

Marketers Looking to Break Through Cultural Clutter:
Take Cues From Japan
Guest Column by Paul Kurnit

There are so many toys launched every year, yet so many make little news or noise. Some enjoy modest success. And, a very few break through and become runaway hits -- even cultural phenomena -- because they are a combination of new, eclectic and unexpected ideas.

Many of these are products that have broken, extended or twisted paradigms of expected play. Often they are ideas that American mindsets have not conceived of -- in fact, three of the biggest toy phenomena in recent years -- Transformers, Mighty Morphin Power Rangers and Tamagotchi -- have been made in Japan.

So, what's the secret -- how can U.S. marketers emulate Japanese toy genius? It's about developing new ideas and iterations that capitalize on classic play patterns and creating products that do not have specific precedent in other toy lines and previous successes.

Toys that become hits capture kids imaginations, generate active fantasy play, spread through word of mouth and encourage collectability. This is what has enabled these three imports from Japan to take the American marketplace by storm

Many American toy developers and marketers think in the box -- looking for products that trade on a trend or capitalize on another winning product that's previously succeeded in the market. **Being culture bound is often the limiter. But, becoming free from cultural conformity is sometimes the ticket to the next big idea.**

Transformers

1984 was the year of the robot action figure. Virtually all of them were developed in Japan. In this case, however, took American marketing to bring the concept across.

On the heels of a successful launch from Tonka (of Gobots) **Hasbro** [HAS] and New York-based ad agency **Griffin Bacal** launched Transformers.

In this case, Japanese product innovation combined with American kid cultural touchstones to make Transformers a winner. Ingenious three-dimensional puzzles were now transforming action figures, locked in a compelling storyline.

The Japanese ingenuity in this brilliant product was marvelous attention to detail and incredible engineering that created numerous movable parts and delivered a satisfying two-toys-in-one product.

Product development took incredible patience, vision and the ability to design in three dimensions. This highly complex visual conceptualization was very consistent with Japanese culture. High context, low verbal orientation had also sparked the video game revolution largely driven by Japanese innovation from companies like **Nintendo** and then **Sega**.

American kids, unlike their more literal parents -- and Western adult toy designers -- were more adaptable to this new visually driven, tactile product line.

Kids began to collect the Transformers line, for the challenge of the transformation play and for the pursuit of armies of good vs. evil characters. Transformers took off. It soared past Gobots and scored over \$100 million in sales in the first year, catapulting to \$300 million by year two.

Mighty Morphin Power Rangers

MMPR represents a very different kind of Japanese ingenuity combined once again with American marketing muscle. Power Rangers is a concept that American toy companies would have been very unlikely to launch. It was originally an incredibly low-tech, live action program launched into a kid culture dominated by high-tech, special effects and heavy-animation.

Power Rangers took its inspiration from a decidedly cheesy live action show that was popular in Japan. At the time, by contrast, American action-adventure fare for kids was largely delivered in animation on television.

Saban Entertainment came into the market with an adaptation of the

Japanese show. It was very different from any of the fare on American TV. It was campy and empowering in a very simple way. Bandai delivered the toy product. A band of real life human teenagers were empowered as the Mighty Morphin Power Rangers. It struck a responsive chord in American kids. The Power Rangers were not super heroes. They weren't cartoon characters. They weren't humorous turtles. MMPR took off.

American marketers were dwelling in fantasy land. Recent action figure successes in the U.S. had dealt with much more fantastic, fanciful, appealing but out-of-kid-reach fantasy characters. It didn't dawn on them that real world-based characters that kids could emulate would have such big appeal.

Lesson learned: Kids want access to mastery over their world. Power Rangers gave it to them.

Tamagotchi

Pet Rock meets the cyber age. Paradigm-busting is of ten about combinations of ideas. In this case, Japanese ingenuity combined with technical know-how brought another phenomenon to America toy and gift stores.

This product offers small electronic characters who need the care and feeding of their owners.

The concept combines high tech interactivity with nurturing play. And, this time there are ramifications. How kids care for their pet determine how it behaves, matures, lives or dies.

Tamagotchi has taken off. It's this year's toy phenomenon. Kids take the pets with them wherever they go. It's an active and addictive play pattern, one that demands the constant attention of the pet's owner. Kids are taking them everywhere. They are consumed with the care and feeding of these electronic creatures.

What is at play here? This is a classic play pattern made fresh by technology and interactivity. Japanese ingenuity has delivered the high-tech innovation that fuels a low-tech play pattern. It's unexpected and totally accessible. It's different, yet familiar. **Lesson learned: Apply new technology to familiar, emotional, classic play.**

The Bottom Line Is...

Developing the next phenomenon is by no means just the province of Japanese ingenuity. It's about suspending disbelief and designing to the fantasies, hopes, fears, joys and aspirations of kids.

High tech or low tech, it's about bringing new fun and play patterns to the market and American kids. Look for meaningful kid touchstones. Avoid adult “over think” and you could be on your way to inventing or promoting the next big thing.

Paul Kurnit, President and Chief Operating Officer, **Griffin Bacal**, has a growing reputation as an expert in marketing to kids and families. Mr. Kurnit has created Kid Think Inc., Licensing Works! , LiveWire: Today's Families Online, GB! Griffin Bacal Promotions, TDC: The Design Center and The I Team (Griffin Bacal's Interactive Task Force), all divisions of Griffin Bacal devoted to developing solutions to today's kid marketing challenges.