

Toy Story

Faced with a shrinking number of kids, many of Japan's toy makers are turning their attention to adults. **Tony McNicol** reports.

The pokey shop in Tokyo's Asakusa district is jam-packed with row on row of colorful smiley-faced soft toys. There are long shelves stocked with custom-made clothes and a range of accessories for the cuddly characters. At the top of a narrow flight of steps up to the second floor is a little table set out ready for a pretend tea party. Near the counter, an elderly couple are chatting with a shop assistant—perhaps they are choosing a toy for a favorite grandchild?

So far, so much like a thousand other toyshops. But Haato no Shippo (a heart-shaped tail) is a toyshop with a difference. For one, it only sells a single range of merchandise: Bandai's Primo Puel talking soft toy. Another is that most of the shop's customers are women in their forties, fifties, and sixties—and for the most part they are not buying toys for children or grandchildren, but for themselves.

Bandai has sold well over a million Primo Puel toys. When it introduced the character with a big red heart on its chest

six years ago the company marketed it to working women in their twenties. The company quickly discovered, however, that the toy was more popular with middle-aged and elderly women. Two years ago Bandai opened the Primo Puel shop in Asakusa; staff say that customers come from as far away as Japan's northernmost island of Hokkaido to check out the range.

Bandai's talking soft toy is just one of a number of new toys aimed specifically at adults in Japan. The birthrate is already at a historic low and the number of children is predicted to fall further. If things go on as they are, the toy industry faces losing many of its traditional customers, which is why makers are experimenting with new products for young adults, middle-aged men and women, and retirees.

Asakusa, where Haato no Shippo is located, is an area with historic ties to the toy industry. Several of Japan's best-known toy manufacturers are based there, including Bandai. Part of the association centers around Asakusa's famous Sensoji

temple. For hundreds of years, pilgrims and tourists from all over Japan flocked to Asakusa, and when they left, the pilgrims often picked up paper or wood toys to take home to their families. Today, gift shops in a long arcade leading up to the temple sell everything from samurai wigs to rice crackers to folding fans, and there are still several toy shops.

Around the turn of the twentieth century many of Tokyo's toy wholesalers set up in nearby Asakusabashi and Kuramae. Some of the largest formed business partnerships with major toy makers also based in the area. In the 1950s and 1960s, fuelled by the domestic postwar baby boom and foreign exports, the Japanese toy industry grew rapidly.

Today, though, times are tough for the Asakusa toy industry. Virtually all the factories have moved to China or other low wage cost countries. The wholesalers were dealt an almost fatal blow in the early 1990s by the arrival of the American toy superstore chain Toys R Us, which started buy-



BOTH PHOTOS: TONY MCNICOL

Primo Puel—over a million sold, mostly to women over forty



Aimed at women from thirty to fifty, Brain Trainer is also popular with retirees.

ing directly from the makers. Now makers and retailers both do business at paper-thin margins. And each year there are fewer and fewer children to buy their wares.

No wonder makers are looking for new customers.

Big Kids, Small Toys

Seeking male customers to match their female Primo Puel enthusiasts, Bandai has introduced the Little Jammer range. Each set consists of four plastic jazz players perched on small speakers made by Kenwood. Users insert special cartridges into the accompanying stereo, and the figures play their instruments in time to the music. The basic set costs 21,000 yen (178 dollars) although there are extra cartridges available, and optional trumpeter and bongo player (6,800 yen)—not to mention a special display rack complete with scale bar and wine rack (18,000 yen).

The toys are targeted at middle-aged and elderly men, says Bandai spokeswoman Imafuku Yuriko, noting “people in those generations have a little more spare time and a little more spare money now.” About 5,500 of the product’s 50,000 customers have joined a Little Jammer Owner’s Club, receiving a special cartridge and set of stickers.

Another well-known company, Sega Toys, has also had a recent hit with a product targeted at adults, selling 50,000 Homestar table-top planetariums. The toys were designed by Ohira Takayuki, the well-known creator of the full sized MEGASTAR-II portable planetarium.

For 19,800 yen (168 dollars), customers, who are often couples in their thirties,

can project 10,000 stars onto the ceiling of their homes. There are two discs to insert into the volleyball-sized machine to change the pattern of constellations. Sega is planning other discs, possibly with romantic nighttime views of Tokyo or cherry blossom, says Harada Mikako, a manager in the company’s PR and Advertising Department. The machine has a timer so users can watch it as they drop off to sleep. “Lots of people use it in their bedroom,” says Harada.

Sega also makes the Brain Trainer, a small pocket-dictionary sized electronic gadget. One version looks much like a calculator and requires users to answer arithmetical questions; another features language questions. Brain Trainer is aimed at women from thirty to fifty, but is also used by families and retired people—anyone looking for mental exercise, says Harada. The company sells an accompanying set of playing cards. Instead of numbers the cards have brain-exercising sums, say “2+5 hearts” for the seven of hearts.

Hug me

The most firmly established category of adult-targeted toys so far is so-called *iyashikei* (healing) toys. The offbeat and cute products are designed to sooth away the stresses of everyday life. Amongst the most popular are Takara’s “Walkie Bit” tiny robot turtles—featured in Time Magazine’s “Best Inventions of 2005.” “It’s small, it’s cute, and it sashays across your desk, tail wriggling,” enthused the magazine.

The toy can be programmed to walk to a particular rhythm by clicking on its shell, and it also plays music. Takara has shipped 300,000 Walkie Bits worldwide

since releasing the toy last Summer, about twice as many as they originally expected, according to PR officer Kennedy Gitchel. The target age was ten- to thirteen-year-old girls, but many women in their twenties and thirties have also bought the toy. “It’s kind of relaxing and therapeutic,” says Gitchel.

Bandai’s Primo Puel also fits into the *iyashikei* category. The newest version of the 10,290-yen (90-dollar) toy can say 400 phrases such as “kiss me,” “I’m lonely,” or “hug me.” It can also recognize a handful of spoken phrases like “I’m home” and “let’s play.”

Primo Puel has sensors for light, touch, vibration, and hearing. It is programmed with five levels of happiness, which alter depending on how users treat it. “The best way to make the toy happy,” says Primo Puel shop manager Fukuda Seiichiro, “is to hug it and play with it.”

Fukuda and the other staff hold a special event once a month in the shop. The next one will be a Valentine’s party. Bandai also organizes day trips, birthday parties, and kindergarten entrance days. “Lots of people treat it like a grandchild or daughter or friend,” says Fukuda. Although the toys are officially unisex, many owners decide the sex of the toy for themselves. And when a Primo Puel runs out of power, owners never refer to batteries, they talk about giving their toys “food.”

Iyashikei toys and other products for adult customers could be a ray of hope for the beleaguered toy industry. Though the market’s decline appears to have bottomed out of late, it is still contracting by about 1% a year. Makers are merging in an attempt to compete more effectively in the global toy market. Last year Bandai and Namco joined; Takara and Tomy will merge this March.

The industry’s peaks were probably during the 1960s baby boom and the first half of the 1990s before the recent recession. Since the turn of the century, though, the market has shrunk by about a fifth. Toy makers face stiff competition from sports equipment and game consoles amongst other products. “When families want to spend money on their children there are lots of different choices now,” says Oishi Kenichi, secretary general of the Japan Toy Association.

“To an extent [the declining birthrate] may be inevitable,” says Oishi. Toys for adults and elderly people are a market that is just beginning to be tapped. “Lots of [manufacturers] are saying toys are not just for children. We need to develop ideas for lots of different new products.”

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