

A New Wave in Plush?

by Ericka Johnson

From Beanie Babies to Webkinz to Pillow Pets, the plush category has been known to spawn crazes among consumers of all ages. While classic stuffed animals continue to offer steady sales at retail, plush has come a long way over the years. In 2010 plush manufacturer CJ Products' My Pillow Pets presented its catchy TV jingle, "It's a Pillow, It's a Pet... It's a Pillow Pet!," grabbing the attention of children and parents everywhere. The Pillow Pet phenomenon



Bubele's Patch Buddy, Kevin Mao

has given rise to a variety of plush products, including accessories and apparel, that transform into a multi-use item. Parents are more willing to buy them, knowing they will do more than gather dust on a shelf. Examples include Hoodie Pets' sweatshirt, a fleece hoodie with a plush toy that attaches via hook-and-loop to the front pockets of the hoodie, and Bubele's Patch Buddy, a plush toy and a custom backpack with a built-in carrying case.

Other plush trends that continue to gain momentum are character development and extended play patterns. Kids get to know a character based on a story found on the hangtag or packaging. They then are invited to enter an online world where that character is represented as an avatar.



Brobo's Shine Force

This draws kids into the brand, making parents happy with the extended play pattern, and manufacturers and retailers content with the possibility of add-on purchases and the collectibility aspect.

Smaller startup companies have begun creating platforms to bring their characters to life in an effort to reach more consumers. Custard 'n Jelly's kid-created Guardian Angel Buddies are an elite task force of seven angels, each with a story and a special skill. They watch over their owner everywhere they turn. The brand, which promotes the message of self-esteem and contributing to charity organizations, launched last fall and is positioned as a lifestyle brand for girls.

Kenji, Inc. introduces the adventures of Brobo and friends, five robots from the future who befriend children in the present day and encourage friendship, education, and fun. The Brobo characters' "Shine Force" light in their chests helps children to be brave in the dark. Pretty Ugly, LLC, known for its quirky characters with offbeat backstories, introduces its line of Ugly Buddies, a nine-inch Uglydoll with a four-inch Uglydoll buddy, and eight new characters to the Uglydoll's Uglyverse. This year, Uglydolls are also coming to the big screen. Universal Pictures' Illumination Entertainment has acquired the rights to develop an animated feature film based on the Uglydoll characters.

The plush category has always provided kids with friends to snuggle and play with. The trends of multifunction plush and the development of plush into characters with big personalities, is helping to drive sales, one cuddle buddy at a time.



Custard 'n Jelly's Guardian Angel Buddies



Pretty Ugly's Ice-Bat and Wage Ugly Buddies