

Retailers are cashing in by catering to kids



By Angela
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MARKETING to children in these Bart Simpson days requires little more than luring tiny shoppers with fantasy-filled storefronts, live entertainment and brilliant primary colors. By blurring the lines between shopping and playing, some Canadian retailers have found that selling to children works best with a bit of imagination.

Kiddlywinks, a children's clothing and toy store based in Orangeville, Ont., is reeling in young shoppers.

Owners Peter Parrish, a former senior vice-president with A and A Records and Tapes, and Bobbi Hoadley, a child psychologist, have designed their *à la mode* store to keep a child's attention at all times.

Strategically placed by the store window is the children's play area, in full view of pedestrians and stray children.

"Our philosophy is to allow any kid to come in and play because the mother will soon follow," says Parrish. "They might not buy something today, but they might tomorrow."

"We don't apply any pressure to buy. If the kids have a good time at our store then they'll probably want to come back. We want to leave a positive impression with

our clients. Being community-friendly is important."

At Kiddlywinks, as at some other urban children's specialty stores, customers shop in a real-life toy house. Apart from the play area, Parrish and Hoadley have set the store entrance into a floor-to-ceiling tree trunk that acts as a prop during the weekly story-reading hour.

"We tell the kids that elves (the store's mascots) sleep inside the trunk during the day and make shoes for the store at night," says Parrish. "Elves are a logical character for a children's store to have as a mascot because they remind kids of toys, Christmas and shoes."

More subtle eye-pleasers are the primary colors that brighten the walls, the fancy washroom with a mural and flying kite on the ceiling and the free-for-all water cooler.

"We're trying to appeal to kids but the person we want to reach is the person who buys for them—mothers, fathers or grandparents," says Parrish.

"Our marketing advantage is that we offer an alternative to designer brands and toys that promote violence. We've also taken an ethical stand to sell only recycled school paper."

With only a small advertising budget, Kiddlywinks, like many other small retailers, relies heavily on in-store promotions, occasional ads in community newspapers, reputation and word of mouth. It has only used direct mail once—to announce the store opening.

"Our storefront has been our major selling point," says Parrish.

"The small extras we provide, like face painting for pre-schoolers, didn't really result in sales for us. Kids talk to their friends about our store and that brings new customers. From time to time we offer promotions like a free video rental with every \$20 purchase."

With another mini-baby boom on its way the children's market will be hot for the next five years, says Roni Bregman, a children's marketing consultant in Toronto.

"By 1995 20% of the Canadian population will be 16 or under," she says. "Although a recession will slow down spending, infant clothing and toys won't be affected because parents usually want to give their new baby the best of everything. But they will be price-conscious and expect quality goods."

In the last three years Canada has seen an increase in the number of retail stores that cater to children, including Toys R Us, Young Canada, Gap for Kids and Active Minds. The latter has found success in selling educational material, toys and literature to the young set.

Formed two years by Coles Book Stores, Toronto, Active Minds was the first store of its kind to try to attract customers through creative displays and play areas. Children can crawl into the store through a tunnel entrance, play and read in a special play area, watch in-store product demonstrations and attend author book signings.

"We did extensive research, found a void in the market for children's books and capitalized on it," says Sarah Strachan, vice-president of new business development.

In an effort to bill itself as more than just a book store Active Minds has become a participant in the environmental protection movement, actively discouraging the use of plastic shopping bags and encouraging customers to buy natural cotton bags reading "I have an Active Mind."

Promotion has generally been through the store's bi-monthly newsletter *Active News*, offering information for parents on literacy and recommended books and an activity page for children.

Success for Active Minds has brought on a new crop of creatively designed children's stores. The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe, an independent children's bookstore in Toronto, features a huge papier-mâché lion and white witch in the storefront and a wardrobe door as a children's entrance. There is no play area but lots of bright primary colors and quality texts.

Major clothing chains have been sprucing up their children's departments with familiar cartoon faces, brightly painted signs and popular items to entice young shoppers.

Bata Shoes, which successfully introduced Bubblegum characters to promote its children's line, is now mounting a poster T-shirt campaign to promote its new, hip Ground Level shoe.

"It's important to start developing brand awareness because kids generally see the product before the price," says Judith Hersh, Bata's advertising and visual merchandise manager.

"Using bright colors and cartoons has been a good drawing card for us, but generally kids' shoes don't require too much marketing on our part," she says.

"Kids know what they want and a lot of what they choose depends

on what their friends are wearing and what's hip. And in shoes it's Reebok."

In the last couple of months Reebok has seen children's shoe sales jump 40% and its children's athletic shoes sales increase 10%, says Murray Souter, vice-president of marketing at Reebok.

"We've tried to enhance Reebok as the popular brand to wear and

bike with a buck in his back pocket who will ride up to the store and grab a deli stick," says Lytch.

To sweeten the appeal of its deli sticks Shopsy's Ontario has launched a new ad campaign using video prizes and neon giveaways as bait. Whenever kids pick up a stick they become eligible to play touch-phone baseball by dialing an 800 number. Ten winners will be cho-



POP material, such as this poster for Reebok, can be found in the shoe department at Kiddlywinks

it's worked. Retailers are using our shoe as a traffic generator," Souter says.

"Middle-class parents are having fewer kids and indulging them more. This trend will continue even in a recession."

Label-conscious children, influenced by TV programming and advertising, are fast becoming a core group for companies like Shopsy's, which has a major ad program targeted directly to video-crazed children.

"Shopsy's deli sticks weren't selling well and that's because we were targeting the wrong group. Our research showed we should be marketing to kids," says Annette Beckett-Lytch, manager of agency services at Promotional Campaigns, the promotions arm of Ogilvy and Mather, Toronto.

"We realized we didn't have to sell mothers on deli sticks because moms aren't going to buy them," she says. "The person who's going to buy our product is the kid on the



sen at random to play Sega Genesis on the JumboTron screen at Toronto's SkyDome.

"To sell to kids we no longer have to go through the back door (their mothers) because today's kids, greatly influenced by television and peer pressure, pretty well know what they want to wear, eat and watch," says Beckett-Lytch. □ ANGELA BIANCHI is a Toronto freelance writer.