

CASE 6

Mattel Confronts Its Marketing Challenges*

Synopsis: As a global leader in toy manufacturing and marketing, Mattel faces a number of potential threats to its ongoing operations. Like most firms that market products for children, Mattel is ever mindful of its social and ethical obligations and the target on its corporate back. This case summarizes many of the challenges that Mattel has faced over the past decade, including tough competition, changing consumer preferences and lifestyles, lawsuits, product liability issues, global sourcing, and declining sales. Mattel's social responsibility imperative is discussed along with the company's reactions to its challenges and its prospects for the future.

Themes: Environmental threats, competition, social responsibility, marketing ethics, product/branding strategy, intellectual property, global marketing, product liability, global manufacturing/sourcing, marketing control

It all started in a California garage workshop when Ruth and Elliot Handler and Matt Matson founded Mattel in 1945. The company started out making picture frames, but the founders soon recognized the profitability of the toy industry and switched their emphasis to toys. Mattel became a publicly owned company in 1960, with sales exceeding \$100 million by 1965. Over the next forty years, Mattel went on to become the world's largest toy company in terms of revenue. Today, Mattel, Inc. is a global leader in designing and manufacturing toys and family products. Well-known for brands such as Barbie, Fisher-Price, Disney, Hot Wheels, Matchbox, Tyco, Cabbage Patch Kids, and board games, the company boasts nearly \$5.9 billion in annual revenue. Headquartered in El Segundo, California, with offices across the world, Mattel markets its products in over 150 nations.

In spite of its overall success, Mattel has had its share of losses over its history. During the mid to late 1990s, Mattel lost millions to declining sales and bad business acquisitions. In January 1997, Jill Barad took over as Mattel's CEO. Barad's management-style was characterized as strict and her tenure at the helm proved challenging for many employees. While Barad had been successful in building the Barbie brand to \$2 billion by the end of the 20th century, growth slowed in the early 2000s. Declining sales at outlets such as Toys "R" Us marked the start of some difficulties for the retailer, responsibilities for which Barad accepted and resigned in 2000.

Robert Eckert replaced Barad as CEO. Aiming to turn things around, Eckert sold unprofitable units and cut hundreds of jobs. In 2000, under Eckert, Mattel was granted

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the highly sought-after licensing agreement for products related to the *Harry Potter* series of books and movies. The company continued to flourish and build its reputation, even earning the Corporate Responsibility Award from UNICEF in 2003. Mattel released its first Annual Corporate Responsibility Report the following year. In 2011, Mattel was recognized as one of *Fortune* magazine's "100 Best Companies to Work For" for the fourth consecutive year.

Mattel's Core Products

Barbie

Among its many lines of popular toy products, Mattel is famous for owning top girls' brands. In 1959, Mattel introduced a product that would change its future forever: the Barbie doll. After seeing her daughter's fascination with cutout paper dolls, Ruth suggested that a three-dimensional doll should be produced so that young girls could live out their dreams and fantasies. This doll was named "Barbie," the nickname of Ruth and Elliot Handler's daughter. The first Barbie doll sported open-toed shoes, a ponytail, sunglasses, earrings, and a zebra-striped bathing suit. Fashions and accessories were also available for the doll. Although buyers at the annual Toy Fair in New York took no interest in the Barbie doll, little girls of the time certainly did. The intense demand seen at the retail stores was insufficiently met for several years. Mattel just could not produce the Barbie dolls fast enough. Today, Barbie is Mattel's flagship brand and its number one seller—routinely accounting for approximately half of Mattel's profits. This makes Barbie the best-selling fashion doll in most global markets. The Barbie line today includes dolls, accessories, Barbie software, and a broad assortment of licensed products such as books, apparel, food, home furnishings, home electronics, and movies.

Although Barbie remains a blockbuster by any standard, Barbie's popularity has slipped over the past twenty years. There are two major reasons for Barbie's slump. First, the changing lifestyles of today's young girls are a concern for Mattel. Many young girls prefer to spend time with music, movies, or the Internet than play with traditional toys like dolls. Second, Barbie has suffered at the hands of new and innovative competition, including the Bratz doll line that gained significant market share during the early 2000s. The dolls, which featured contemporary, ethnic designs and skimpy clothes, were a stark contrast to Barbie and an immediate hit with young girls. By 2005, four years after the brand's debut, Bratz sales were at \$2 billion. By 2009, Barbie's worldwide sales had fallen by 15 percent. In an attempt to recover, Mattel introduced the new line of My Scene dolls aimed at "tweens." These dolls are trendier, look younger, and are considered to be more hip for this age group who is on the cusp of outgrowing playing with dolls. A website (www.myscene.com) engages girls in a variety of fun, engaging, and promotional activities.

American Girl

In 1998, to supplement the Barbie line, Mattel acquired Pleasant Company and its American Girl collection for \$700 million. Originally, American Girl products were sold exclusively through catalogs. Mattel extended that base by opening American Girl Place shops in major metropolitan areas including New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, Atlanta, Dallas, Boston, Denver, Miami, and Minneapolis. The New York store features three floors of dolls, accessories, and books in the heart of the 5th Avenue shopping district. The store also offers a café where girls can dine with their dolls and a stage production where young actors bring American Girl stories to life. The American Girls brand

includes several book series, accessories, clothing for dolls and girls, and a magazine that ranks in the top 10 American children's magazines.

The American Girl collection is wildly popular with girls in the 7- to 12-year-old demographic. The dolls have a wholesome and educational image that offsets Barbie's image. This move by Mattel represented a long-term strategy to reduce reliance on traditional products and to take away the stigma surrounding the "perfect image" of Barbie. Each American Girl doll lives during a specific time in American history, and all have stories that describe the hardships they face while maturing into young adults. For example, Felicity's stories describe life in 1774 just prior to the Revolutionary War. Likewise, Josephina lives in New Mexico in 1824 during the rapid growth of the American West.

Hot Wheels

Hot Wheels roared into the toy world in 1968. More than thirty years later, the brand is hotter than ever and includes high-end collectibles, NASCAR (National Association for Stock Car Auto Racing) and Formula One models for adults, high-performance cars, track sets, and play sets for children of all ages. The brand is connected with racing circuits worldwide. More than 15 million boys aged 5 to 15 are avid collectors, each owning forty-one cars on average. Two Hot Wheels cars are sold every second of every day. The brand began with cars designed to run on a track and has evolved into a "lifestyle" brand with licensed Hot Wheels shirts, caps, lunch boxes, backpacks, and more. Together, Hot Wheels and Barbie generate 45 percent of Mattel's revenue and 65 percent of its profits.

Fisher-Price

Acquired in 1993 as a wholly owned subsidiary, Fisher-Price is the umbrella brand for all of Mattel's infant and preschool lines. The brand is trusted by parents around the world and appears on everything from children's software to eyewear, and books to bicycles. Some of the more classic products include the Rock-a-Stack, Power Wheels vehicles, and Little People play sets. Through licensing agreements, the brand also develops character-based toys such as *Sesame Street*'s Elmo, Disney's Winnie the Pooh, and Nickelodeon's Dora the Explorer.

Fisher-Price has built a trust with parents by creating products that are educational, safe, and useful. For example, during recent years, the brand has earned high regard for innovative car seats and nursery monitors. Fisher-Price keeps pace with the interests of today's families through innovative learning toys and award-winning products. One example is the Computer Cool School, a kid-friendly keyboard with a tablet and stylus, which turns a standard Windows-based computer into an interactive classroom for kids ages 3 to 6. The product was awarded the "Best Toy of 2008" by both *Parents Magazine* and *Family Fun Magazine*.

Cabbage Patch Kids

Since the introduction of mass-produced Cabbage Patch Kids in 1982, more than 90 million dolls have been sold worldwide. In 1994, Mattel took over selling these beloved dolls after purchasing production rights from Hasbro. In 1996, Mattel created a new line of Cabbage Patch doll, called Snacktime Kids, which was expected to meet with immense success. The Snacktime Kids had moving mouths that enabled children to "feed" them plastic snacks. However, the product backfired. The toy had no on/off switch and reports of children getting their fingers or hair caught in the dolls' mouths surfaced during the 1996 holiday season. Mattel voluntarily pulled the dolls from store shelves by January 1997, and offered consumers a cash refund of \$40 on returned dolls. The U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission applauded Mattel's handling of the Snacktime

Kids situation. Mattel effectively managed a situation that could easily have created bad publicity or a crisis situation. In 2001, Toys "R" Us took over the Cabbage Patch brand from Mattel.

Mattel's Commitment to Ethics and Social Responsibility

Mattel's core products and business environment create many challenging issues. Because the company's products are designed primarily for children, it must be sensitive to social concerns about children's rights. It must also be aware that the international environment often complicates business transactions. Different legal systems and cultural expectations about business can create ethical conflicts. Finally, the use of technology may present ethical dilemmas, especially regarding consumer privacy. Mattel has recognized these potential issues and taken steps to strengthen its commitment to business ethics. The company also purports to take a stand on social responsibility, encouraging its employees and consumers to do the same.

Privacy and Marketing Technology

One issue Mattel has tried to address repeatedly is that of privacy and online technology. Advances in technology have created special marketing issues for Mattel. The company recognizes that, because it markets to children, it must communicate with parents regarding its corporate marketing strategy. Mattel has taken steps to inform both children and adults about its philosophy regarding Internet-based marketing tools, such as the Hot Wheels website. This website contains a lengthy online privacy policy, part of which is excerpted below:

Mattel, Inc. and its family of companies ("Mattel") are committed to protecting your online privacy when visiting a website operated by us. We do not collect and keep any personal information online from you unless you volunteer it and you are 13 or older. We also do not collect and keep personal information online from children under the age of 13 without consent of a parent or legal guardian, except in limited circumstances authorized by law and described in this policy....¹

By assuring parents that their children's privacy will be respected, Mattel demonstrates that it takes its responsibility of marketing to children seriously.

Expectations of Mattel's Business Partners

Mattel, Inc. also makes a serious commitment to business ethics in its dealings with other industries. In late 1997, the company completed its first full ethics audit of each of its manufacturing sites as well as the facilities of its primary contractors. The audit revealed that the company was not using any child labor or forced labor, a problem plaguing other overseas manufacturers. However, several contractors were found to be in violation of Mattel's safety and human rights standards and were asked to change their operations or risk losing Mattel's business. The company now conducts an independent monitoring council audit in manufacturing facilities every three years.

In an effort to continue its strong record on human rights and related ethical standards, Mattel instituted a code of conduct entitled Global Manufacturing Principles in 1997. One of these principles requires all Mattel-owned and contracted manufacturing facilities to favor business partners committed to ethical standards comparable with

¹Mattel, Inc., Online Privacy Policy (<http://corporate.mattel.com/privacy-policy.aspx>), accessed July 17, 2012.

those of Mattel. Other principles relate to safety, wages, and adherence to local laws. Mattel's audits and subsequent code of conduct were designed as preventative, not punitive measures. The company is dedicated to creating and encouraging responsible business practices throughout the world.

Mattel also claims to be committed to its workforce. As one company consultant noted, "Mattel is committed to improving the skill level of workers... [so that they] will experience increased opportunities and productivity." This statement reflects Mattel's concern for relationships between and with employees and business partners. The company's code is a signal to potential partners, customers, and other stakeholders that Mattel has made a commitment to fostering and upholding ethical values.

Legal and Ethical Business Practices

Mattel prefers to partner with businesses similarly committed to high ethical standards. At a minimum, partners must comply with the local and national laws of the countries in which they operate. In addition, all partners must respect the intellectual property of the company, and support Mattel in the protection of assets such as patents, trademarks, or copyrights. They are also responsible for product safety and quality, protecting the environment, customs, evaluation and monitoring, and compliance.

Mattel's business partners must have high standards for product safety and quality, adhering to practices that meet Mattel's safety and quality standards. Also, because of the global nature of Mattel's business and its history of leadership in this area, the company insists that business partners strictly adhere to local and international customs laws. Partners must also comply with all import and export regulations. To assist in compliance with standards, Mattel insists that all manufacturing facilities provide the following:

- Full access for on-site inspections by Mattel or parties designated by Mattel
- Full access to those records that will enable Mattel to determine compliance with its principles
- An annual statement of compliance with Mattel's Global Manufacturing Principles, signed by an officer of the manufacturer or manufacturing facility

With the creation of the Mattel Independent Monitoring Council (MIMCO), Mattel became the first global consumer products company to apply such a system to facilities and core contractors worldwide. The company seeks to maintain an independent monitoring system that provides checks and balances to help ensure that standards are met.

If certain aspects of Mattel's manufacturing Principles are not being met, Mattel will try to work with them to help them fix their problems. New partners will not be hired unless they meet Mattel's standards. If corrective action is advised but not taken, Mattel will terminate its relationship with the partner in question. Overall, Mattel is committed to both business success and ethical standards, and it recognizes that it is part of a continuous improvement process.

Mattel Children's Foundation

Mattel takes its social responsibilities very seriously. Through the Mattel Children's Foundation, established in 1978, the company promotes philanthropy and community involvement among its employees and makes charitable investments to better the lives of children in need. Funding priorities have included building a new Mattel Children's Hospital at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), sustaining the Mattel Family Learning Program, and promoting giving among Mattel employees. In November 1998, Mattel donated a multiyear, \$25 million gift to the UCLA Children's Hospital. The gift was meant to support the existing hospital and provide for a new state-of-

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Early in the 1970s, when cars were still made by hand, Mattel's Mingshi products, which were friendly to operators, were popular. Later, when mass production began, the children's toys were no longer handmade.

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Mattel's principles cover issues such as wages, work hours, child labor, forced labor, discrimination, freedom of association, and working conditions. Workers must be paid at least minimum wage or a wage that meets local industry standards (whichever is greater). No one under the age of 16 or the local age limit (whichever is higher) may be allowed to work for Mattel facilities. Mattel refuses to work with facilities that use forced or prison labor, or to use these types of labor itself. Additionally, Mattel does not tolerate discrimination. The company states that an individual should be hired and employed based on his or her ability—not on individual characteristics or beliefs. Mattel recognizes all employees' rights to choose to associate with organizations or associations without interference. Regarding working conditions, all Mattel facilities and its business partners must provide safe working environments for their employees.

Despite Mattel's best efforts, not all overseas manufacturers have faithfully adhered to its high standards. Mattel has come under scrutiny over its sale of unsafe products. In September 2007, Mattel announced recalls of toys containing lead paint. The problem surfaced when a European retailer discovered lead paint on a toy. An estimated 10 million individual toys produced in China were affected. Mattel quickly stopped production at Lee Der, the company officially producing the recalled toys, after it was discovered that Lee Der had purchased lead-tainted paint to be used on the toys. Mattel blamed the fiasco on the manufacturers' desire to save money in the face of increasing prices. "In the last three or five years, you've seen labor prices more than double, raw material prices double or triple," CEO Eckert said in an interview, "and I think that there's a lot of pressure on guys that are working at the margin to try to save money."

The situation began when Early Light Industrial Co., a subcontractor for Mattel owned by Hong Kong toy tycoon Choi Chee Ming, subcontracted the painting of parts of *Cars* toys to another China-based vendor. The vendor, named Hong Li Da, decided to source paint from a non-authorized third-party supplier—a violation of Mattel’s requirement to use paint supplied directly by Early Light. The products were found to contain “impermissible levels of lead.” On August 2, 2007, it was announced that another of

Early Light's subcontractors, Lee Der Industrial Co., used the same lead paint found on Cars products. China immediately suspended the company's export license. Afterward, Mattel pinpointed three paint suppliers working for Lee Der—Dongxin, Zhongxin, and Mingdai. This paint was used by Lee Der to produce Mattel's line of Fisher-Price products. It is said that Lee Der purchased the paint from Mingdai due to an intimate friendship between the two company's owners. On August 11, 2007, Zhang Shuhong, operator of Lee Der, hung himself after paying his 5,000 staff members.

Later that month, Mattel was forced to recall several more toys because of powerful magnets in the toys that could come loose and pose a choking hazard for young children. If more than one magnet is swallowed, the magnets can attract each other inside the child's stomach, causing potentially fatal complications. Over 21 million Mattel toys were recalled in all, and parents filed several lawsuits claiming that these Mattel products harmed their children.

Mattel's Response

At first, Mattel blamed Chinese subcontractors for the huge toy recalls, but the company later accepted a portion of the blame for its troubles, while maintaining that Chinese manufacturers were largely at fault. The Chinese view the situation quite differently. As reported by the state-run Xinhua news agency, the spokesman for China's General Administration of Quality Supervision and Inspection and Quarantine said, "Mattel should improve its product design and supervision over product quality. Chinese original equipment manufacturers were doing the job just as importers requested, and the toys conformed to the U.S. regulations and standards at the time of the production." Mattel also faced criticism from many of its consumers, who believed Mattel was denying culpability by placing much of the blame on China. Mattel was later awarded the 2007 "Bad Product" Award by Consumers International.

Many critics asked how this crisis occurred under the watch of a company praised for its ethics and high safety standards. Although Mattel had investigated its contractors, it did not audit the entire supply chain, including subcontractors. These oversights left room for these violations to occur. Mattel has also moved to enforce a rule that subcontractors cannot hire suppliers two or three tiers down. In a statement, Mattel says it has spent more than 50,000 hours investigating its vendors and testing its toys. Mattel also announced a three-point plan. This plan aims to tighten Mattel's control of production, discover and prevent the unauthorized use of subcontractors, and test the products itself rather than depending on contractors.

The Chinese Government's Response

Chinese officials eventually did admit the government's failure to properly protect the public. The Chinese government promised to tighten supervision of exported products, but effective supervision is challenging in such a large country that is so burdened with corruption. In January 2008, the Chinese government launched a four-month-long nationwide product quality campaign, offering intensive training courses to domestic toy manufacturers to help them brush up on their knowledge of international product standards and safety awareness. As a result of the crackdown, the State Administration for Quality Supervision and Inspection and Quarantine (AQSIQ) announced that it had revoked the licenses of more than 600 Chinese toy makers. As of 2008, the State Administration for Commerce and Industry (SACI) released a report claiming that 87.5 percent of China's newly manufactured toys met quality requirements. While this represents an improvement, the temptation to cut corners remains strong in a country that uses price, not quality, as its main competitive advantage. Where there is demand, there will be people trying to turn a quick profit.

Mattel's Intellectual Property Fight with Bratz

In 2004, Mattel became embroiled in a bitter intellectual property rights battle with former employee Carter Bryant and MGA Entertainment Inc. over rights to MGA's popular Bratz dolls. Carter Bryant, an on-again/off-again Mattel employee, designed the Bratz dolls and pitched them to MGA. A few months after the pitch, Bryant left Mattel to work at MGA, which began producing Bratz in 2001. In 2002, Mattel launched an investigation into whether Bryant had designed the Bratz dolls while employed with Mattel. After two years of investigation, Mattel sued Bryant. A year later MGA fired off a suit of its own, claiming that Mattel was creating Barbie dolls with looks similar to those of Bratz in an effort to eliminate the competition. Mattel answered by expanding its own suit to include MGA and its CEO, Isaac Larian.

Four years after the initial suit was filed, Bryant settled with Mattel under an undisclosed set of terms. In July 2008, a jury deemed MGA and its CEO liable for what it termed "intentional interference" regarding Bryant's contract with Mattel. In August 2008, Mattel received damages in the range of \$100 million. Although Mattel first requested damages of \$1.8 billion, the company is pleased with the principle behind the victory.

In December 2008, Mattel appeared to win another victory when a California judge banned MGA from issuing or selling any more Bratz dolls. However, the tide soon turned on Mattel's victory. In July 2010, the Ninth U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals threw out the ruling. Eventually, the case came down to whether Mattel owned Bryant's ideas under the contract he had with the company. In April 2011, a California federal jury rejected Mattel's claims to ownership. In another blow to Mattel, the jury also ruled that the company had stolen trade secrets from MGA. According to the allegations, Mattel employees used fake business cards to get into MGA showrooms during toy fairs. Mattel was ordered to pay \$85 million in liabilities, plus an additional \$225 million in damages and legal fees. MGA CEO Isaac Larian has also announced that he will file an antitrust case against Mattel. Mattel continues to claim that Bryant violated his contract when he was working for the company.

Mattel Looks Toward the Future

Like all major companies, Mattel has weathered its share of storms. The company has faced a series of difficult and potentially crippling challenges, including the recent verdict against the company in the Bratz lawsuit. During the wave of toy recalls, some analysts suggested that the company's reputation was battered beyond repair. Mattel, however, has refused to go quietly. Although the company admits to poorly handling recent affairs, it is attempting to rectify its mistakes and to prevent future mistakes as well. The company appears to be dedicated to shoring up its ethical defenses to protect both itself and its customers. Mattel's experiences should teach all companies that threats could materialize within the marketing environment in spite of the best-laid plans to prevent such issues from occurring.

With the economic future of the United States uncertain, Mattel may be in for slow growth for some time to come. Today, Mattel faces many market opportunities and threats including the rate at which children are growing up and leaving toys, the role of technology in consumer products, and purchasing power and consumer needs in global markets. The continuing lifestyle shift of American youth is of particular concern for Mattel. The phenomenal success of gaming systems, portable media devices, smartphones, and social networking sites among today's youth is a testament to this shift. Children and teens are also more active in extracurricular activities (i.e., sports, music,

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and volunteerism) than ever before. Consequently, these young consumers have less time to spend with traditional toys.

Despite these concerns, Mattel has a lot to offer both children and investors. Barbie remains the number one doll in the United States and worldwide. And Barbie.com, the number one website for girls, routinely gets over 50 million visits per month. Furthermore, all of Mattel's core brands are instantly recognizable around the world. Hence, the ability to leverage one or all of these brands is high. A few remaining issues include Mattel's reliance on major retailers, such as Walmart, Target, Toys "R" Us, and Amazon (which lessens Mattel's pricing power), volatile oil prices (oil is used to make plastics), and increasing competition on a global scale. However, analysts believe Mattel has a great growth potential with technology-based toys, especially in international markets, in spite of changing demographic and socioeconomic trends.

For a company that began with two friends making picture frames, Mattel has demonstrated marketing dexterity and longevity. The next few years, however, will test the firm's resolve. Mattel is hard at work restoring goodwill and faith in its brands, even as it continues to be plagued with residual distrust over the lead paint scandal and its alleged theft of trade secrets. Reputations are hard won and easily lost, but Mattel appears to be steadfast in its commitment to restoring its reputation.

Questions for Discussion

1. Do manufacturers of products for children have special obligations to consumers and society? If so, what are these responsibilities?
2. How effective has Mattel been at encouraging ethical and legal conduct by its manufacturers? What changes and additions would you make to the company's global manufacturing principles?
3. To what extent is Mattel responsible for issues related to its production of toys in China? How might Mattel have avoided these issues?

Sources

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