

¶Toys are no toy business.

FOUR HUNDRED SIXTY MILLION PESOS FOR TOYS

EVERY year now the American toy industry takes in from the parents of the land the huge sum of \$230,000,000—a large part of it during the month before Christmas. There are as many as five hundred established toy manufacturers—with fifty or so newcomers popping up each year—and their struggles to get a share of that \$230,000,000 make the toy business the most unpredictable and deceptively angelic-looking of American industries.

The success of a toy does not depend on its effect on the child's development, but on its effect on the parent's pocket-book and on his or her eye for "cuteness." The successful toy is the one carefully designed to appeal to the ripened sense of parents—and the toy that fails is often the one that best meets the needs of growing children.

It cost one manufacturer several hundred dollars to find out that people are not yet ready to buy enough educational toys, or to pay enough for them, to support a company catering exclusively to that trade. Not having experienced such toys in

their own childhood, parents are totally unfamiliar with their greater advantages.

For example, nursery schools recognize that building blocks are basic pre-school material and that a young child has a definite need for larger blocks than any that can be obtained from commercial sources. Before he has finger control, he can't build; and he gets his satisfaction from picking things up and carrying them from one end of the room to the other. Large, hollow blocks—12 by 12 by 6 inches, or even 12 by 24 by 6 inches—which he has to struggle to lift, are ideal at this stage, when he should be developing his back and arm muscles, and co-ordinating balance with locomotion. At the next stage of growth his smaller muscles call for exercise, and the child by instinct begins to pile things. Brick-sized blocks are easily placed and stay placed without delicate adjustment, and therefore do not discourage him. Not until he is beginning to be capable of the eye-hand co-ordination required for precise balancing should he have

to contend with smaller blocks or any of the construction sets.

Nevertheless you'll look in vain for those larger blocks in the toy marts. They're not there because adults can't understand them. Wooden boxes and bricks don't look like toys to them. Only a two-year-old child can understand them, and his vocabulary is too limited to explain them to his parents. So he has to be content with a clockwork hula-hula dancer which he can't wind up himself and which gives him only a momentary sensation of color and motion when someone else is kind enough to play with it for him. And nursery schools who want blocks big enough to do the younger children some good have to have them made to order by local carpenters.

Even to sell the smaller construction blocks the makers must daub them with bright colors for the sole benefit of the parents. Small children will play with colored and uncolored blocks indiscriminately, but usually they get more pleasure from the uncolored kind, because color sometimes confuses their design forms and limits their constructive imagination. Nursery schools use natural-wood blocks for this reason. But the toy-giving relatives buy twice as many colored blocks as plain ones, even

though they cost half again as much.

Not only must a toy please the parents to succeed, but even after it is in the money it isn't sure of staying there. For the toy-buying public is fickle to the last degree. It quickly tires of new toys, demanding still newer ones, as well as a constant change in the appearance of those that are able to survive more than one season. This means much factory expense for new dies, molds, and boxes—and also it means losses on outmoded stock or raw materials. But change there must be.

There are few toys which cannot be imitated in spite of patents. The result is that business ethics are a luxury in the industry, and some of the most reputable toy firms have been built on a stringently pursued policy of pirating ideas from rivals. With everyone grabbing shares in a new idea, it is likely to be exploited into oblivion in the course of two or three seasons, during which time frenzied price competition has left little profit for anyone. The larger companies are said to have an agreement among themselves not to copy an original item of another company for two years; but if the toy is still a good seller after its normal span, the lid is off, and everyone jumps in. At one time there

were one hundred and ten different ring-toss games on the market. The chiseler's penalty is certain knowledge that any good idea he may have will likewise be appropriated, and that representatives of Japanese factories will be waiting for the stores to open in order to buy the first samples of his creation. In the Tinkertoy factory in Evanston, Illinois, I was shown a Japanese imitation of the construction set, faithful even to the trademark drawing and two typographical errors in the instruction sheet. The only difference, as merchants who stocked it soon learned, was that the rods didn't fit the holes and the hubs were bored by hand instead of machine, so inaccurately that you couldn't possibly build anything with it. The twenty-four American infringers at least offered more than a package of nerve.

Another paradox of this hectic, fascinating business is that the manufacturers who are able to beat the price-cutters at their own game, and remain profitably in the field, are almost invariably not toy specialists at all, but makers of anything else from brush handles to tombstones—companies to whom toys are just cake, and not a whole meal. The gamble is too hazardous for a new firm or one with limited finances. It

costs plenty to manufacture any toy, even a poor one.

What is more natural than for the American Electric Company to make a toy telephone (as well as supply the Bell Corporation with standard size parts), or for Brunswick-Balke-Collender to make small billiard tables, or for the Esty people to manufacture 2,000 children's reed organs a year? A producer of chainstore aluminum ware uses up the ends of sheets, and the small pieces that would otherwise be scrap, for stunted kitchen utensils which constitute 40 per cent of his total business.

Many successful toys, furthermore, have utilized the inventive talents of men who are qualified specialists in the adult provinces they seek to interpret for youth. The best-known airplane kit designer is a former Army aviation instructor. The inventors of the two outstanding wooden construction toys were architects of note.

Indeed, one of the dominating factors in the toy industry is a rank outsider who, without even entering the toy business, has affected its physiognomy and prosperity more than any other one man. Perhaps you have already guessed his name: Walt Disney. Figments of Disney's imagination sold more

than \$3,000,000 worth of toys in the first third of the year 1938. Not more than one manufacturer is licensed to use a Disney character or group for each type of toy. But the fact that 117 toy manufacturers have been licensed to use Snow White characters gives an idea of the hair-splitting that goes on in the name of exclusive li-

censes. And there's Disney's whole animal menagerie for another profitable subdivision. It is said, incidentally, that a Disney license is regarded as a better protection against infringers than a United States patent, which is considered in the trade as little more than a down payment on a lawsuit.—*Weldon Me-lick, condensed from Harper's.*

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Beautiful Words

THE ten most beautiful words in the English language—"beautiful in meaning and in the musical arrangement of their letters"—as compiled by Wilfred J. Funk, poet and lexicographer:

Dawn	Mist
Hush	Luminous
Lullaby	Chimes
Murmuring	Golden
Tranquil	Melody

—*From Youth.*

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Wonderful Medicine

A PATENT medicine manufacturing company received the following letter from a satisfied customer:

"I am very much pleased with your remedy. I had a wart on my chest, and after using six bottles of your medicine, it moved to my neck, and now I use it for a collar button."—*Lampoon.*