

Bratz dolls: Responding to cultural change

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ABSTRACT

Barbie was introduced by Mattel in 1959 and quickly dominated the market and continued to do so for decades. As a beautiful blonde, Barbie represented the traditional qualities of women and the line later expanded to include diversity among the other dolls. In 1999, Barbie's 40th anniversary year, sales hit approximately \$1.5 billion and nearly \$24 billion in total sales over the life of the doll.

In 2001, MGA introduced the Bratz line and the dolls immediately became popular, gaining market share as Barbie sales declined. Within the first six months on the market, MGA sold more than \$20 million in Bratz dolls. In response, Mattel introduced the MyScene dolls to the market in 2002 but were unable to compete with Bratz. In 2004, MGA experienced a 45 percent growth in Bratz doll sales, while Barbie sales had fallen, resulting in a \$500 million loss. In 2006, Bratz became the number one selling doll and Barbie was bumped to number two.

Bratz dolls were created to more closely match the look of girls today, instead of the ideological perception of women in the 1950s when Barbie was created. Bratz dolls have a realistic height, look more ethnic, and have distinct fashion styles. Every Bratz doll is different with its own personality, much like tween girls today. The case study discusses how MGA identified and responded to a target market that was no longer connecting with Barbie and was in need of something more representative of who they were.

Keywords: Bratz, Barbie, Mattel, MGA, tweens, target marketing, strategic marketing

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INTRODUCTION

This case study highlights Mattel's Barbie's first real competitor and discusses how MGA responded to the powerful target market of tweens; a market that was no longer connecting with Barbie and was in need of something more representative of the modern societal and cultural landscape. MGA created the Bratz dolls to meet the changing needs of tweens, launching a successful marketing campaign that ultimately competed head to head with Mattel.

This case is appropriate for business classes covering marketing fundamentals, consumer behavior, brand management, management strategy and customer value. Students should understand the importance of creating a product that appeals to a global target market; how to market the appeal in a rapid and sustainable manner. The case illustrates a number of elements of strategic marketing planning, including:

1. Understanding the importance of competitive advantage
2. Completing an exhaustive SWOT analysis
3. Understanding the target market and market segmentation
4. Describing elements of the marketing mix
5. Understanding branding and the value of a good brand

LET THE DOLL WARS BEGIN

In 2001, a newcomer in the doll market threatened to end a nearly 50-year run of dominance for Mattel's classic Barbie franchise. A younger, hipper, edgier model arrived in the form of fast-selling Bratz dolls; Mattel executives, as well as some conservative parents, were concerned. Bratz ingeniously targeted a newly empowered demographic sub-segment of the doll market — "tweens" or girls between the ages of 8 and 12. Bratz also appealed to growing ethnic populations—particularly Hispanic girls and their families (Talbot, 2006). Certainly controversial for the time, Bratz dolls sported tattoos and heavy makeup, as well as revealing clothing compared to standard doll lines of the time and less sexualized predecessors and competitors. Further, Bratz extolled neither the virtues of caretaking characterized by dolls of the past, nor the more recent career or lifestyle role models for young girls personified and created by Barbie in the 1960s. Bratz simply "have a passion for fashion" and tweens believed the ethnically ambiguous "bling-ed out babes" in toyland were more relatable. As a result, Bratz catapulted to the number one doll line in 2006 after only five years in the market (Colker, 2008). Classic and traditional Barbie, although ever-evolving over decades to reflect major demographic change (like women in the workforce and ethnic diversity), seemed ill-prepared at first to compete with a brand taking such a nuanced response in terms of style and philosophy to a dramatic shift in cultural values.

End of Era

For centuries, dolls were generally used as props for young girls to administer caretaking skills and develop maternal behaviors (Turrini & Mendell, 1995). Barbie was introduced in 1959 as "Barbie — teenage fashion model" and significantly changed the

way American girls played with and viewed dolls (Rogers, 1999). Barbie suddenly became a basis for young girl's construction of fantasy narratives (Anggard, 2005) and even gender role preferences and femininity (Karniol, Stuemler-Cohen & Lahav-Gur, 2012).

Mattel dominated the toy industry with its Barbie doll for nearly 50 years as the world's most popular plastic princess (Duvall & Nash, 2005). Barbie represented a tradition of elegance and grace that captivated audiences of all ages, broadly targeting girls from childhood years through to adulthood. Mattel's Barbie changed with macro-trends such as women entering the workforce and growing ethnic populations, though her perfect physique and unrealistic measurements remained the same. Barbie remained the prototypical aspirant dream for American girls; a fashion model's physique and beauty married to high-level careers that morphed over time such as Nurse (1961), Stewardess (1961-1964), Elementary Teacher (1985), Pilot (1990), Paratrooper (2000), and Computer Engineer (2010). Barbie has also run for President of the U.S. sporadically from 1992 to 2012 within the fashion doll zeitgeist (Milligan, 2010).

There was a disconnect between young girls and Barbie in the early 2000s, perhaps driven by the unattainable physiques and overblown career expectations of this "perfect princess." MGA Entertainment recognized a societal shift, both in demographics and psychographics, and a resultant opportunity to develop a doll-line more reflective of the day by introducing Bratz dolls in June of 2001 (Stanley, 2005). The Bratz characters were more funky, urban, and ethnically diverse, wearing streetwalker-type clothes, over the top makeup, tattoos, and even piercings which ultimately connected with an older preteen marketplace (McAllister, 2007). MGA quickly became the number two doll maker in the United States (Cook, 2007), targeting this rebellious and until now ignored marketplace, proving to be a serious challenge for Mattel.

MGA Entertainment

MGA Entertainment, a private company founded by CEO Isaac Larian in 1979, is the third largest toy maker worldwide with facilities headquartered in Van Nuys, California (Colker, 2008). MGA manufactures various lines of innovative "consumer entertainment" products, including toys (games and dolls, etc.) personal electronics, housewares, as well as sporting goods (Bloomberg Businessweek, 2014). The company introduced the Bratz dolls in June 2001, and has since been a leader in the market as a self-proclaimed premiere girls' lifestyle brand. In 2005, Bratz worldwide sales reached \$2 million and totaled 125 million dolls (Talbot, 2006). In 2006, Bratz was rated in the Toy Industry Association's top 5 Best Girl Toys and even received awards from Family Fun and Licensing Industry Merchandisers Association (cartoonwatcher.com). MGA's Bratz line utilized urban chic fashion styles to create fun and trendy new products in all fashion areas, as well as entertainment.

Competing Against Barbie

Mattel, Inc. introduced Barbie to the market in 1959 as a "3-dimensional doll through which little girls could play out their dreams" (Graser, 2013). Barbie swept her way to the front as the industry leader and sat on her throne for decades as young girls

grew up with the doll. Mattel went public in 1960 and entered an elite group of Fortune 500 companies with approximately \$100 million in sales (<http://corporate.mattel.com/about-us/history/>).

In 1961, Mattel introduced Ken to accompany stylish Barbie in the many places young consumers took her, as well as Midge and Skipper in 1963 and 1965 consecutively (Graser, 2013). Mattel was the first doll maker to introduce an African American doll to the market; Christie. She became available in 1968 followed by Asian and Latin dolls in the 1990s. The company celebrated Barbie's 40th birthday in 1999 as sales hit approximately \$1 billion. Throughout Barbie's history, she was the global leader across many markets with roughly \$1.5 billion in annual sales worldwide. In the 2000s, the company took Barbie in a different direction with the Couture line, higher-end clothing with a more expensive chic appeal, and numerous high-end collector editions (<http://corporate.mattel.com/about-us/history/>). In 2003, as stated in Mattel's Annual Report, "With \$3.6 billion in retail sales worldwide, the Barbie® brand boasts the #1 girls Web site with 31 million visits per month and, according to Forbes, is the #1 girls global entertainment property" (Mattel Annual Report, 2003, p. 5). Barbie is responsible for 20% of Mattel's total sales as opposed to 30% a decade ago (Brown, 2013).

Bratz Dethrones Barbie

The Bratz line was introduced in 2001, and has continuously gained market share at the expense of the Barbie franchise. Within the first 6 months in the market, MGA sold more than \$20 million in Bratz dolls (Nash, 2005). Mattel's response was slow, despite their heavy spending on competitive intelligence; they did not at first perceive Bratz as a direct competitor. One key issue is that Mattel was unwilling to compartmentalize the marketplace for dolls—and was unable to recognize the tween market as separate, significant, and unfulfilled.

In 2004, MGA experienced 45% growth in Bratz dolls sales over twelve months (Nash & Duval, 2005). Interestingly, Barbie's sales remained at approximately \$1.5 billion since Bratz were introduced, but significant market share has been lost by Mattel (Nash, 2005). Mattel's Barbie dominated 75% of the doll market but in 2004, their share shrunk to 60% (Nash & Duval, 2005). In 2006 Bratz dethroned Barbie forcing her into the number two spot, and by 2007 Bratz dominated the market as number one (Barbaro, 2006).

Albeit late to market, Mattel introduced the less successful MyScene dolls to the market more than a year after the Bratz debuted in late 2002, and then Flavas in 2003 (Barbaro, 2006; Palmeri, 2005). Both copycat doll lines with big heads and more ethnic features were unable to unseat Bratz from market leadership. In fact, this delay of 14 months allowed Bratz to capture more market share and maintain a sustainable competitive advantage over Barbie. Even so, in 2005 MGA began a significant lawsuit claiming that "that Mattel has engaged in acts of unfair competition and intellectual property infringement intended to damage MGA's market share" (Bratz Lawsuit, 2005).

What are Tweens?

Perhaps the greatest reason for Bratz success is that MGA was one of the first firms to acknowledge the buying power of the “tween” marketplace. Tweens, or pre-teens, are in between childhood and the world of the pre-adult teenager (Swain, 2010). Although they are beginning to reject childlike toys and images, they are not quite ready for the sexual aggressive marketing tactics provided to teenagers in the U.S. (Swain, 2010). Bratz provided a childlike toy, with more adult and sexualized style and nuances.

Marketing to Tweens

American children appear to be evolving faster than ever and marketers are wise to sit up and take notice of this generation of tweens. According to 360Youth.com, tweens spend \$51 billion dollars each year, with \$1.7 being their own money earned from allowances and gifts (De Mesa, 2005). Furthermore, parents and family members spend an additional \$170 billion directly on their tweens (De Mesa, 2005). This staggering statistic indicates that marketers should target products, retail stores and services specific to this age group.

Tweens appear to have strong influences on their parents and family purchases ranging from cars and televisions to vacation destinations. Tween influential spending has reached \$260 billion annually (Castleberry & Merrier, 2008). This enormous number is far too high for marketers to ignore and smart ones are starting to build consumer relationships with children as young as eight years old in an effort to create lifelong customers. Consequently, progressive marketers are studying the developmental stages of childhood, as well as social, cultural and ethnic trends and differences to better understand tweens and what motivates them (Austin, 2001).

Tweens tend to be cynical consumers and while “cool” may be “in,” it is usually brief. Successful marketers must listen carefully and give tweens what they want. Marketers must be very focused on how and where they advertise online. Event marketing such as concerts, movies, sporting events and school text books is an important tool for reaching tweens. Cable TV and radio marketing should be channeled to tween music, sports, and children’s programs to reach the greatest number of audiences in this target group. Direct mailings and magazine coupons that give something the tween wants can be an effective marketing tool (Austin, 2001).

Successful marketers recognize that ultimately it is the parent who holds the purse strings for tweens; yet tweens still want direct control for things like wireless phones and services (De Mesa, 2005). Working for the parent’s approval on certain tween choices can be crucial to a firm’s success.

Defining Bratz Dolls for Tweens

MGA created the Bratz dolls as a more realistic image of what many American tweens experience, particularly in more urban settings. The Bratz dolls have a more realistic height; if the Bratz dolls were an actual person they would stand at 5’6” (Cook, 2007); compared to the average American 19 year-old girl who is 5’4”. Barbie, however,

would be 5'9", would weigh 110 pounds, have an 18 inch waist and a 39" bust, and would be "at best, anorexic" (Katz, 2011).

The Bratz dolls do have exaggerated features, of course — but these are related to the face only with oversized eyes and full lips. This playful, exaggerated head and features create a more playful, albeit sexualized appearance. The difference between Bratz and Barbie does not stop with the features of each doll. Each Bratz doll also has a very different fashion style. Unlike career-minded Barbie, Bratz are interested in going out to a club or hanging out with their friends. Bratz dress accordingly, with edgier nightclub-style clothing, lots of jewelry and accessories, and of course, intense makeup.

Bratz Marketing to Ethnic Tweens

Bratz was specifically developed to capitalize on growing ethnic groups in the U.S. and to cross over globally as well. Bratz dolls were meant to provide competitive contrast to the blonde, blue-eyed, white and typically middle-class American dream girl personified in Barbie. A Bratz doll does not look like a typical "American" or any typical demographic for that matter (Cook, 2007). The dolls have a look that is ethnic, but not clearly identifiable to a specific ethnic minority or group. Hispanics, African Americans and mixed ethnic children seem to have a greater affinity to Bratz and are able to identify with their more stylized appearance. The look of the Bratz dolls are what makes them more globally relatable and immensely popular across the world (Cook, 2007).

Bratz: Too Sexy?

Most consumers buying Bratz dolls today are not old enough to remember the controversy surrounding Barbie's debut. Although early Barbie dolls were fully and appropriately dressed and had a more wholesome look that young girls could hope to grow into, her "fantastical boy proportions" did raise eyebrows in 1960s America. Criticisms of her being an exaggerated Marilyn Monroe type abounded (Karniol, et al. 2012). Similarly, Bratz dolls received plenty of negative attention for portraying sexy images for young girls.

As for Bratz and sex — Isaac Larian, CEO of MGA Entertainment, suggests that only adults look at the dolls and see "sex," whereas the girls playing with the dolls see similar beautiful characteristics they personally possess. Larian stated, "These are the clothes that are worn if you go to schools anywhere in the USA. They are not sexy. Bratz dolls are caricatural plastic dolls. They don't even look like real human beings. They're cartoonish" (Jayson, 2007). When surveyed, young girls responded that Bratz dolls look like teenagers and that Barbie looks like a mother. Larian also does not feel Bratz should be criticized because of their motto "a passion for fashion" and that young girls have every right to live their fantasies through these dolls (McAllister, 2007). Larian also said, "...parents can't be too concerned. They are obviously buying the products for kids" (Leibrock, 2007). The Bratz dolls respond to the shift in girls maturing quickly, known as "age compressing," (Castleberry & Merrier, 2008) resulting in a more sexually suggestive appearance as well as make-up and tattoos.

CONCLUSIONS

Bratz has developed worldwide popularity that seems to support that their marketing strategies have ignored the parental discomfort with the sexy image of Bratz. Bratz is not only a doll, but an enormous conglomerate of products that include feature films, videos, websites, books, lunchboxes, computer games, bedding, clocks, backpacks, pencils, organizers, money banks, photo albums/frames, and electronics (Barker, 2007). The tween girl is seeking maturity and independence. The Bratz doll appeals to these desires by marketing this “sassy” style and attitude to tweens (Cook, 2004).

The Bratz marketing strategy took advantage of a cultural sea change known as “age compression” where adult products and teen attitudes are being embraced by (and some say “pushed upon”) children as young as four (Johnson, 2009). The saucy clothing, over the top make-up and edgy style of the Bratz doll is intended to make a statement—and it has been more than embraced by the tween marketplace. Bratz is just one of many companies attempting to lure the tween market. Ad campaigns using the hottest pop stars to advertise everything from high heel shoes to music is racking in millions (www.cbc.ca., 2005). As early as 2000, Hollywood routinely recruited tweens to review story concepts, theatrical trailers, and even rough cuts of R-rated films (Austin, 2001). Perhaps driven by corporate targeting strategies as well as social changes, by the end of the decade industry sources stated that children as young as 11 no longer “consider themselves children” (Swain, 2010).

2014 UPDATE: WHERE ARE THEY NOW?

Both MGA and Mattel have been engaged in a legal and doll supremacy battle since 2003. Years of court wrangling had Mattel at one time owning the rights to Bratz dolls in 2008 (Colker, 2008) only to be overturned in 2010 and given back to MGA along with a settlement in excess of \$309 million in 2011 (Chang, 2011). Larian believes the total cost to MGA for losing control and rights for Bratz to be “in excess of a billion dollars” (Chang, 2011).

Meanwhile both firms were not without market share and substantial new product victories as well as continued social criticisms for both Barbie and Bratz brands. Bratz successfully launched a “legally distinct” line of dolls called “Moxie Girls” in 2009 at the height of the turbulent court battles, and more recently has launched “Bratzillaz,” a line of dolls with magical powers of witchcraft. MGA continues its multimedia success with several TV and online video series, including a reality show “Bratz Academy” with Nickelodeon that recreated a Project Runway-type show for 14-year olds to compete in fashion creation. More recently a Bratz reality show highlighting the musical brand extensions of MGA entitled “Bratz Makin’ the Band” (Bratz are Back, Better than Ever-MGA Press Release, 2012) was contracted for cable release in 2014.

Mattel has also had numerous successes despite continuing to lose Barbie market share to a plethora of competitors across multiple competitors (Stanley, 2005). Monster High doll sales and profits have topped analyst predictions for the last two years and the line based inspired by monster movies and iconic ghouls and demons in American culture has also spawned numerous branded products. Both Monster High and Barbie have had success, like Bratz, in the online streaming and cable animation arenas (Bryson, 2007).

Barbie had three full-length animated launches in 2013. In addition, Barbie released new webisodes of *Barbie Life in the Dreamhouse*TM as did Monster High with a double video DVD, television specials and webisodes. Mattel boasted \$7 billion in sales in 2012, and is beat sales and profit estimates in 2013 (Brown, 2013).

Both doll lines have had their share of social and moral critics (Starr & Ferguson, 2012). Although Bratz dolls took over a decade of heat concerning the sexualization of tweens; some believe this was more of a reflection of changing mores and the omnipresent sexual media impact upon an age subgroup that had been previously sheltered (Kunkel, et al. 2005; McAllister, 2007). Starr and Ferguson (2012) referred to dolls as “a thermostat for the sexualization of ever younger girls in U.S. society” and an indication of a concerning “Lolita Effect” (Durham, 2008) in American culture. Over time, the criticisms levied at Bratz for their skimpy clothing and edgy makeup has been supplanted by a strong respect for MGA for being the first major brand to successfully target the tween marketplace, one copied soon after by JC Penney, the Limited, and Nokia.

Meanwhile Barbie has been accused of adding to the “agita” of youth, by reinforcing unrealistic and unattainable body images in young girls. Quindlen (1999), urges us to drive “[a] silver lamé stake through [Barbie’s] heart” for marketing an unattainable ideal of physical beauty to girls in their early and vulnerable years, when their identities are being formed (Castleberry & Merrier). Poor Barbie has even been accused of being racist due to her perfect “blonde bombshell” looks (DuCille, 1996).

Discussion Questions

1. What differential or sustainable competitive advantages should Bratz dolls capitalize on?
2. Perform a SWOT analysis the Barbie brand pre 2001. What opportunities and threats did Mattel not understand or foresee? Perform a SWOT analysis of the Bratz brand. How does it compare to Barbie?
3. Is MGA doing a good job with marketing the Bratz dolls to tweens? Should they focus on any other markets (why or why not)?
4. Can negative implications concerning the Bratz dolls ultimately affect the brand management for MGA?

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