

**Toy stories, horror stories and fairy tales:
The role of the media in promoting responsible corporate
behaviour**

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Brighton Business School
University of Brighton
Occasional/Working Paper Series
Working Paper No. 12
December 2007

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ISBN: 978-1-905593-32-3

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Abstract

With consumers increasingly demanding that business acts responsibly, a key source of information in assessing an industry's ethical credentials is the media. Its powerful influence can highlight perceived ethical abuses and change corporate behaviour. It has however a responsibility itself to give a fair and balanced view on issues (toy stories), in not selling itself merely through scare mongering (horror stories), and in not exaggerating or making false accusations (fairy stories). This paper examines the media's treatment of the British traditional toy industry and concludes that the industry may need to find other communication vehicles to convey to consumers its responsible deeds.

Key words: Media, Corporate Responsibility, Consumers, Toys

Introduction

The traditional toy industry in Europe is under pressure for many reasons; downward pricing pressures, consolidation of toy retailers, stringent toy safety legislation, falling birth rates and growing competition for children's present lists such as that posed by electronic consoles' and games' suppliers such as Sony, Microsoft and Nintendo to name but a few. But perhaps one of its most challenging dilemmas is how to convey to consumers that it is a caring, responsible industry with children's well being at heart (Hogan 2006).

The drive for the industry to become more responsible, open and trustworthy has come from a number of sources; from the industry itself, from some individual toy companies and their visionary founders and leaders, from legislators under pressure to tighten policy around marketing to children, and from a growing band of consumers who demand fairness, openness, sensitivity and integrity in targeting them and their susceptible and vulnerable children.

An important source of influence on corporate behaviour and consumer attitudes that appears to have been less frequently explored in the marketing area is that of the media. We live not only in the 'ethics era' (Smith 1995) but also in the 'multi-media era' where people turn to media (in print, visual and electronic form) to be informed and entertained. In the UK alone, around 12 million national newspapers are bought each day (Audit Bureau of Circulation October, 2006), the average television viewing is nearly 4 hours per day (BARB January, 2006) and, according to a 2006 Google survey, the average Britain spends around 164 minutes online every day (The Guardian 2006). Such weighty, regular contact not only gives the media enormous opportunity to sway public opinion but also places a large onus of responsibility on them to report accurately and comment critically but fairly. The media have been seen to influence opinion and behaviour in many different areas such as what political party to vote for (Ramsey 1992), highlighting health awareness issues (Howe et al. 2003) and even triggering childhood aggression (Lister 2005).

Whilst the media seems to often portray itself as the 'consumers' champion', it has to be careful not to overstep the mark relying on business to supply many of its stories (via press

releases) and provide much of its profit via advertising, sponsorship, advertorials and promotional offers. However whether journalists and media owners are more interested in story telling rather than truth telling when the latter has greater entertainment value and sales value is not clear (Kovach 1998) and it is only recently that the BBC for example has launched its first corporate social responsibility report (Living Public Value December, 2004), "...joining a small but growing number of media organisations that have begun to assess their influence and measure the impact they have on the social, political and cultural life of the nation" (Armstrong 2004).

As it battles to promote its positive qualities, the toy industry is highly aware of the media's influence on consumers as David Lipman, the founder of JAKKS Pacific/Kidz Biz, a leading international toy company points out: "...the public has a very bad perception of the toy industry and this needs to change. In most instances, this bad perception is actually driven by the media." (Toy News January, 2003: 55).

Such comments stem from a feeling in the industry that rather than extolling the technical wizardry of the new remote-controlled robot or the cunning ingenuity of the latest mind-bending game, the media has a habit of focusing on shock stories; the rare product with a potentially dangerous design or manufacturing defect found for sale in a street market; the trendy toy that has sold out in the shops and will lead to thousands of disappointed children on Christmas day; the low wages or poor working conditions of toy workers in the developing world; or the ultimate horror story for parents, the exorbitant prices of this year's most popular toys and how much the average parent is spending on each of their children. Such stories led one toy company director interviewed to comment:

"I don't really know where journalists come from. There are very few journalists who write positive things about anything in truth!"

But does the media only report on the negatives and does their coverage fairly or unfairly influence consumers' perceptions of the toy industry at a time when the moral issues about marketing to young children continue to be debated? Is the media skewing the argument or is it actually improving ethical standards in the industry? The purpose of this paper is to objectively consider the role of the media in raising ethical issues and encouraging better

corporate social responsibility and is based upon some recent qualitative research carried out with senior toy industry executives and toy consumers.

Methodology

The idea for this topic stemmed from a wider qualitative study of how the toy industry builds trust with parents. It became apparent when looking at secondary data and talking with both toy industry representatives and toy consumers just how influential the media is in swaying opinion about types of toy, toy company behaviour and child vulnerability (particularly with regard to the thorny issues of pester power and peer pressure). The qualitative research approach was considered most appropriate in view of the exploratory nature and behavioural focus of this research, over a relatively small sample and covering potentially personal and sensitive issues such as ethical behaviour, social responsibility and child/parental vulnerability. The main benefit of selecting this approach has been its focus on, “naturally occurring ordinary events in natural settings” (Miles and Huberman 1994: 10) that has made it possible to gain an understanding of the ‘real life’ context and, by using a semi-structured question format, to probe and explore managerial behaviour and views. This has been underpinned by the fact that data were collected face-to-face and on company premises rather than through the post, e-mail, or over the phone.

Personal interviews were held during 2003/2004 with 15 senior toy executives from leading toy companies in the UK (including 7 of the top 10 companies by market share), from the British Toy and Hobby Association (the industry’s representative body) and from 2 of the largest toy retailers in the country. A further study in 2005 also gathered data from in-depth interviews with twelve parents with children between 1-12 years of age.

A responsible role for the media?

Because toys are such an important part of children’s early lives (Kline 1993), stories about children’s toys and games frequently appear in the media, particularly newspapers and magazines and their associated websites. Such stories emanate from their own journalists and commentators, from other research organisations (for example, universities, syndicated research organisations), from NGO’s with an interest in child,

consumer and environmental welfare (for example, Bernado's, Consumers Association, Friends of the Earth) and from the toy industry itself (through press releases).

There is a seemingly important role for the media to play in exposing and publicising ethically dubious practices in children's markets. Raising such issues brings concerns into the open for debate and discussion and keeps companies on their toes. This perhaps contributed to the numerous comments from the managers interviewed that there is no hiding place for toy companies who must always therefore be seen to be doing the 'right' things.

There are a number of areas where the media might argue it has raised important issues about toys and toy company behaviour that are in the public interest and that have brought about change. The media has for example highlighted toys containing potentially hazardous materials such as lead in paints or phthalates in plastics, or reported on toys and games that could cause harm (such as the dangers of children playing unsupervised on garden trampolines). In 2003, it raised the initial concerns of some parents about the Yo-Ball, a Yo-Yo on an elastic string that potentially might have become wrapped around a child's neck. Creating awareness to the possible danger subsequently led the British Government to call for additional safety tests and resulted in the toy being banned, the first such incident for over a decade (Bird 2003). The media, more controversially, also raise concerns over what it deems to be unsuitable or distasteful children's products (for example, a Barbie doll dressed in lace lingerie or a range of licensed McDonald's toys), or over toys that might lead to aggressive boy's behaviour (toy guns) or an unhealthy obsession with wizardry (Harry Potter merchandise).

The media has reported on irresponsible and illegal toy company behaviour. Wide coverage was given to the substantial Office of Fair Trading fines handed down to one of the leading toy companies Hasbro and two retailers Argos and Littlewoods in 2003 for allegedly colluding over toy retail prices (Rankine 2004). This has made the industry think very carefully about its pricing policies and the need to remain within the competition laws, whatever the motive.

The media has also exposed a number of possible abuses of toy workers. Ethical Consumer (2002) cites reports by the US National Labor Committee of worker

exploitation in toy factories in China by some of the leading brands including Mattel, Disney, and Hasbro. More recently, there have been reports of strikes and protests over pay and conditions in China's Guangdong province that accounts for 70 per cent of global toy production (Spencer 2004). The toy industry there employs almost one million people in 5000 factories, many with barred windows, where workers are locked in for up to 18 hour shifts (August 2003). Other reports have highlighted seven-day working weeks, 360-day working years, and fines for non-attendance. Pay also seems low with a minimum wage of 450 Juan per month, around £30 (Spencer 2004). It is perhaps such coverage that has contributed to the British toy industry signing up to the ICTI (International Congress of Toy Industries) code in 2004, a global ethical manufacturing initiative designed to improve the pay and working conditions of toy workers in the developing world (BTHA 2004).

Finally, the environmental credentials of the toy industry are regularly raised. With most toys made of plastic, concerns have been raised about the disposal of discarded toys. A 2006 Local Government Association report estimates that 8000 tons of battery-operated toys are thrown away every year in the UK (Harper 2006) and although much of this waste can be blamed on consumers, the industry appears to have done little to date in incorporating more biodegradable materials into their production, other than in packaging, nor moving away from disposable batteries as the main power source of toys. This may change when the new European Waste and Electronic Equipment Directive comes into force in July, 2007 which will put more responsibility for toy recycling on manufacturers rather than consumers (Wallop 2004).

The toy industry position

Most managers in the sample recognised that the media has a job to do and they were trying to work closely with journalists through personal contact, press packs, and press releases. As one pointed out though, you cannot control what the media are ultimately going to say:

“Sometimes they might not write nice things about your toy but again in business those are the risks you take. We actively talk to them about what we're doing... We've nothing to hide here. At the end of the day, we encourage them to write about what we are doing and

if they don't like it, well they don't like it. And if they write they don't like it, that's their prerogative..."

A few managers saw the media's role as fair and sometimes even of benefit to the industry and particularly to responsible toy companies:

"In principle, I think that our children do need protecting and I believe in freedom of the press and investigative journalism and if they find something, they should bring it out. And that's fine. I am all for toy companies that are unfairly exploiting children being exposed!"

Other respondents however considered the media to be overly negative, arguing that it is headlines about the psychological and physical dangers of products rather than their play and educational values that tend to be the norm. Some considered that the industry was sometimes picked on because of its focus on children and the fact that toys and toy giving are still such an important part of Christmas:

"I think it [the media coverage of toys] probably is unfair. At the end of the day, for children to learn, they have to play. There are lots of different ways children can play but a lot of play is through toys. It's always one of those emotive things that makes the headlines and will continue to do so. Many people have children, and even those that don't have an opinion, so it's an easy topic to target. But the toy industry does an awful lot of good, whether it is directly in bringing the simple pleasure of playing with the toys to the work with charities, on child safety and everything else."

This latter comment reflected the views of many managers who argued that the industry was being responsible in many ways that rarely, if ever, was reported. The enormous investment in toy innovation, development and safety rarely makes the headlines, nor does the adoption of the ICTI code, nor the charitable work the industry does with disadvantaged children through its Toy Trust (www.btha.co.uk).

Another manager believed that some journalists fabricated stories and referred to a claim that had been made in one newspaper in the United States that some of her company's

products contained asbestos. There was no foundation at all to the story and the article created a lot of unnecessary disruption for the company concerned.

Inaccurate reporting in other ways could also have serious consequences for sales. An example was given of a children's ice cream maker, the 'McFlurry', which was featured on the BBC 1 consumer affairs programme 'Watchdog' in 2003. The presenters carried out a live demonstration of what they alleged to be the poor performance of the toy. It was claimed that the demonstration had been flawed as some ingredients had been mixed in a different order to the instructions but the coverage devastated sales of the product.

Discussion

So should we have some sympathy for the toy industry that contributes so positively to giving our young people a happy childhood? Well, perhaps a little. Whilst the toy industry continues to target young children rather than their parents (thereby encouraging pester power), there will always be a sense that they are being irresponsible, taking advantage, and yet there do appear to be areas where the industry is trying hard to address societal concerns and to become more responsible and trustworthy. Unfortunately in competitive markets where companies are fighting for their survival the few companies that are tempted to push the boundary of what is ethically acceptable or legally permitted provide the media with its future storylines and the legislators with the grounds to tighten regulation. Even one transgression seems to tarnish the whole industry and like other industries it suffers from many problems that are difficult for it to control. Around one in ten toys sold is estimated to be counterfeit; three retailers in the UK account for over half of all toy sales giving them enormous sway and buying power, and toys are losing out to other entertainment products as children abandon toys and games at ever-younger ages (Key Note 2004). The toy companies also argue that they have little influence over peer pressures on children or what will become the playground's next 'must have' toy. As one senior executive commented:

"I have been working in the industry for twenty years and you still get taken by surprise. I don't know what winds kids up. I don't think any of us understands it"

The media perform a valuable societal role in bringing important ethical issues to the attention of time-pressed consumers but it is also let down by the odd journalist who engages in writing fairy stories. The media are a strong voice with the power to influence opinion and consumer purchase behaviour. Although it appears that generally it is the bad practice that makes the headlines, there is some coverage of positive aspects of the industry, the new 'clever' toys, news from the national toy exhibition or the latest toy awards although these tend to be found in the smaller column inches.

Many consumers however seem to like being shocked by media horror stories and the media might argue that it is these headlines that grab the attention. In later interviews with the consumer sample it became clear that they know little about most toy companies, about where toys are made or what they are made of, or the industry's social responsibility initiatives. They also tended to form closer relationships with the toy retailers rather than specific manufacturer brands. The consumers relied heavily on the media to provide information about toys and claimed that positive or negative reporting would sway their future purchasing decisions. The implications of this are that the industry needs to continue in its efforts to persuade the media to adopt a more balanced approach in truthful story telling and consider new ways of reaching consumers with messages both directly and through retailers.

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