

B-BEL IS COOKING UP SOMETHING NEW

BY ANDREW KARDON

At a time when tech toys like iPods and RoboSapiens are capturing all the media attention, it's somewhat of a shock to see a relatively new company prosper with "traditional" activity toys. But that's just what the Canada-based B-Bel has done, growing from a start-up company producing novelty items to a diverse activity-based toy company selling in eight different countries—all in less than a three-year span.

"What we want to do is make fun products that are enjoyable for people of all ages," says Michael Korniat, vice-president of sales for B-Bel. "The high-end tech toys. . . that's not where we want to be. It's not a thing that people really do together."

Conceived in 2002 by Raymond Poirier, B-Bel began marketing in 2004, oddly enough with a novelty line called Facemakers, a sort of cross between a Rubik's Cube and Mr. Potato Head that lets kids create more than 100 different faces. Looking to expand into a more group-oriented, activity-based realm, the company began making some changes.

HAPPY HOMEMAKERS

Dollhouses certainly aren't anything new, but B-Bel took this classic play pattern and gave it a modern twist. With its Dollhouse Decorator line, kids can do more than just play house. Removable sticker sets, paints that scrub from the walls, and reversible floors let kids build the dollhouse first, and then design and re-design it over and over again.

Latching on to the popular home makeover craze on TV, B-Bel quickly grabbed the Trading Space license, creating a perfect complement to the Dollhouse Decorator line, where kids could build and remodel various rooms of a house. More recently, the line has evolved a bit moving over to a new license with ABC's *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition*. The primetime network show centers on groups working together to remodel an entire house, fitting even more in line with B-Bel's dollhouses.

"Everything out there's been done," says Korniat, "So you've got to create distinct character traits within your products. Our Extreme Makeover House is a dollhouse and you're not going to get away from that. But what we've done is kids can decorate it and redo it. Instead of just playing with dolls in a doll-



B-Bel's Kids in the Kitchen line is shown above. Below is the Extreme Makeover Home Edition dollhouse.



house, the roleplay that we've changed in the play pattern is that the kids can pretend to decorate."

COOKING UP SOMETHING NEW

Another big push from B-Bel this year is its new Kids in the Kitchen line, which takes the difficulty and danger out of cooking. With a color-coded system of measuring cups and spoons, kids can easily follow directions with the accompanying recipe book. They just open the book and follow along, filling the color-coded spoon with the correct ingredients. Stickers can be placed on actual household items by parents so the young chefs can just match up the ingredients with the recipe.

The premiere No Bake Chef set includes 15 no-bake recipes that don't require any actual cooking

or eggs, so they're completely safe for children to do all by themselves. A second set, Party Cake Chef, includes decorating stencils for bakers to concoct various cakes and add all sorts of designs.

"Kids need instant gratification," says Korniat. "They need something they can make that's beautiful and easy, because that's how they go to the next level. If something's too difficult for them, then they get frustrated."

While the Kids in the Kitchen line doesn't include any actual ingredients, it does come in a variety of sets featuring color-coded cups, spoons, and recipes, as well as kid-sized mixing spoons, bowls, and an apron and chef's hat, so they can complete their roleplay.

Looking ahead to 2007, some major retailers are looking at placement of the entire product line.

TOYS GONE WILD

Further diversifying the Winnipeg-based company, B-Bel offers up two additional product lines. The Wild Ones action figures feature 19 points of articulation and play off the extreme sports theme including mountain biking, scuba diving, hang-gliding, and rock climbing. Besides some modern-looking sculpts and clothing, they also include some uniquely detailed vehicles. The ATV has independent suspension, the Deep-Sea Sub really works underwater, and the mountain bike has shocks on the front and seat just like a real one. Future plans call for a website that lets kids create new clothing and heads, which the company will then actually produce.

The other growth area is in juvenile accessories. Based on the child safety harnesses parents use at crowded areas like shopping malls and airports, the Safe-2-Go line is disguised as a cuddly backpack with a retractable safety strap line. The initial release features a Sunflower with retractable bee, Frog with retractable fly, Dog with retractable bone, and Ladybug with retractable baby bug. A licensed line is currently in the works.

The toy marketplace may forever be evolving, but B-Bel's diversity—from decorators-in-training to culinary kids—will ensure that it continues to adapt to its audience. As Korniat puts it, "What we really want to do is make products that are fit for everybody. I can't see anything like that changing."