*Chapter Two*

# MARKETING GLOBAL KITTY

## Strategies to Sell Friendship and "Happiness"

Sanrio means "Saintly River" or "Pure River." It is a name that reflects the spirit of our company, and the goal that we set for ourselves: to help build a sincere, virtous [*sic*] society. . . .Through our wide range of communication media, including Social Communication gift merchandise, greeting cards, music, films, books, and live entertainment, Sanrio aims to help link the many tributaries of good will and camaraderie around the world into one ever-broadening confluence of friendship.

*—Sanrio company philosophy as presented on its website (www.sanriolicensing.com/philosophy.php, June 20, 2010; no longer available)*

We [Sanrio marketers] kind of build friends [through celebrity outreach] and then let someone else discover the story.

*— Bill Hensley, Sanrio, Inc., marketing director, personal communication, June 19, 2002*

There's something about working with characters and a brand that makes other people happy that somehow filters its way through us.

*— Sarah Walsworth, Sanrio, Inc., visual merchandiser, personal communication, March 25, 2010*

You can never have too many friends.

*—Kitty White, AKA Hello Kitty (hello-kitty.sanriotown.com/, September 29, 2012)*

Sanrio establishes its global networks as an "enabler of intimacy" through locally derived marketing practices. This chapter takes the words of the founder, Tsuji Shintarō, as expressed in the company philosophy given above as a quasi-religious calling that stands above capitalist desirings to inculcate unassailable values of friendship and happiness. According to this position, the company is less interested in profit and more interested in spreading goodwill—or more specifically, the company is interested in the profits that might be wrought from creating a "sincere, virtuous society" built upon friendship and happiness. This chapter details ways in which capitalism and idioms of secular spiritual calling intertwine in the everyday workings of producing and marketing Hello Kitty. One might call this, tongue-in-cheek, the making and marketing of the "way of Kitty,"[1] expressed through company aphorisms, as given above.

As of 2010, Sanrio maintained seven worldwide licensing offices in the following locations: Torrance, California (serving North America); São Paulo (South America); Hamburg (Europe, Russia, Africa, and the Middle East); Seoul, Korea; Taipei, Taiwan; Shanghai, China; and Hong Kong (other parts of Asia, including India, and Oceania). In fact, with domestic sales in a slump, the company relies exactly on these offices to generate a significant portion of the company's global revenues. In 2007, for example, of the 44.3 billion yen in sales, revenue from Sanrio's overseas markets amounted to almost one-quarter of the total (Otake 2008). At the same time that Sanrio's overall sales fell 3.9 percent from the previous year, sales from overseas operations rose almost 30 percent (Otake 2008). This demonstrates the importance of pink globalization to Sanrio as a critical component of the company's viability. The global nature of Hello Kitty's thirty-fifth anniversary celebration, with separately planned events and publications in Japan as well as in the United States, demonstrates the degree to which the icon's home is as much the world (at least specific parts of the industrial world) as Japan. In this chapter I provide further details of Hello Kitty's world in and outside Japan, with a focus on Sanrio, Inc.'s, South San Francisco offices and marketing in the United States. Although this book as a whole focuses on consumption and its meanings, including extensive interviews with fans beginning in chapter 3, I analyze here Sanrio's general corporate philosophy, strategies, and practices with a focus on the United States, as an important backdrop for the tale.

Part of that backdrop rests in the Japanese media spotlight upon Tsuji Shintarō (b. 1927), Sanrio's founder, who has maintained a personal interest and say in the company from the outset to the time of writing. Part of the media spotlight also focuses on Hello Kitty's designer Yamaguchi Yūko. Here, too, Sanrio emphasizes Yamaguchi's rela-

tionship with her fans, and the ways in which Hello Kitty emerges only and specifically from that relationship—an industrial artisanal product of "friendship." This chapter also details some of Sanrio, Inc.'s corporate practices of "friendship" as a backdrop to the consumer voices that follow in subsequent chapters. Together—corporate and consumer (chapters 2 and 3)—the intersection of voices provides some of the interrelated complexities in the globally situated meanings given Sanrio's cat.

## The Man behind the Cat: Tsuji Shintarō

To understand Sanrio and Hello Kitty, its flagship character, one must understand Tsuji Shintarō. His unmistakable stamp (scent?) is everywhere—in offices, websites, publicity brochures, events, and products. In truth, Sanrio represents his lifelong project, and therefore Hello Kitty is his baby. His continued involvement with Sanrio, even in his eighties, is legendary. One of his managers in Japan tells me that he receives e-mails daily from Tsuji. Tsuji visits Purorando, Sanrio's theme park, twice a week. In person, Tsuji is direct, charming, energetic, and seemingly always bemused (Stevens 2007). Within the environs of Sanrio, he is known as "Papa" or "Senior" (to distinguish him from his son Kunihiko, who is destined and groomed to take over the business at some point).

His 2000 autobiography, *Kore ga Sanrio no Himitsu* (This is Sanrio's secret), reconstructs his past as a path carved out of emotional hardship and wide-ranging experiences to lay the founding elements of the Sanrio philosophy and practices.[2] Although he was born into a wealthy family, his mother died of leukemia when Tsuji was thirteen and he was subsequently sent to live a lonesome life with relatives who were less than warmhearted. Tsuji links this emotionally traumatic experience to his yearning and appreciation for "social communication" (the foundation of Sanrio's goods). When he was younger, he was sent to a Christian-based kindergarten, where he became exposed to acts of giving and celebration: first in the form of charitable gifts to beggars, and, second, through children's birthday parties that were celebrated monthly at the school. Both of these were new to him and made a great impression. Tsuji links charity experiences to adopting the notion of public benevolence. He links the birthday party experience to valuing the pleasures of informal, "obligation-lite" gift giving—thus, Sanrio's motto of small gifts making for big smiles (see chapter 1). Tsuji's earlier life thus laid the conceptual building blocks for an empire built around



gifts, friendship, and happiness, as well as the cute characters that would encourage people enacting these ideals.

Even in terms of personality, Tsuji's matches Hello Kitty's. As Ken Belson and Brian Bremner write, "His [Tsuji's] good nature and very outgoing . . . friendliness match Kitty's perpetual cheerfulness. The two are so bound together that they even look out for each other, metaphorically speaking" (2004:32). The authors suggest that Tsuji may be his own worst enemy in "his artistic impulse, his entrepreneurial risk taking, his sometimes obsessive trust in the stock market" (32), but Hello Kitty stands at the ready to bail him out with successful global sales. The authors also point to parallels in Tsuji's life with Hello Kitty's: in the mid-1990s, Tsuji underwent surgery for polyps in his colon, an experience that brought him face to face with his own mortality in a life-changing way; during that same period, Hello Kitty's fortunes also turned in a dramatic upswing of popularity generated by her association with leading pop female stars, such as Kahara Tomomi.

Tsuji's presence is felt more in Japan than elsewhere. For example, he writes an editorial column in the monthly Japanese in-store newsletter *Ichigo Shimbun* (Strawberry news), in which he calls himself "Strawberry King" (also the name of a Sanrio *kyarakutā* from 1975). He has also published books on his "strawberry-king" philosophy (Tsuji 2007).[3] With a shared birthday (December 7) and position at the top of the enterprise/kingdom, Strawberry King acts as an alter ego for Tsuji. This intimate link between Tsuji and the kyarakutā Strawberry King has parallels in other examples of *migawari* (self-other exchange; surrogacy; here between humans and kyarakutā), as discussed in chapter 1. More important, this willingness to identify with and be identified as a cute kyarakutā sets the stage for Hello Kitty transmogrifications. If Tsuji can become Strawberry King, then Hello Kitty can become anything or anyone. Furthermore, Tsuji provides a role model for close relationships with kyarakutā. In this case, the exact relationship is as "grandfather" to young offspring.

## Hello Kitty as Socially Produced, Artisanal Product: Focus on Yamaguchi Yūko

If Tsuji is Hello Kitty's grandfather, then the female designer Yamaguchi Yūko is "Kitty's Mama." Yamaguchi has been Hello Kitty's designer since 1980 (preceded by two other earlier female designers, Shimizu Yūko,

1974–76, and Yonekubo Setsuko, 1976–80) and in the 2000s serves as a creative director and member of the Board of Directors of Sanrio.[4] Sanrio's practice of spotlighting Yamaguchi results in an enhanced personal encounter with Hello Kitty. Sanrio's (and Yamaguchi's) cat becomes far more than a finished product. Rather, one sees both puppet (Hello Kitty) and puppeteer (Yamaguchi), both doll and its maker, in an ongoing process of refinement and enactment. Hello Kitty—through Yamaguchi's media presence—emerges as a socially produced, artisanal product.[5]

Along with being heavily involved in Sanrio promotional events in Japan as the designer of Hello Kitty, Yamaguchi in 2009 published her autobiography entitled *Kiti no Namida* (Tears of Kitty). Those tears, she writes, are tears of joy and gratitude in recalling the success of her life's path, taken alongside Kitty (2009:206). In her public appearances, she functions as the human face behind Hello Kitty, garnering a Japanese fan base that she shares with Sanrio and its iconic cat. By spotlighting Yamaguchi, Sanrio places a very personal and idiosyncratic figure at the helm of the cat's current creation. For Japanese fans, this pairing allows Hello Kitty to emerge not from the faceless confines of closed-door, male-dominated corporate boardrooms, but from the individuated space of one young woman and her life. Yamaguchi's media presence frames Hello Kitty as a highly crafted, dynamic creation, molded by design decisions in interaction with public trends (see the consumer trends of various subcultures in chapter 5) and, more importantly, personal tastes.

Yamaguchi does not take the mantle lightly. In a 2004 interview with *Japan Times*, she talks about her role—rescuing Hello Kitty from consumer and corporate boredom, drawing upon fan responses as inspiration for her creative process. She explains:

> About five years after its [Hello Kitty] birth [c. 1979], . . . consumers got bored with the character and no one [among designers at Sanrio] volunteered to become a new designer. . . . I myself did not like Kitty very much at that time, so I decided to eliminate the previous images and do a complete makeover. . . . For example, I removed the black outline of the character to help soften its overall image. Gradually, I saw the number of fans attending my autograph session increasing. . . . I owe Kitty's success to fans. New ideas came to me as I heard their opinions. (Quoted in Kaneko 2004)



Yamaguchi draws a clear picture, positioning herself as aligned with fans, sometimes in opposition to more conservative decision makers at Sanrio (Kaneko 2004).

Yamaguchi traces some of the changes that she has overseen in the course of thirty years of designing Hello Kitty, from middle-class pianos to teddy bears to boyfriends.

> "I constantly try to give Kitty a fresh angle. . . . The first Kitty I ever designed was at the keyboard of a grand piano, very gingerly playing a single note. That was because all the middle-class Japanese girls at that time played the piano, and a grand piano was something they all longed for." In the early '80s, when Teddy bears were all the rage in Japan, Kitty was seen clutching a bear as her special friend. In 1987, after Yamaguchi received a letter from a high-school girl asking for "the sort of Kitty a grown-up could have," Kitty hit the shops in then-trendy black-and-white attire, and sales for this line went through the roof. The overwhelmed staff at Sanrio started consciously aiming to expand the target age group. (Katei Gaho International Edition 2004)

Yamaguchi thus plays a direct hand in Hello Kitty's flexibility (discussed in terms of "play" and "subversion" in chapter 5)—her "fresh angle"—as a character and as a design.

Yamaguchi talks about her own close identification with Hello Kitty. In an interview in 2009, she said: "I met Hello Kitty thirty years ago. Thirty years ago we were friends. Ten years later, she became my second identity. What she does, I do, and what I do, Hello Kitty does. Right now Hello Kitty is my partner in life."[6] With such close identification between Yamaguchi and Hello Kitty, Japanese adult female fans can more easily appreciate the cat as the artistic creation of a woman not entirely unlike themselves. In many ways, it is Yamaguchi's relative ordinariness in contemporary Japan that works here. Aside from the particularly jejune styling of her hair—dyed a bright orange-red with bangs and two pigtails[7]—she looks like a slightly flamboyant version of a housewife. In fact, Yamaguchi is known as "Kitty Mama"—or, the mother of Hello Kitty, reinforced by the language of her biography that uses the verb *sodateru* (to raise, as a child) to describe her relationship with Sanrio's icon (Yamaguchi 2009).[8] Yamaguchi likens her relationship both as mother to child and as manager to *aidoru* (idol)—typically a young, popular singer-entertainer, who themselves may be seen as commercial prod-

ucts made ready for market by intense training (see Aoyagi 2005). The relationship between Yamaguchi and Hello Kitty, then, takes sodateru as a fundamental process of molding, here giving birth to a product that will sell. The relationship is even more complex, as Yamaguchi herself explains, "Kitty is not my child, but rather my partner" (2009). Put more precisely, Hello Kitty holds the position of ultimate intimacy as the child who becomes a partnering life companion.

Yamaguchi's book traces the twists and turns of that relationship, as she endows Hello Kitty with some elements from her own life (e.g., playing the piano, in parallel with Yamaguchi's early aspirations to become a concert pianist; Yamaguchi 2009:39). Throughout her narrative, fans can see the ongoing intimacy between Yamaguchi and Kitty, as it develops from creator and created, to life partners, resulting in the designer's name and figure indelibly linked to Sanrio's cat. The red-haired, pigtailed designer emerges as a distinctive figure and idol in her own right, particularly for having created Sanrio's *aidoru kyara* (idol character) during the past three decades (Yamaguchi 2009:171). For the Japanese public, the two—the designer and her creation—exist as interlocking, interdependent personalities, even a form of *migawari* (surrogacy). In this way, Yamaguchi as Kitty (or Kitty Mama) acts as a living, breathing conduit to further enhance Japanese fans' relationship with Hello Kitty. She helps make Kitty real.

Yamaguchi's blog (in Japanese) that she began in October 2008, entitled (in English) "Yuko Yamaguchi in Wonderland," depicts the designer as a broadly smiling, slightly overweight, middle-aged woman, with her signature hairstyle, holding a Hello Kitty figure (Yamaguchi n.d.). Yamaguchi's blog provides two parallel capsule profiles—one for herself and one for Hello Kitty—including their shared aspects (blood type, A, and a favorite beverage, milk). What the blog conveys most clearly is the degree to which Yamaguchi herself has become a celebrity by way of her creation, partner, and alter ego, Hello Kitty, including monthly missives about her life, listings of her latest public appearances, and fan letters. Those missives perform their own femininity, with emoticons, orthographic expressiveness (especially the use of the exclamation mark), and starstruck excitability (cf. Katsuno and Yano 2007). In fact, the entire blog may be interpreted as a Japanese feminine space with its predominant pink color, tone of chatty intimacy, and abundant Hello Kitty imagery. Yamaguchi positions herself not as a distant celebrity, but as a wide-eyed fellow fan of other celebrities and blogger of her



life. She is one with whom Japanese adult female Hello Kitty consumers may identify. Japanese fans' identification with Yamaguchi only enhances Sanrio's position: by this, the company's flagship character is not mere corporate product, but personal, socially derived expression developed by a particular individual ("one of them") in tune with their needs and wants.

Most importantly, by making Yamaguchi the designer an important public face for Hello Kitty, Sanrio spotlights the design process itself, as well as the personality behind that process. The positioning of a nose, the pattern of a skirt, the angle of a bow, then, transform into a collaborative decision between Yamaguchi and her fans. Here is the industrial process as personal, collective, *te-zukuri* (handmade, artisanal) expression. The valorization of a product as handmade carries important aesthetic weight in Japan, and contributes to the object's status as "art," or at least "artisanal." Hello Kitty, an obviously industrial product, approaches symbolic te-zukuri status by foregrounding the process of its creation. Japanese fans of Yamaguchi may establish a personal relationship with overlapping entities—designer, object, and company—and thus confirm the artisanal status of Sanrio's cat.

Although my discussion has focused on Japanese fans, global fans are not excluded from this process. For example, *Time* magazine featured Yamaguchi in 2008 (August 21), answering queries from fans globally in an article entitled "10 Questions for Yūko Yamaguchi" (*Time* 2008). The article identifies the questioners by name and place of residence, with most coming from the United States but one each coming from Canada, Dubai, and Malaysia. Yamaguchi answers some of the most commonly asked questions from global fans about Sanrio as follows (Yamaguchi's responses indicated by "Y. Y."):

—Why doesn't Hello Kitty have a mouth? Sandi Saksena, Dubai.

Y. Y.: It's so that people who look at her can project their own feelings onto her face, because she has an expressionless face. Kitty looks happy when people are happy. She looks sad when they are sad. For this psychological reason, we thought she shouldn't be tied to any emotion—and that's why she doesn't have a mouth. [This echoes Sanrio's response to the same question, given in chapter 1.]

—Why is Hello Kitty from London and not somewhere in Japan? Courtney Bower, Des Moines, Iowa.

Y. Y.: When Hello Kitty was created, many girls in Japan had read *Alice in Wonderland* and adored Britain. Also, there were other characters [created by my company Sanrio] who were supposed to have been born and raised in the U.S., so Kitty was born in London as a way of differentiating her. [See the discussion of *mukokuseki* in the introduction.]

—Do you consider a global audience when you're designing? Ignacio Meza, Los Angeles.

Y. Y.: In the past, I was designing only for Japanese fans. But lately I've been designing for Kitty fans in general. I don't think so much about where they come from as how delighted they'll be if I do such and such a design. (*Time* 2008)

Although the global fans in this article engage with Yamaguchi, and although she has made numerous appearances outside Japan, her fame is undoubtedly far greater in Japan, especially given her blog and book in Japanese. For these fans and others, Yamaguchi as Kitty Mama represents the ongoing process of sodateru, creating the artisanal product, shaping design through collaboration. Hello Kitty may be viewed as art (or artisanal), because fans have become familiar with the artist herself. Yamaguchi's spotlight conveys the sense that both design and social sensitivity infuse the milieu from which Hello Kitty emerges. This sets the stage for Sanrio's leap into the art worlds of corporate celebration (discussed in chapter 6). The combination of fine-tuned design and connection with fans also becomes a template for the processes of production, marketing, and company ethos for both Sanrio in Japan and abroad.

## Corporate Kitty Abroad: Strategies of "Friendly" Marketing from Tokyo to the United States

Visiting the headquarters of Sanrio, Inc., in South San Francisco several times since 2002 has provided insights into the day-to-day operations of pink globalization. The relationship between Sanrio, Inc., and Sanrio headquarters in Tokyo resembles that between child and parent, in which the hierarchy persists, even as the child matures and attempts to spread her wings. Thus, the American operation (which, since my initial fieldwork in 2002, has extended to Los Angeles as well as South San Francisco) negotiates its autonomy from the Tokyo offices. Although product design originates primarily from Japan, the American team was able to generate and develop some designs of their own with approval from Sanrio in Japan. As Bill Hensley, the marketing director at Sanrio at the time of our interview, whom I quote at length throughout this chapter, describes the process: "Most of the design relationships between Tokyo and us are more consultative: there's design work being done here, planning work being done in Tokyo, the designer paired here with the planner there, determining what the full line's gonna be for that design theme, and then executing for the specific items for that design theme" (personal communication, June 19, 2002). In the 2000s, Sanrio stores in the United States carried both product lines, especially for collectors always tuned to the minutest details of difference. Since that time, designers in the United States say that the Tokyo head offices first gave them more autonomy, and then after establishment of collaboration with Nakajima USA in 2004, which I discuss later in this chapter and in chapter 3, took away the autonomy.

One of the roles of Sanrio, Inc. (prior to the Nakajima USA link), has been to localize the Japanese company's products to better suit an American market. Japanese and American Sanrio products may be distinguished by particular color palettes (e.g., Japanese hues tend to be more subtle and often more subdued) and particular items (e.g., the sizes and shapes of lunch boxes or stationery differ in the two countries). Sanrio wisely pays close attention to local differences in taste, product design, and utility, even within the United States. Peter Gastaldi, executive vice president of Sanrio, Inc., at the time of our interview, provides this kind of detail: "Pink and frilly sells very well in the South [United States]" (personal communication, June 19, 2002). What one sees in a Sanrio store abroad, then, is a mixture of Japanese-originated products selected and sometimes localized for the specific market, products developed by Sanrio in the United States and products designed for Japan. Since Nakajima's collaboration, there has also been a clear distinction between Sanrio/Nakajima products from Japan—which, according to company sources I spoke with, tends to be more conservative—and those goods produced by licensed arrangements with different companies—which may be more "adventurous." These different sources of products hold different kinds of meanings and cachet for various consumers abroad. The casual buyer may hardly differentiate between types of products and may buy on the basis of personal preference. But more serious American

collectors may want the more unusual, difficult-to-obtain products designed for Japan because of their perceived authenticity. (Hensley notes that Japanese collectors shop at American stores for the exact opposite: they want the American products, which are difficult to obtain in Japan.)

As Hensley describes the general process of Sanrio operations in the United States, the flow of activity moves from a product design and planning team that reviews the product plan for the coming year, including specific design lines, followed by a merchandising team that selects goods and orders them, followed by receipt of order and distribution to approximately five thousand (as of 2002) accounts, followed by sales and its review of customer acceptance (personal communication, June 19, 2002). This process goes on regularly, constantly, and relentlessly, especially with Sanrio's practice of releasing hundreds of new products monthly in Japan and elsewhere (Hensley estimates in 2002 approximately four thousand new products yearly in the North American market alone). In effect, there is always something new to be sold, always something new to buy. Even as a consumer, one can never keep up. The process—like the myriad products—is purposely endless.

The process is also personal—that is, determined at the level of personal taste. During one of my visits to Sanrio, I was able to sit in on a meeting of the merchandise team, a small group of male and female employees of whom half were Asian American (and half were white), as they perused the catalogue of available Sanrio products from the home office in Tokyo and decided on which items to carry and quantities of each. Their decisions seemed based on personal preference and anecdotal knowledge of the recent past history of sales of similar Sanrio products, rather than detailed research. During this meeting no one came with charts, tables, or sales figures. No one even came to the meeting with a computer. Instead, the group sat around a table looking at a color inventory of products, much as an individual customer might do browsing through a mail order catalogue. The mood was relaxed and informal. In fact, this rather informal process provides the localizing touch to more global corporate strategies from Tokyo. As a Japanese company keen to develop and respond to local markets, Sanrio can do no better than to listen to the locals in each of its offices globally. Thus, marketing strategies may begin in a broad sense in Tokyo, but they are fully fleshed out in company practice in local offices worldwide exactly through the personal touch.



## Celebrity Outreach and Other Sanrio "Friendships"

The personal touch of the selection process extends to Sanrio's approach to marketing. Sanrio claims to forego straightforward advertising in favor of "publicity," with special focus on celebrities. In fact, walking into the South San Francisco offices of Sanrio, Inc., one may peruse binders full of news clippings, including those picturing celebrities with their Hello Kitty accoutrements. Hensley explains the process:

> We don't do a whole lot of marketing in the traditional Western sense of big ad budgets and all. This year, we're really not spending any ad dollars. We put our primary emphasis in getting the new product story out to magazines, newspapers across the country, television stations, leveraging that story because the news media is celebrity obsessed. So if we can say that, yes, Mariah Carey is a big Hello Kitty fan, and it's not just us saying it, because she's not a paid spokesperson for us, but, here's the proof, because she's on MTV showing her Hello Kitty T-shirt, because she's photographed in *People* and *Us* [popular "gossip" magazines] carrying her Hello Kitty boom box, we kind of spin that back, and then that story feeds on itself. (Personal communication, June 19, 2002)

Instead of strict advertising, then, Sanrio relies on becoming "newsworthy," part of a "story,"—and thus, on celebrities, whose media attention transforms into a spotlight upon whatever they wear or do, resulting in inadvertent endorsement. The celebrity focus personalizes Sanrio and Hello Kitty as not merely a large distant corporation, but one chosen by influential persons in the know. In short, Sanrio aims to keep building "the story," to create "buzz" about their products as lifestyle choices by celebrities.

That choice may not come about by accident. Hensley explains what he calls "celebrity outreach" or "prospecting"—in effect, plying the field of celebrities for potential Hello Kitty users, regularly sending out free products to those who might already be, or hold the potential for becoming, a fan. At the time of our interview in 2002, Sanrio was sending items to between fifty and seventy different celebrities (with some admitted overlaps) every quarter. In the words of Sanrio, this is a process of "building friends."

> It's kind of like prospecting. It's with the same [marketing] organization that represents us for TV and film [product] placements, so they

have access to how to get products to the celebrities. We get nice letters back [from celebrities]. Yesterday I got one from Tara Lipinski, who had a little story to tell: "You know I loved this stuff when I was a kid, and I still collect it." . . . It's the difference between celebrity fans versus celebrity endorsement, and we're not paying anyone to endorse us. There's the self-acknowledged list of celebrities. Then there's the list [of those] that may or may not have an interest [in Hello Kitty] that we've sent products to. (Hensley, personal communication, June 19, 2002)

But how does that potential list get generated? How does Sanrio decide who might be a potential fan? Hensley explains with the succinct example of Lisa Loeb.

> Often it's based on a comment. Let's take our friendship with Lisa Loeb: We read in an article someplace her saying "I really wish I had a Hello Kitty rice cooker." It's like—done! Here's the rice cooker! And then she gets back to us saying "I love your stuff; can we do something?" It's like, "Well, we're working on a story for next month's feature on our website; why don't we do a story on your new album and on your Hello Kitty collection?" So for her it's great exposure to have all the eyeballs that go to Sanrio-dot-com see something about her and her new album. For us, it's interesting content and implied endorsement. (Personal communication, June 19, 2002)

The paradigm of "friendship" (quoted in the epigraph to this chapter) and fandom resulting in "implied endorsement" guides the way in which Hensley and others discuss Sanrio's business practices. The benefits of friendship work both ways, one celebrity enhancing the status and circulation of another. The resultant Lisa Loeb album from this Sanrio collaboration illustrates just how embedded one celebrity identity can be in another, friend to friend, so to speak. The two best-friend identities intertwine in mutually lucrative ways. The cover of Loeb's 2002 album *Hello Lisa* (Artemis Records) graphically demonstrates the nested identities between singer and cat: Hello Kitty holds a CD cover of Lisa Loeb, who wears Hello Kitty ears and bow (figure 2.1); Loeb holds a mirror that reflects a Hello Kitty winking image, wearing Loeb's trademark glasses. Further, the title of the album, *Hello Lisa*, obviously references Hello Kitty, especially when written in the same curly font as Sanrio's product. In a related video for "Underdog," one of the cuts from the *Hello*




2.1. *Hello Lisa* by Lisa Loeb (2002) (Artemis Records).

*Lisa* album, Hello Kitty appears playing guitar, while Loeb plays guitar and sings in a kitchen filled with pink Hello Kitty products, concluding with Loeb stroking Kitty's cheek affectionately.[9] Later that same year, Loeb appeared in Sanrio stores promoting her album, as well as at the Japanese MTV Music Awards with Hello Kitty. The "friendly" product tie-ups intertwine multiply, creatively, exuberantly.

Sanrio's approach to celebrities has continued through today. Dave Marchi, the brand marketing manager in 2010, explains what he calls the company's "guerrilla tactics":

> The whole celebrity culture has gotten even more insane, and it's just . . . celebrities rule . . . not rule all, but celebrities do make a big impact on the general public. We still don't do traditional advertising and rely more on word of mouth and we're kind of that niche brand that people enjoy. We don't have movies and television shows and all that, so we do rely on guerrilla tactics, or just word of mouth tactics to get the brand out there and build buzz. We definitely don't do endorsements. We will never pay a celebrity to hawk Hello Kitty or be a representative of Hello Kitty. Rather, if we know that a certain

> celebrity is a fan, we work that relationship. (Personal communication, March 25, 2010)

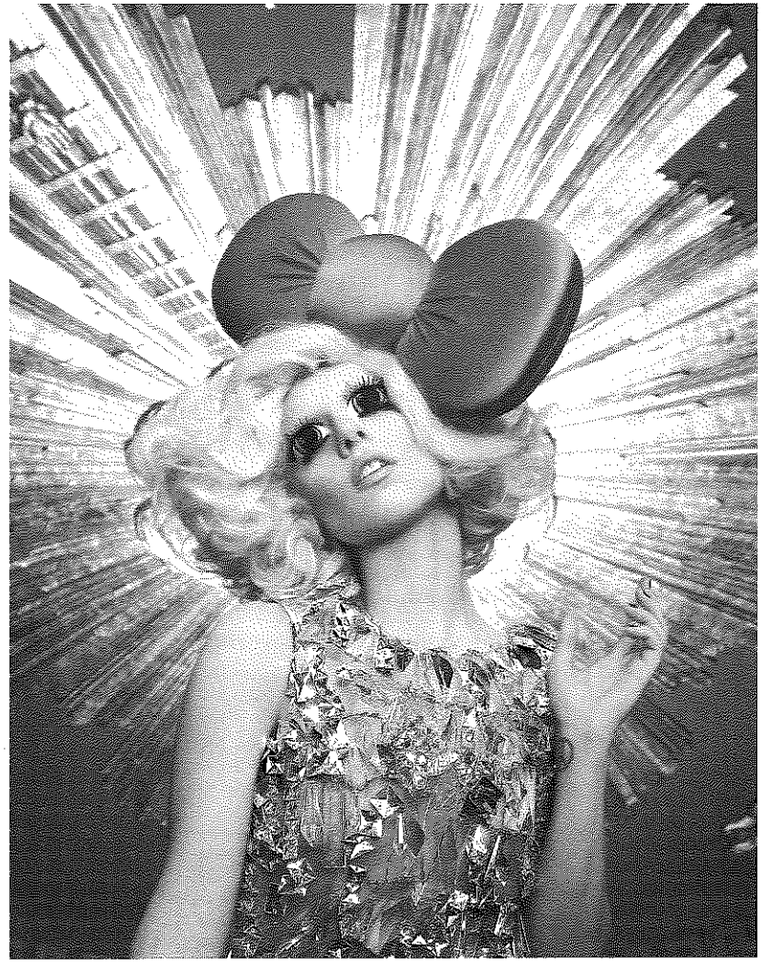
Marchi gives the example of the popular singer Lady Gaga, whose spectacular Hello Kitty photo shoot (figure 2.2) made headlines and flooded the Internet.

> Lady Gaga, perfect example. That came about because she showed up in our San Francisco store before she became what she is now [very famous]. She showed up in our San Francisco store, and I just happened to be talking to the manager, and they said, "Oh, Lady Gaga was in here." And I'm like, "No way, that's great. She's some cool club performer." And she was saying "Oh, I'm Lady Gaga. I'm a huge Hello Kitty fan." And I think she asked if she could either get a discount or free stuff or something like that and they said, "No," because they didn't know who she was. I'm like, "Well, you should've given it to her," because I knew who she was, and she was cool. A couple months later, we were presented with the opportunity to do a photo shoot as part of this reality show for these celebrity photographers. They wanted us to be part of it, and basically all we had to do was to book a photo shoot with a celebrity and then it would be part of the reality show, so we said, "Ok, why don't we ask Lady Gaga. We know she's a fan." And this was when she was continuously on the rise. So we asked her, and then she said, "Great. I wanna do it. It sounds fun." That all worked out, and we had these amazing photos. We didn't have to pay her or anything like that. (Personal communication, March 25, 2010)

In short, Lady Gaga in over-the-top Hello Kitty outfits builds "buzz" for Sanrio—for free. In this case, it was not so much Hello Kitty adding value to Lady Gaga (although every public iteration builds and shapes Lady Gaga's evolving image), but Hello Kitty gaining a tremendous boost of ironic cool from the pop diva. Here is the stuff of headlines: well beyond product placement, celebrity overlaid upon celebrity, images lapping each other in a referential loop.

But how to police which celebrities may be appropriate for the image of Hello Kitty? Celebrities—or people who have gained some kind of fame in a media-saturated world—pose their own kinds of challenges for Sanrio and must be screened carefully. Marchi explains that celebrity tie-ups with Hello Kitty have to be approved by the head office in





2.2. Lady Gaga in/as Hello Kitty (2010). Image by Markus Klinko and Indrani Pal-Chaudhuri, fashion by GK Reid.

Tokyo. (And the Lady Gaga project almost did not meet their approval, primarily because they did not know who she was and found her image questionable.) However, some other cases arise on the spot, and Sanrio people in situ have to make quick decisions. Marchi tells the following story of a porn star Hello Kitty fan (discussed further in chapter 5):

> A porn star showed up to the *Three Apples* [exhibit in Los Angeles in celebration of Hello Kitty's Thirty-Fifth Anniversary], and I'm like, "What do we do? We can't say, 'You can't come in.'" She came as a huge fan. Her name is Tera Patrick [née Linda Ann Hopkins, b. 1976]. She's apparently a really big porn star, and she's a huge Hello Kitty fan. In fact, her husband at the time, who was also a porn star, sent me photos of her wearing Hello Kitty bikini underwear, and he's like, "Hey, we wanna use these for our calendar. Can you give us approval?" And I said, "You know, unfortunately we can't." I didn't say, "Because you are a porn star and we don't wanna associate the brand with that." But it's just not in our best interest to do that. (Personal communication, March 25, 2010)

Celebrity connections thus come with their own perils that include a thumbs up for Lady Gaga and apparently a thumbs down for the likes of Tera Patrick. Here lies the fraught terrain of "buzz."

These tie-ups and "friendly" connections through celebrity outreach and associations draw close parallels with that of product placement, acting to securing places for Sanrio products in media such as film and television. These places hold increasing importance in a consumerist world of incessant branding by which every available surface and space may act as a potential billboard. Like other companies, Sanrio enlists the services of a branding agency that specializes in connecting celebrities, media, and products, acknowledging the importance of these links not so much in producing things as in producing and reinforcing brands. Naomi Klein's pathbreaking book *No Logo: Taking Aim at the Brand Bullies* addresses these processes: "Creating a brand . . . requires an endless parade of brand extensions, continuously renewed imagery for marketing and, most of all, fresh new spaces to disseminate the brand's idea of itself" (2009:5).[10] Product placement and celebrity outreach create these "brand extensions," "renewed imagery," and "new spaces." Hello Kitty has been especially successful in product placement in major Hollywood films and mainstream American television in recent years. Hensley points out that sometimes this placement comes about through a celebrity's specific



request: for example, the actor Mike Myers requested a Sanrio store and Hello Kitty appearance in *Austin Powers in Goldmember* (2002). In other words, Hello Kitty's fame precedes her globally so that Sanrio may have to rely less, perhaps, on branding agencies and more on the manufacture and presence of carefully crafted "buzz." At the very least, this is what Sanrio would like the public to believe. In the business of such mutual branding, there is little place for overexposure. There is only, in Klein's words, "brand extensions," "renewed imagery," and "new spaces" (2009:5).

## Research and Surveillance of "Friends": Creating Market Success

What is critical to the Sanrio image is imparting a sense of the personal touch—rather than the corporate touch—creating "friends," relying on affective relationships, in spite of (or maybe by way of) Hello Kitty's mediated presence. According to Sanrio's scheme of things, the company does not so much create desire as respond to consumer wishes. In this, Sanrio says that it stays close to the ground, constantly keeping a pulse on its customers. Hensley explains:

> We do interviews and mini focus groups, but it's not really just showing products and getting feedback on it. We're speaking to customers; we're observing customers in the store; we're monitoring what they say on-line, what they feed back to us, different chat rooms that talk about Hello Kitty. We have comment cards in all of our company-owned stores and we read every one of those that come in, to see what's good and bad about the Sanrio experience. It's an ongoing thing. Additionally we go out just about every year to six or eight markets and do interviews in a dyad format where we bring in a girl and her best friend. We're not necessarily looking for Hello Kitty fans—they could be totally indifferent to us or dislike us greatly—but we do this to truly find out what's happening in the market and where Hello Kitty fits in that market. (Personal communication, June 19, 2002)

Part of "finding out" lies at the hands of marketing research, which one can assume every producer conducts. Some may see Sanrio's research as surveillance; others may see it as smart marketing to the fickle customer base that ranges from tweens to young female adults. Sanrio's approach, however, is slightly different from most, because the company's

goal, according to Hensley, is not necessarily to capture the hearts of every single potential consumer. Instead, the company wants to satisfy the needs of those who are already amenable to Sanrio products. "I have no idea of percent of population, but it's not like we're striving for 75, 80 percent of the population to be Hello Kitty fans and buying all the stuff. Our market success is with a core interested group" (personal communication, June 19, 2010). According to Hensley, the connection between producer and consumer, then, is part of Sanrio's effort to develop products responsive to customers' needs, not necessarily to create desire. This positioning places brand loyalty in the laps of consumers, with Sanrio as their faithful servant.

Sanrio cautions that it does not want a huge boom in its product sales, either in Japan or abroad (chapter 1). In contrast with the smash hit of Pokémon or Tamagotchi, Sanrio prefers Hello Kitty to fall below the radar of wildly popular "fad-dom," developing customer loyalty with a more low-key approach that emphasizes individual choice and possibly a longer shelf life.

> You know, to us success is really not a world where everybody's a Hello Kitty fan. 'Cause that implies that there's gonna be a huge drop off at some point. So we want to create things of functional value, functional lifestyle value, that are fun, that are cute. So rather than us spend a huge ad budget to try to convince them of something that maybe they've decided against, we want to move with a smaller, but more committed, more interested group in developing our products. It's a lifestyle decision that is right for some, not right for everyone. (Personal communication, June 19, 2002)

This kind of decision making places the onus of responsibility on the consumer, rather than on the company. It allows Sanrio to occupy a place untainted by consumer manipulation (e.g., creation of desire) and sanctified by individuated choice. Consumers thus are reconstituted as a self-selected group ("smaller, more committed"), rather than as a mass of marketing dupes. According to Hensley, by offering a variety of products in relatively low quantities, Sanrio avoids the possibility of big failures in sales, on the one hand, and enhances the wearing and encoding of personal identities, on the other:

> The breadth of the product offering is the core of the Sanrio experience. You know, we're making things in low quantities—every individual item—so if it fails, you know still it's gonna sell through. It's not like we're gonna be stuck with 800,000 units of something in the warehouse that is a dead item. So it's not just that we can promote just one, say, backpack, and that leads the way. We might make a backpack in quantities of the low thousands as opposed to the hundreds of thousands like a Jansport [major American backpack company]. But we make thirty-two different styles and they all have different designs. The idea is that the customer can have something that's unique to them. So that's part of the story that we tell, and that's part of the customer experience that is the reality of the Sanrio experience. It's a slower build, but a greater payback. (Personal communication, June 19, 2000)

With this "slower-build-greater-payback" approach, Sanrio deliberately distances itself from large-scale manufacturers, arm-twisting advertising, and large runs of the same product. (Note, however, that the business plan of offering a number of items in low quantities can be the approach of a collectibles industry, such as Beanie Babies.)

### Consumer Life Cycle of Hello Kitty Fans

Instead, Sanrio identifies what Hensley calls "the consumer life cycle" from "Introduction" to "The Change,"[11] to "Rediscovery," to "Nostalgia." Here I quote Hensley at length to give a sense of the flow of that cycle, and Sanrio's response with age-appropriate products:

> The customer life cycle. She enters elementary school and is introduced to Hello Kitty. It's all about bright colors, the large Hello Kitty image, functional stuff, where Hello Kitty is big, primarily pink or red or brightly colored. As she moves through elementary school she can use a wider and wider selection of what we make, all the pencils, pens, notebooks come into play.
>
> She hits middle school, and we refer to that period as "The Change," where not just Sanrio, but with characters in general, during which she starts to question "Is this part of me being a kid and now I want to be a teen? So where does a character fit in to that?" The decision at that time is "Do I leave characters behind or do I bring them with me?" So at that point, the design theme changes to something that's a little bit more subtle, more iconic, generally or more often using Hello Kitty's face as just an icon on the design as opposed to a

large image in bright colors. So the colors can change, the size of the character on the product can change, the functionality of the product can change. Things that are more functionally appealing to an older girl. She's no longer gonna wear the big pink backpack—she's done with that. So the Hello Kitty backpack might be a large leather-bottomed bag with a smaller Hello Kitty emblem on it. Having said that, some girls really never go through that Change—they're Hello Kitty all the way. Others that go into the "Change" will leave characters behind altogether.

A good percentage will emerge with confidence as a teen, what we refer to as the "Rediscovery," and at that point they've assigned sort of an unwritten set of rules for character merchandising. You don't go over the top with it. You keep it subtle, you keep it functional, and you keep a lot of it in your room. So that the social me out there as a sixteen-year-old might say, "Well, I'm cool hanging a Hello Kitty keychain off my backpack and putting a bunch of stuff in my backpack. So that's a big part of it, but where she might have only a few things on her social self, inside the room could be totally different, where there's [Hello Kitty] things everywhere. And she goes over the top still. So as long as she's staying within those kind of rules that she's set, you'll meet the Hello Kitty fans that have the T-shirt, everything.

At the late teen and adult age, sometimes what comes back is, the really youthful stuff. Kind of a "Nostalgia Thing." Faith Popcorn [a consumer trends analyst; quoted in the introduction] called it a "wink on pink"—that's the women in the boardroom, it's almost like a surprise factor: "Don't think you know exactly who I am, 'cause I'm likely to surprise you." The Gucci bag with the Hello Kitty notepad and pen inside. Or the Hello Kitty bag or purse that you just wouldn't expect because it's going with the Armani suit. That kind of stuff. The juxtaposition of cute with total fashion. (Personal communication, June 19, 2003)

In Hensley's identification of this consumer cycle—Introduction, the Change, Rediscovery, and Nostalgia—Sanrio aims to create a Hello Kitty bubble in which a female may move through life with only occasional blips. In effect, each phase of a female's life can be boiled down to these marketing terms that makes of her relationship with Hello Kitty both an individuated psychosocial interaction, as well as an age-graded expectation. At times the movement through that cycle questions characters in general; at other times, the consumer's decisions may be made for Hello Kitty specifically. The point, however, is that no matter where a girl/woman is in the cycle, Hello Kitty is there. She exists as a constant presence—if even in different forms—waiting only for the readiness of the consumer. As Hensley cautions, this bubble is not for everyone. But for those who choose, Hello Kitty serves as an industrially designed, strategically marketed, affectively laboring, ever-ready, dependable companion. Hello Kitty becomes a lifelong friend.

Here it is important to situate some of the details of what Hensley says historically, because since the time of our interview in 2002, Sanrio has issued many more products that are likely to blend these different phases of the consumer life cycle. Since 2002, Cool Japan (discussed more fully in chapter 7) has framed Japanese Cute-Cool in different ways as well, providing further sustenance to the notion of pink globalization itself. More specifically, teens may have less trouble convincing their peers of the coolness of Hello Kitty in 2010, so long as she chooses the "right" Kitty stuff.

stop here

*Interview: From Employee to True Believer—Dan Peters*

Dan Peters (b. 1968) is tall and good-natured with a constant twinkle in his eye. His hair is spiked and somewhat disheveled, his body typically strikes relaxed poses, and his desk is littered with humorous items including Hello Kitty. He projects "art student" (which he was, with a professional certificate in digital design; his undergraduate degree was in literature from the University of California, San Diego) far more than company man (which he is and has been since he took a job with Sanrio in 1996). I interviewed Dan a number of times over the course of my fieldwork, during which he advanced from Sanrio's senior promotions designer in the Marketing Department, in 2002, to the art director of Marketing Stores and E-Commerce in 2010. To his admitted surprise, the company becomes him and he wears his tenure there well. I include these coupled, condensed interviews conducted on June 19, 2002, and March 25, 2010, with Dan not only as an employee profile, but to note the very ethos of Sanrio as eloquently expressed by one of its quirky members. First, from 2002, Dan discusses Japanese Cute-Cool and the dimensions that he finds appealing:

D. P.: Part of what I find to be of great appeal of Sanrio is the Japanese quality of it. So I, for lack of a better term, I don't like to

like Disney-fy everything into this kind of cookie-cutter American culture type of this of what's acceptable. I love the fact that Sanrio is different. And so, I could very easily edit things and smooth them out into Sleeping Beauty type, you know, kind of like descriptions. But I love the quirkiness. And I think that's part of our appeal. At least to me it is. You know, so, yes, I do that in a sense, but I think it's even harder to try and keep some of the original flavor, the unique quality, you know, that I think is part of the charm, you know.

C. Y.: I mean, you just mentioned sort of Japanese qualities. How would you put a finger on that?

D. P.: See, that's the thing is you can't. Every time I think I can, a new character will show up that turns himself into pudding. I saw this one cartoon which I thought was the most existential brilliance of one of our characters, Pompom Purin, his name means "pudding," and so basically he's this yellow retriever, and he's sitting there eating a cup of pudding, and then like a tear runs down his face, because he kind of looks at it like he's eating himself. And it's just this four-panel cartoon, and I might be misinterpreting it, 'cause I can't read Japanese, because part of that character is you'll see him as, like a flan. With a smile on the flan. And then they'll show him as a golden retriever. So he's a golden retriever that turns himself into pudding. I thought, this is brilliant. This is like . . . Disney would never do this. So that kind of quirkiness I think is just really appealing, you know.

C. Y.: Do you think American consumers get it?

D. P.: Depends. In my cynical feelings, probably not. I think like, there are certain people, certain types of consumers that understand the irony, but I think the majority of who we're targeted to don't. They're just looking—hey, that's a cute dog or hey, that's a cute cat, my kid'll like this. And obviously most of the kids are too young. To understand all of that weirdness. I mean, I think like people who—my friends who are artists and designers get it. They're the ones who, I show stuff like that to, or buy them stuff like that for their birthdays or Christmas, but other than that, I'd say as a whole, probably not. I don't think that they do. But I don't even know if it was meant to be a joke. That's the whole gray area. I don't if the original designer, maybe they just thought it was cute. I think there's a different sense of what's cute and what's acceptable as cute in Japan. Pompom Purin, for example—his artwork, he has a little x on his butt to show where the anus is, which in Japan is very cute. And I remember when that first came over here, [at Sanrio, Inc.] we're like, I don't know if we can show that. 'Cause, you know, people like—it's just meant to be a cartoon, we're not meant to have that kind of realism. Maybe we're somewhat repressed, our culture is, so we're like, "No, no, no, you can't do that." But I show that to my friends, who get it, and they're just like, oh, this is great! Yeah.

C. Y.: So what is your reaction to working at Sanrio?

D. P.: Well, at first, just taking a job at Sanrio I thought was just ironic and ridiculous. But I thought about it, I've always been somebody who grew up with *Mad Magazine*, grew up just drawing sketches of little cartoon people, my whole life. And I find that I genuinely like a lot of it. It's not just like, "Oh, ha ha, this is what I do for a living." It's like, "Wow, I really like this character." Or, "I really like that design." Before I had this job, if I walked by a Sanrio store, I doubt that I would have gone in and explored. But now, being a designer there, and actually dealing with the characters on a daily basis, I really can see the appeal of it.

In our interview in 2010, Dan discussed what he sees as the Sanrio message more explicitly—from designers becoming like the characters they create, to the general goodwill of the company. It is telling that Dan sees the antithesis of Hello Kitty to be Barbie—that is, plastic, inauthentic, superficial. Hello Kitty represents the non-Barbie companion, the Sanrio "real" alternative in consumers' lives. What does Hello Kitty mean for a key employee who has worked at Sanrio, Inc., for about one-third of his life? Dan's quick answer: "All things cute, innocent, and . . . the wonderment of life." But he also explains the "real heart behind what we do," the "authentic feeling" behind the product. Just as Hello Kitty may be "real" for consumers, she also represents the "real" for many Sanrio employees such as Dan. He believes this truly, sincerely, without the least trace of irony.

D. P.: When we had a team of designers here, I could tell some of them were actually, sort of, turning into their characters a little bit.

C. Y.: Really?

D. P.: Like our Badtz-Maru [black penguin figure] designer was . . . she just . . . emanated Badtz-Maru.

C. Y.: The designer.

D. P.: Yes, yes. You could just tell the way she smiled, like . . . when she's drawing him or working with this character, she had this mischievous quality, which granted she had before she started designing with him, but it's funny that you can see that when you're so devoted, as she was—she was a fantastic designer, and you could tell that she really got into it. And it showed in her work. She did beautiful work. So I would say sometimes, again as in art directing, some of the designs that I've seen, you can tell when people are just putting Hello Kitty on something, "Oh, just throw Hello Kitty on it, and it will work," versus really thinking about the essence of who Hello Kitty is and what might work best.

C. Y.: What kinds of changes have you seen in the Hello Kitty product line since you started here?

D. P.: We do have some partnerships in Japan with some very cool designers that I didn't even know about that we do collaborations with, where you'll see Hello Kitty and Baby Milo's one . . . just different characters that create this very cool, Japanese-looking, not typical Sanrio style, so I've seen more of that in the last five, ten years of kind of . . . us dealing with different people who I wouldn't normally associate us with, and I think there is . . . the way I was trained, there was more protection over Hello Kitty of who she should and shouldn't associate with, and she should represent all things that are cute and innocent, but I think there is a little bit more of "it's OK to put her on the edge a little bit more" now. That's actually a big change I've seen since I started, because I was trained a certain way and we're meant to represent a certain kind of view on life, and I think now there is more acceptance to be a little bit edgier, and try different things and that of course appeals to older target audience. I would assume that as long as the Sanrio message "Small Gift, Big Smile," the social communication, the . . . sharing and having a positive worldview and world message, if that is consistent, no matter what the product is or the collaboration, if it's still about making somebody smile and feel good, then I think it's OK.



C. Y.: So, in your mind, what is the essence of Hello Kitty?

D. P.: Yeah, it's interesting because I have this discussion with other designers and we talk about how . . . Hello Kitty can be all things to all people. She doesn't have a mouth, and so basically, it's the . . . whatever you're feeling, she'll embody it, because she doesn't have that expression to . . . we can make her have angry eyes and do things like that if you want. But I think, I mean, to me, I still view her and her design as just perfection of innocence and cuteness. I really think because she's such a simple, basic design, especially the original design like right there, 1974 . . . it's . . . she's all things cute and just kind of the wonderment of life to me. So that's very open ended. Here is this little icon that personifies, in a way, it's hope, innocence, and . . . and some of the artists, of course, play on that to do some kind of ironic pieces, and . . . something edgy, but I still think they're playing off of what represents just this perfect design of cuteness and innocence, and any single person, that if you tell them to describe Hello Kitty, "cute" will be one of the top three words.

C. Y.: Sure, undeniably.

D. P.: Or I'll . . . I often challenge people and say to them, "Describe this without using the word cute." But . . . it's very, very difficult to do.

C. Y.: And for you, saying these things, you're saying it totally straight, without any sense of irony yourself.

D. P.: No, absolutely, absolutely. And I've seen a lot of character designs that we do, and a lot from other companies, and I still think, as far as just being the embodiment of cute and innocence, I think, especially, like . . . I love old-school Hello Kitty.

The newer stuff, I still like, but to me, the original is just . . . it just makes me smile and makes you feel good. And I think all of our staff hopefully does that, but it's just . . . as a designer, I look at it and go, "Wow, somebody drew that, and it's so simple, but yet so complicated in its simplicity."

C. Y.: As a design, here I'm talking really about the visual sense of it and maybe thinking about the original one, what do you think makes it work so well?

D. P.: That's always . . . you'll hear that from a lot of people. If Sanrio could do it, they would obviously create a hundred of them, but I think, just based on design, I think round things are very comfortable, so having a nice big round marshmallowy head, I think is just extremely . . . in fact, actually, one of the designers that used to work here, she always asked me, "How's the marshmallow?" because she felt like working here was like working in a marshmallow. And so . . . and I say, "Well, sometimes it seems like it gets a little hard in the areas, but still . . ." She's like, "How's the marshmallow?" which is great, because that's kind of how I view her. I mean she looks soft, not overly designed. There is not too much detail to either be confusing or . . . I mean just the use of primary colors, I think, invokes childhood.

C. Y.: Earlier you used the word *authenticity*. Could you tell me something of what you meant?

D. P.: I think especially in this day and age when you have, as I was pointing out, with technology, the ability to create a brand or create a product in two seconds. You can scan it and make T-shirts, and use all of these different sites, like Etsy and all these different places that you can just upload an image and they'll put them on T-shirts and you can sell them at that website. I think that you're seeing, A, it's hugely competitive out there, but I think you're also seeing kind of watered-down brands and items that are out there that have nothing behind them other than somebody drew something they thought was cute and are trying to sell it on whatever they possibly can, and I just feel that, as I mentioned with the detail of the original Hello Kitty design, and as a company, part of the



reason I love working here is I feel that there is real heart behind what we do and what we're trying to get across to the consumer.

C. Y.: So you really believe that?

D. P.: Yeah. I mean, not always. I'm not blinded by it. But obviously with licensing expanding, etc., etc., there are things which I don't think we should be on or be representing, but I think overall, what I understand from people who really love our brand, that's what they love about it. They love that there is an authentic feeling behind it, that it's not just the latest item that we're trying to sell, but that it really is this cute, well thought out thing that is different from what they'll get at Target or Walmart or . . . there is a "je ne sais quoi."

C. Y.: But it's not as if Sanrio is any less interested in making money than anyone else, do you think?

D. P.: No.

C. Y.: So what's the difference?

D. P.: I guess the difference is upholding the kind of message that Tsuji Sr. wanted when he created the company, and which was that "Small Gift, Big Smile" idea of creating something little . . . it doesn't have to be a huge, like, backyard jungle gym set. You can give a child just a little item that, just based upon the quality of that item, that they're just as happy as if you'd bought them a new pink car. So, just, sort of, upholding that we're still trying to sell all sorts of things, but if you come down to the essence of who we are, it stems from that original concept of sharing that with people, sharing experiences and communicating positive feelings with others. I don't know, to me, Barbie doesn't really do that.

C. Y.: So in your mind, if you were to take the exact opposite of Hello Kitty, it might be Barbie?

D. P.: It might be Barbie. Again, it's sort of like, Barbie goes hip-hop and just kind of . . . there is the whole . . . which is ironic . . . the fakeness of the Paris Hiltons, and Paris Hilton, to me, embodies Barbie. Ironically, she's a huge Hello Kitty fan. To me,

personally, that's not who I really want representing our brand, because, to me, she personifies the plastic.

C. Y.: And there has never been a Barbie-Hello Kitty tie-up?

D. P.: Yes, we do have it. It's a Barbie wearing Hello Kitty items [mentioned in the introduction]. So she's got like Hello Kitty clothes on, things like that. So if Barbie went into a Sanrio store, this is what she would wear.

C. Y.: So Barbie is kind of the opposite, but actually there is some collusion as well.

D. P.: [*Laughs*] Yeah, we're just making Barbie feel better by wearing sweet, innocent Hello Kitty.

## Inculcating Happiness as Company Ethos

Peters is not alone in his assessment of the core brand message of Hello Kitty as happiness. Dave Marchi, agrees, his normally low-key voice rising slightly in intonation:

> She [Hello Kitty] just embodies this kind of pure happiness. You can look at her and whatever it is, her countenance or the way she's designed or her style, just embodies pure happiness. Ultimately people who are her detractors can say, "Oh, she's just there to sell products and you just slap her on things." But when you really look at it, she's just there to bring happiness and make friends and share with your friends, and it's something that you can share and enjoy. Does that make sense? And I say this totally, completely unironically. Yeah, 100 percent, without being the branding person or anything like that. I honestly can say, it's [about] happiness. (Personal communication, March 25, 2010)

It is hard not to agree, especially when these words are spoken with such passion and zeal—even amid the fatigue of a workaday world. Some might cynically say that it is Marchi's job to agree, to promote Sanrio as an altruistic company in the unassailable business of selling happiness. Indeed, Marchi's responses, as Peters's, sounds as scripted as any company ideology might be.

And yet, walking the halls of Sanrio, Inc., one cannot help but notice an overall mood of the place and its employees. The physical environment is fairly neat, clean, and, in many places, literally pink. One sees Hello Kitty in promotional displays, on desks, on shelves—a mix of personally owned items and company-owned products. The presence of the cat is not relentless but casual, some items strewn as part of midstream work. I am not suggesting here a closed equation: neat + clean + pink = mood of happiness. I am also not suggesting that every single person in Sanrio's employ glows with a company idiom of feeling good. Nor am I suggesting that Sanrio is a workplace devoid of conflict.

However, I am raising the possibility of ties between employees and products, and of a workplace that might run relatively smoothly because of employees acknowledging, accepting, and ultimately promoting the worthiness of the product. These are smart workers, capable of irony, as true believers. In other words, key workers in positions of responsibility with whom I spoke share a strong belief in Sanrio and its ethos of sociality and happiness as expressed in one of its iconic figures, Hello Kitty. Here lies the potential for emotional contagion—that is, the transferring of emotions between people in close proximity (Hatfield, Cacioppo, and Rapson 1994). The emotional contagion transfers in this case not only between workers, but also from product to employee—much as Peters mentioned with designers and the characters they draw.

I met Sarah Walsworth (b. 1970), a Filipina American who serves as Sanrio visual merchandiser of Sanrio, Inc. She explains the relationship between many Sanrio employees and the characters that are the daily staple of their work: "It's an extension of us now. It's just who we are" (personal communication, March 25, 2010). And part of "who we are" materializes in the Sanrio products owned and displayed by employees. Walsworth recalls a recent example when she was trying to gather older Hello Kitty products for a promotional display: "Everybody's got something [Sanrio on their desks]. Even our VPs. Just like a connection. Everybody's got something [Hello Kitty] in their lives that's like from way back that they still hang onto, that's still part of their lives" (personal communication, March 25, 2010). Thus, for many employees, being surrounded at work (and home) by cute characters such as Hello Kitty creates possibilities for the general mood of innocent happiness rubbing off, icon to employee. Walsworth suggests that some of the warm ethos of the workplace at Sanrio has to do with the nature of the product:

> I think it has a lot of do with what we work with . . . I mean we can have a meeting, and we're deciding on Kitty's nose . . . I mean it's a

serious meeting, but then you have to take a step back and laugh and go, "Oh my god, look at this. We're talking about her nose or her suspenders not being straight!" I mean those are the kind of decisions that we make. They're important decisions, but the content of what you're talking about . . . It's just like working in a toy company and you're just testing products to see how fun it is. That's kind of like what it is! It would be a lot different if we were working with something that's like . . . I don't know . . . bullets and guns versus Hello Kitty. (Personal communication, March 25, 2010)

So serious discussion about cute noses and suspenders—about the fun aesthetic of products—may result in laughter, rather than raised blood pressure. And "making other people happy" rebounds back upon workers in significant ways that affect who one is or believe themselves to be.

If Hello Kitty represents childhood, then closely identifying with the product sometimes means feeling protective toward Sanrio's cat. Walsworth explains:

> Being a core fan, it's like giving your baby to somebody else who knows nothing of the brand. They would like to get their hands into the brand, and give their spin on it. So, knowing our designs and how Kitty is applied on the product and colors, we know what's best for Kitty. We're very protective of her. When licensing first started taking off, it was a real big turn-off. It was like, "Oh my god, I would never stick those colors with that," or "I would never put Kitty wearing heels" or "I would never have Kitty dressed as a punk rocker or a pirate." It was aesthetics for one thing, and the other thing would be, we were protective of our brand. (Personal communication, March 25, 2010)

Sanrio employees such as Walsworth feel protective of Hello Kitty because, in some sense, she represents them.

The identity issues emanating from and through the workplace profoundly affect workers. Trying to decide what is causal (Hello Kitty makes workers happy) and what is selective (those who have an affinity for Hello Kitty or the attitudes surrounding Kitty end up working successfully at Sanrio) is less important than the confluence of workers and what many of them consider to be the Sanrio/Hello Kitty ethos of friendship, social communication, innocence, and ultimately, happiness. This is happiness itself defined by connections through childhood



innocence to its simplest forms: that is, not necessarily happiness built upon adult complexity of experience, but simplified as an experience of childhood. However, note that employees and fans situate Hello Kitty's ethos as separate from the maudlin sentimentality of a line such as Precious Moments. Rather, childhood itself—especially in these Japanese hands, as detailed in chapter 1—gains multiple dimensions through Hello Kitty.

Here are employees—true believers—who put in extra hours at work, often not out of response to a top-down assignment (with paid overtime), but because of their own self-generated enthusiasm and sometimes ideas (see chapter 6 for a discussion of the *Three Apples* exhibit). This is the mood of people who believe in the worthiness of their product and their endeavor, even if outsiders may view that product as childish or "abnormal" for adults. Some of these employees—especially females—come to the job, already fans of characters such as Hello Kitty. Others—primarily male—learn the brand as part of their on-the-job training. Both meet in boardrooms with a sense of commitment to what Peters and Marchi identify as the core message of the brand. Here is a brief excerpt of a conversation between Dave Marchi, Sarah Walsworth, and myself that took place on March 25, 2010, at Sanrio, Inc.:

D. M.: I go through the airport, and my bag has Hello Kitty on it, my laptop has Hello Kitty on it. I don't even think about it.

S. W.: That's how it is with our VPs as well. They don't think twice about having [Hello Kitty] pens sticking out of their shirts and stuff. It's just normal.

C. Y.: And you're not doing this [carrying Hello Kitty] because you're working for Sanrio?

D. M.: Absolutely not. No. Absolutely not. I mean if I were to stop working for Sanrio, yeah, I probably wouldn't be as Hello Kitty–fied or Sanrio-fied as I am, but I would still have the fondness and the understanding for the brand and the products, for sure. I couldn't go back.

S. W.: There is a definite distinction between people who get it and those who don't get it.

C. Y.: [Laughing] It sounds as if Hello Kitty is almost like a cult or a religion or something.

D. M.: Totally.

C. Y.: You think so?

D. M.: Totally, in certain ways, yeah, for sure.

C. Y.: Like how?

D. M.: People who get it and people who don't get it. And, I think, if you're a Hello Kitty fan, depending on how big or small your fandom is, you understand that.

S. W.: That's true. [At Sanrio] we all kind of share the same family culture of Hello Kitty-ness . . . it's like a family . . . working is really like a family setting, and I think Sanrio does that. I don't know if it's Hello Kitty necessarily, but Sanrio has that kind of corporate culture.

This is a company culture that relies on a family idiom of inclusiveness, loyalty, affect, and social ties. As Walsworth puts it, "It's a little bit laid back, little bit softer around the edges. We would never just barge into an office and go, "Give me these numbers." We have respect for each other" (personal communication, March 19, 2010).

What employees tell me is that the opposite of a worker upholding the Sanrio ethos is someone who comes in fresh out of college, holding a strictly "corporate" attitude and background. In other words, this is someone who thinks of a job as a set of cut-and-dried rules set down in a handbook, a "structured way of doing things" as one person put it. These "corporate" types assume that simply following the rules results in a paycheck. Longtime employees distinguish themselves from these types, pointing to passion and zeal—elements not written in handbooks or employee manuals—as hallmarks of the Sanrio "family" of workers. One may see the corporate model as rational, contractual, large scale, and essentially modern; the "family" model, by contrast, may be considered emotional, relational, small scale, and nonmodern. Whereas the corporate model may be learned in business schools, the family model is acquired experientially, on the job, among "true believers."

I asked Walsworth about the possibilities of exploitation, given special projects that might require long hours and no overtime pay.

> Me, personally, I have never felt that, only because I know I put that [project] on myself. It's not asked of me. It's not expected of me, but I do it myself. The only time that it [exploitation] ever comes up is if my husband would say, "Why? Why are you doing it? Just relax." And that's when you go like, "OK, relax." He's just like, "Just don't do it or stretch your time out." And it's like, "You know what, I can. You're right." We have enough freedom to actually work around it, but with as many projects as we have, it's like we get to those crunch times. Maybe it's poor planning, maybe we didn't have enough people—whatever the case may be, we just made it happen, and we didn't complain until it was like, "Ok, it's been two days since we've slept." And we know nobody else can help us. I think, part of it, too, is that we aim so high. It's like we really wanna make this just spectacular, and it was hard for us to say no to things. So we kind of put it on ourselves. (Personal communication, March 19, 2010)

A sense of exploitation thus only comes about when one is robbed of the agency to conceptualize and execute a project of one's own. Sanrio wisely gives free rein to its employees, who have the freedom to come up with projects and find ways to execute them. These are employees led by their own emotional attachment to the product, from designer Yamaguchi Yūko in Japan to merchandisers such as Walsworth in the United States.

Part of that attachment derives from "getting" the message of Hello Kitty. According to Peters, Marchi, and Walsworth, the brand promise of Sanrio (and Hello Kitty) is a message that someone may or may not "get," but once they do, they always have "it." As Marchi says, "I couldn't go back." Although talking about Sanrio (and Hello Kitty) as a religion may be lighthearted banter, at least some of what was said is not so far from spiritual discourse—conversion narratives, the leap of faith invested in "getting it," distinguishing between believers and nonbelievers, an evangelical belief in their mission, even a bit of persecution at the hands of the general public. Employees I spoke with—those in positions of responsibility within the company—profess a personal affinity for what they see as the innocence of pink and firmly believe in its message of hope and happiness. Pink globalization and Japanese Cute-Cool seem to become them, both in the sense of the progressive unfolding of a person, as well as in the sense of enhancing, fitting, and suiting their lives.

As the quasi-religious and capitalist intertwine, I can only note the sincerity with which these employees speak, structured around a busi-

ness model and product that have found a home in numerous global locations. A company ethos of happiness tinged with pink sounds like a hugely naive, manipulative enterprise, and that, in fact, may be exactly what it is. However, critique of this position comes far too easily. In my mind, it is more challenging to bring skepticism to bear in understanding the very framework of their sincerity, to acknowledge possibilities of emotional contagion, to untie and retie knots of the human spirit that may live within such highly manipulable endeavors. As Yamaguchi Yūko has done in Tokyo, so, too, are these American employees situating their lives within Sanrio's core brand message of "happiness" as interpellated subjects. They may be true believers in "the story"—that is, small-gift-big-smile friendship and notions of emotional well-being—raising skeptical Adorno-arched eyebrows of disbelief. But this critical reaction may say more about the necessity of our intellectual posturings than about their own lives.



*Chapter Three*

# GLOBAL KITTY

## Here, There, Nearly Everywhere

People who live with animals value the charm of muteness.
*—Ursula K. LeGuin (2005:19)*

Ever since I was little, Hello Kitty was just the only character. . . . I've seen it everywhere. It's like imprinted in my mind. Her face. I really don't know. It's weird. I just always see her face in my mind. It's scary.
*— Hello Kitty fan, twenty-four years old, personal communication, May 5, 2011, Honolulu*

I feel like I'm a walking advertisement.
*— Becky Hui, fan and Sanrio employee, twenty-seven years old, personal communication, June 21, 2002, South San Francisco*

Happiness tinged with pink, in fact, seduces as a mysterious presence in the confessions of many adult fans, as quoted above. The seemingly inexplicable attraction of Hello Kitty makes many consumers in various parts of the globe speak of her with both intimacy and awe as something they hold close yet do not fully understand. This may not be quite as mysterious as it seems; after all, as Thomas LaMarre explains, "We can never quite be sure what it is that we are enjoying (or why): something of our experience always remains obscure to us, remains unconscious" (2009:242). And yet, the inexplicable nature of fans' pleasure of Hello Kitty generates a certain amount of their talk about her. In their narratives, she is at one and the same time an affecting presence, a mouthless sphinx, and, unmistakably, a product. She poses the *kawaii* al-