



Welcome to Smellville, Ill. Bring your own mask

By Monica Eng, Tribune staff reporter

Kids having a blast with smelly dolls

Chicago. Home of the first atomic chain reaction. Center of some of the 20th Century's most progressive art, architectural and intellectual thought. And the only city in the country where you can buy a toy that simulates the smell of a noxious human emission.

The toys are called Stink Blasters, squeezable three-inch dolls designed to break wind up to 30,000 times on demand. Already available in 31 countries, the little rubber toy is being test-marketed in our city to see if it is likely to blast off stateside. The jury is still out.

But how does our city come to deserve this odiferous honor?

"We chose Chicago because our American distributor in Toronto [Spin Master Ltd.], is familiar with this market and wanted to try it out there," says Daniel Senton, vice president for development and manufacturing of the toy at the California based company MEG.

"Plus," says marketing director Barbara Lewis, who apparently couldn't resist: "Chicago is the windy city."

The manufacturer and the distributor for the toy were evasive when it came to sales figures, but a quick round of calls and visits to the Chicago area stores revealed that some had sold out of the toys, others had stopped carrying them, and others were hoping to get a shipment of the product soon.

A common refrain was one of miss-timing, Stinkblasters were slow sellers before commercials began airing on children's TV programs this summer. Often, by the time customer demand swelled, the toys had been sold off in clearance. Most of the area KB Toys stores we called said they were hoping to get a shipment in soon because people were asking for them.

But it is safe to assume that the Chicago area now has a few thousand of these smelly creatures lurking on store shelves and stinking up children's rooms, thanks to Joe Morrison, who was responsible for the ultrapopular Masters of the Universe series of characters.

"My colleague Joe had been thinking about this for a very long time," Senton says, "but a few years ago we finally got around to making them, and after a year of development, we had a finished product."

The idea was to create a world called Smellville, full of stinky children who had friends and nemeses and varying degrees of stink power. Each of the odiferous urchins comes with a "smell containment unit" to store it in, a trading card and a back story. Already anticipating adult resistance, MEG priced the collectible dolls at \$4.99 so kids could buy them with their own money.

Stinky formulas

And although there are 24 distinct characters so far, MEG admits it did not come up with 24 different stenches or as the manufacturers say, formula.

"We vary the smell intensity for the various dolls, but it would be difficult to come up with 24 different formulas," Senton says. "You are very limited by

using safe ingredients. We had to do a lot of toy safety testing in independent labs. We worked with a lot of scientists to review the ingredients in combination. But, for example, there is more than one fish smell we developed."

"And there is only one broccoli [for Broccoli Bill]," adds Lewis, "and only one garlic [for Garlic Gus]."

Senton worked with a few American labs to develop the smell formulas, which are about 95 percent polypropylene glycol (used most commonly as a moisture carrying agent in cosmetics).

The last 5 percent are oils and food flavorings and extracts," Senton says.

In developing the odors, the lab would send the sample stenches to MEG, where the creative types would sit around in sniffing meetings.

"It is not exactly like wine tasting, but we have to approve and give comments about it like any other creative person," Senton says. "We have to smell something that is supposed to smell like Porta Potty Paul and then try to come up with creative ways to discuss what we would like to change. Quite often we would go outside to do it so there would be a breeze."

Secret Ingredients

Though the dolls are manufactured in China, Senton stresses the importance of developing the secret odor formulas in the U.S. and guarding the secrets. He becomes dodgy when pressed on formula ingredients.

"The reason I am being cagey is because it is a competitive environment and with toys especially, there are knockoffs," he says. "If we made (the odors) in Asia, we would not only lose control of the quality, but the formulas and the development would be common knowledge, and everyone would be doing it. We can't tell you what goes in the last 5 percent of the formula because it is a very competitive business."

While each Stink Blaster comes with a life story and there are often references to sisters and to friends who are girls, there are still no female Stink Blaster characters. That was intentional, says Senton.

"We did a lot of backwards and forwards about that," he explains. "We have girl characters in the stories. But we couldn't convince ourselves that anyone would want to buy a bad smelling girl. It didn't seem appealing to anyone. We are actually in development on a girl's concept in which the girls live in the same world as Stink Blasters, but I mean who would want to buy a nasty smelling girl? I think people can get their heads around boys being grungy, smelly kids, but it is not appealing to anyone to have a girl who does not wash her socks."

Although Stink Blasters' representatives were mum on the exact numbers of units sold in the States, Senton reckons that about 2 million stinky dolls have been shipped worldwide: 200,000 to the Czech Republic alone.

One of the most successful markets has been Australia, where, says Senton, one headmistress has already banned them from her school on the basis that they could aggravate student allergies.

"But I wanted to write back because we have been very careful to not include allergenic things like nuts,



B.O. Brian, Garbage Truck Chuck and Broccoli Bill have a certain air about them.

dairy, and eggs," he says.

And while some high concept toys don't translate well across cultures, the Stink Blasters joke was one that many international toys could grasp right away.

"What we have found is they really do speak an international language," Lewis says. "We even sold it in India, and someone who knows the business said that is so unusual. It is good to know that in this day and age there is still a common denominator among all people."

Translated names

But though the concept and odor speak a universal language, the names of individual characters need some translation when they ventured abroad. So, for example, Barfin' Ben is "Vito Vomito", Blue Cheese Bob is called "Nicola Gorgonzola" and Cow Patty Matty becomes "Tony Caca de Vaca."

In addition to the toys' cross cultural benefits, the manufacturers tout with no apparent irony the empowering nature of a flatulent doll.

"It gives (kids) the power," says Lewis. "Instead of imagining that he is a superhero or a race car driver, the kid gets the power to blast their friends and gross out their friends. It is one of the few toys today that are interactive but don't have a computer chip in it."

"Most toys that you buy for kids don't do anything and you have to imagine everything," says Senton. "This has actually got a physical play pattern. You are actually doing something."

Many parents don't see this aspect and just want the toys out of their houses.

"But you know that only makes the kids want it even more," says Harold Chizick, director of marketing for Spin Master. "Kids love it, but the parents hate it. So we priced it as an impulse, lower priced item, and kids can make their own decision when purchasing it. It is not like anyone is going to get hurt from it."

Although finding Chicago stores that carry the toy is a spotty proposition at this time, Spin Master says they will continue to test the toy in the area until its national launch early next year. Until then, Chicago will be the center of Smellville.