

HeroBuilders.com

>Abstract

Emil Vicale, president of BBC (BBC) Design Group, used rapid prototyping technology (RPT) to build wax or plastic three-dimensional prototypes of his clients' designs. But this same technology can be used to custom manufacture dolls. Shortly after September 11, 2001, Vicale Corporation, BBC's parent company, purchased an e-commerce toy company. Vicale's first action figure was made to honor the heroes who emerged from that event. Using RPT, he crafted a doll with the head of George W. Bush and the body of Arnold Schwarzenegger. Other figures followed. This case is about a design firm that used exploratory research to define a niche in the action-figure business.

www.herobuilders.com

>The Scenario

Emil Vicale, president of HeroBuilders.com Corporation, thinks entrepreneurial. His industrial design company, BBC Design Group, has been operating for more than 20 years. One cornerstone of his design business is an innovative technology called rapid prototyping (RPT). RPT allows a designer to go from 3-D computer model to 3-D plastic or wax prototype in a matter of hours rather than the days, weeks, or months that prototypes using subtraction technology (carving) from wood, metal, or clay might take.

As part of a growth strategy implemented shortly after September 11, 2001, Vicale finalized the purchase of an e-commerce toy company, ToyBuilders.com. This was his first venture into the manufacture of toys, although his design firm had done developmental work for toy companies in the past. Vicale made his first doll to honor an admired hero of 9/11. "The Our Hero doll (resembling George Bush) turned out great, but I basically did it for me," shared Vicale. Over time, Vicale added to his personal collection of admired men with The Ally doll (resembling Great Britain's prime minister Tony Blair) and the American Mayor doll (resembling Rudolf Gulliani, then mayor of New York City). HeroBuilders.com creates each doll by assembling a custom head (created with the rapid prototyping technology from photographs) on to a buff, one-size-fits-all action figure body. As more friends and acquaintances saw the dolls in Vicale's office, requests increased for similar dolls for their own collections or as gifts.

"I'd been making dolls on my personal time. And the individual requests became too much," claimed Vicale. He decided to research the potential for the action-figure business. Starting with the Internet, Vicale found dozens of companies were involved worldwide, some big and some small. "Hasbro was the biggest player, but there were numerous others," described Vicale. Then he took

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his research to the retail environment. “In the toy store, action figures take up the most aisle space, second only to electronic games. And young girls have an action-figure section, too.”

The exploratory research findings stimulated Vicale’s interest. It was this evidence of the magnitude of the action-figure business, combined with a genuine respect and admiration for the heroes of 9/11 that led to the launch of an e-commerce business to sell dolls based on modern day heroes. To cover all the bases, Vicale did consult a lawyer about using the likenesses of living heroes, especially about using the likeness of a sitting president. The lawyer assured him that presidential likenesses were used for numerous commercial ventures, including the sale of newspapers and magazines.

The rapid prototyping capabilities make custom doll manufacturing possible. The business is also in a position to make dolls from photographs of everyday heroes in the lives of everyday people. What HeroBuilders.com hadn’t anticipated was the media attention that discovery of the dolls would create. “Our sales of the figures at the time [less than 10,000 units] didn’t warrant the media attention we received,” explained Vicale. “But one story led to another, then to television. We were unprepared.” After receiving numerous requests for villain dolls, HeroBuilders.com introduced dolls patterned after Osama Bin Laden and Saddam Hussein.

> Discussion

- 1 Which of the four types of studies are presented in this case.
- 2 Using the criteria in Exhibit 1-6, evaluate the research that HeroBuilders.com conducted prior to launching its hero and villain action figure business.
- 3 What issues, other than those Vicale chose to evaluate, would you have included in your research plan for HeroBuilders.com?

> Sources

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