

Am I a *Barbie* girl?

Mattel's fight for Barbie's reputation

MANAGEMENT DECISIONS

The authors prepared this case solely as a basis for class discussion and not as an endorsement, a source of primary data, or an illustration of effective or ineffective management. Although based on real events and despite occasional references to actual companies, this case is fictitious and any resemblance to actual persons or entities is coincidental.

Management Decisions

Barbie’s New CEO

Barbie’s decline in sales during the past three consecutive years, along with the drop in performance of other big brands of the family, was harmful for Mattel which resulted in not any longer being listed as “the most valuable publicly traded toy company”. Moreover, consumers’ negative perceptions towards Barbie were due to communicating a wrong role model to little girls focusing on an “ideal” outer appearance. Additionally, the company’s failure to address a multicultural audience through their products, led Mattel to take a strategic decision and appoint a new CEO to manage the Barbie brand. The new CEO, Christopher Sinclair, in charge since April 2015, initiated Mattel’s attempts towards a change in consumer’s perception of Barbie. His ultimate aim is to modernize the product and to adapt to current trends and consumers’ changing needs and wants.

Barbie’s Come Back Plan

Part of the new communication plan is the new commercial “Imagine the possibilities” that was launched in October 2015. Matt Miller, the executive creative director of advertising agency BBDO in San Francisco, said that “Barbie was originally created to show girls they have choices” and through the campaign their goal was to “show everyone how girls really play and demonstrate that, when girls play with Barbie, they actually play out the possibilities their futures hold”. The new communication campaign of Barbie changes direction regarding their target group. In the past, Barbie’s commercials targeted girls; this way they managed to capture a unique place in their hearts. Contrary to that, with the new digital campaign, the focus is straight on “Millennial parents” and the aim is to open a discussion and a direct communication with mothers and fathers. This way they aid Barbie to reveal its core identity and purpose, honour little girls’ individuality and the process of getting to know themselves and what they want to do in their live. The advertisement depicts girls in the workplace acting as grown ups. The aim was to surpass the message that girls can become whatever they want when they mature and reach to a point when they will make decisions about their life.

The new commercial, as part of the new campaign “You can be anything”, created a positive impact from an early stage. The advertisement was a major hit on YouTube with almost 19.000.000 views within two months and created buzz and WOM on social media, including comments from consumers stating that this was a great move from Barbie. Business world also responded to Barbie’s new positioning describing it as a “drastic shift of Barbie’s strategy”.

Barbie made a powerful revolution with the content of its new communication campaign. From being the traditional doll that represented style and good looks to becoming a doll who speaks for the dreams of little girls by motivating them to think of all the different capabilities and potentials they have for their “future”. This is a new touch for the traditional Barbie who was accused, for not changing orientation and for not adapting to the modern image and the needs of today’s women. Barbie deviates the discussion from a false role model who influenced the way little girls perceived their bodies and image to an inspiring character who supports girls’ dreams and ambitions. What was perceived as an idol or as a good example in the past decades does not have the same appreciation nowadays.

New product orientation

Barbie’s strategic plan for 2015 is focusing on the aim of enabling girls to be anything they want. Barbie’s product revitalization expresses diversity and links to the multicultural communities we live in nowadays. This can be seen in the launch of the new “Fashionista” product line, which includes 23 dolls (with eight skin colors, 14 different face characteristics, 18 eye variations, 22 haircuts, and 23 hair styles) (see Exhibit 4). This way, Barbie improves the way it deals with different target groups and the constant alteration of consumer’s characteristics. Furthermore, they focus on digital communication and announce a new game on their website called “My Style Book” with which prompts girls to find their own style and ideal look. In addition, they collaborate with influential YouTube persons to approach girls in a modern way and enhance Barbie’s engagement with the audience. Looking back to past decades, Barbie’s main communication channels include TV commercials and direct advertising through the use of direct mail or e-mail. In view of Barbie’s new strategic orientation, marketing expenses are focused on a wider communication plan that is adapted to nowadays’ trends and includes TV, digital and use of social media.

Due to technological advances and the tendency and need of the market towards interactive toys, Barbie launches “Hello Barbie”. The new doll has the ability to make a conversation, via a “cloud-based” application; this way Mattel provides the audience with an innovative product. Amongst a series of new products that are launched as part of the new strategy, Barbie has decided to introduce a new “Superhero” dolls line in collaboration with “Warner Brother” and “DC Entertainment”. The new dolls have an active, sporty look and a strong body different from the classic thin body type they promoted until now. The new superhero line, targets on helping girls develop their personality and determination and aspires them to search for what makes them happy and builds upon their capabilities (see Exhibit 5). Barbie made a great effort through partnering with “bloggers and feminists” and professors to develop the new series of dolls who meet the needs and wants of little girls and make them content. The new dolls have a powerful character and are promoting women’s strength and ability to find their own solutions to their problems rather than asking for help.

To conclude, based on the new strategy, Mattel's plans for Barbie in 2016 will discover new pathways and directions. As Ms. Mazzocco, global brand general manager at Barbie, stated: "We are looking under every rock. We are challenging our own rules. As we go into '16 and beyond. This is only the beginning".

Exhibit 4 Barbie “Fashionista” line (2015)



Exhibit 5 Barbie Superhero product line (2015)

