you can incorporate these things into play,” says owner Kathy Mabry.

It only seems natural that G. Willikers! Toy Shop of Portsmouth, N.H., opened its doors on Earth Day almost 30 years ago. Even though less than 5 percent of the store's merchandise is devoted to science and nature, store owner Bob Breneman makes a point of taking small science toys out of their packaging for kids to try out. Those that lend themselves well for hands-on demonstration are 3-D Mirascope Illusion Maker from Toymith and Antworks from Fascinations.

While the store hasn't hosted any science events as of late, Breneman plans to feature Be Amazing's Instant Snow on Saturdays this fall and will demonstrate Elenco's Snap Circuits.

Wind Up Here, a specialty toy store in Olympia, Wash., mixes up its science inventory by merchandising within sections other than science. Roughly 10 percent of its business is devoted to the category, which features such perennial best sellers as Scientific Explorer's Spa Science and Thames & Kosmos' Micro Trek. Store president Brekke Hewitt calls it “the most complete microscope kit for the price that we've found. It's a consistent \$90 sale year-round.” For demonstrations, the new Timber Slot Assembly and Technokit lines from Toyops are previewed at the store. “They've been a wonderful addition and have held up going on six months now,” says Hewitt.

To further engage science enthusiasts, the store holds an annual science night, which Hewitt says is great for both customers and staff training. “Everyone on our team is a science and nature lover,” she says. “We could never go without an extensive science section.”

Going Green

Today's kids are eating organic foods, wearing earth-friendly cotton and now, they're spending play time with an increasing array of “green” toys.

“The recent surge of attention to global warming, its auxiliary issues and its celebrity proponents have created enough buzz to support the debut of green-minded toys and kits,” observes Allison Goldberg of ToyOps, Pensacola, Fla.

“Environmental science is as important as ever,” adds Ted McGuire of Thames & Kosmos, Portsmouth, R.I. He sees the toy industry responding to this movement in two ways: a surge in the number of playthings constructed from recycled materials, and more educational toys that aim to teach kids about the world in which they live. “The key is to make the topics fun enough to be a toy, but serious enough to do these sobering topics justice,” he says.

Experienced makers in this area, Thames & Kosmos has been known for its Fuel Cell toy cars and Solar Power kits. Next year, the company will launch a series of alternative energy and environmental science kits, of which a percentage of sales will go to environmental education and advocacy non-profits in the U.S.

Like McGuire, Frank Adler of Westlake Village, Calif.-based Uncle Milton, feels the science toy niche really needs to engage today's kids so that they can wrap their brains around the content. “The challenge is to present products in an exciting way that kids will respond to,” he says. His company's new Solar Robots, now at retail, aim to do this as they harness the sun's rays to help them move about.

Because of an increased interest in global climate change, Educational Insights of Rancho Dominguez, Calif., is expanding its line of greenhouses. The most recent addition, Sprout & Grow Greenhouse with Wonder Soil, hitting stores this month, lets kids grow plants year-round at home or in the classroom. “Our Solar Science Lab has also been popular due to an increasing interest in renewable energy resources,” says Nancy Balter, instructional designer.

And Cleveland, Ohio-based Dunecraft is working on a Grow Your Own Tree series that will let kids sprout pines, oak, magnolias and birches, then transplant them directly outside in a biodegradable coconut pot. Says Grant Cleveland, company president, “There's a huge interest in environmental products from buyers, but it still remains to be seen how receptive the ultimate consumer is.”

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