

\$165,370,000 in dolls alone

Jingle, jingle, Christmas sales already ringing

By JEANNE WHITTAKER

Being flexible, any management director will tell you, is an important key to success. But, to television actress Leah Ayres, flexibility means more than personal growth.

Flexibility is just one facet in a whole list of qualities that will make her constant companion, Darci—a model, actress, and disco doll—irresistible to today's sophisticated 5-10-year-olds.

Ms. Ayres, whose previous experience includes appearances in daytime soaps, is in the midst of a national tour which will take her to eight major cities to promote Darci and her black counterpart, Dana. The Kenner Toy Co. hopes the pair will rival the Mattel Toy Co.'s Barbie line of dolls this Christmas.

"That shouldn't be any problem, according to Ms. Ayres. To prove that Darci and Dana are more up-to-date and exciting than Barbie, she twisted

Darci's legs, arms, neck and torso into lifelike poses. Darci's mobility, she said, will help stimulate little girls' imaginations.

"Barbie was generic with fashion," she explained. "She was associated with a certain group of people. Now she is rather passé."

Ms. Ayres said Darci is the result of a longer than usual study of the doll market, which last year sold 44 million dolls, accessories and fashions with earnings of \$165,370,000.

"Three years ago, the Bionic Woman was a huge success. It showed that Barbie was no longer meeting the public's needs. So, Kenner conducted a nationwide survey to find out what people want in dolls."

The result showed there was a need for a beautiful, glamorous, sophisticated, totally moveable doll.

Kenner built a prototype and then invited children and adults to its Cincinnati headquarters to test how the doll would fare in a competitive market. Questionnaires, completed at the preview, indicated the doll's original name, Jennifer, was a turn-off, but the doll itself was a success.

"THE NAME held associations for too many people," she said. Darci was finally selected as a moniker because it was unusual and did not hold associations for too many people.

According to John Beck, Kenner's communications manager accompanying Ms. Ayres, the designing, developing and manufacturing of a smash success toy is a difficult and costly undertaking.

A toy company, he said, will cloak the creation of a new toy line with as much secrecy and security as automotive companies devote to the introduction of a new line of cars. A toy company's secrets are often more carefully guarded than those at an auto company, he added.

"There are two floors at company headquarters which have to be notified if visitors are to be brought through," he said.

A toy expert, who began his career 24 years ago with the introduction of another Kenner product, Play-Doh, Beck watches over Ms. Ayres' sample selection of Darci's and Dana's like a dozing nanny. Not only does he like them, he explained, he knows what went into creating them.

"The manufacturer has to guess more than a year in advance what the public will want. The risks are great and the chances of coming up with a successful product are difficult to judge."

Since the doll was introduced at the New York International Toy Fair last

'Toy companies try to change purchasing patterns, but 70 percent of all toy sales are made between October and December. The biggest purchases are made by mid-November. We had to curtail advertising last year on Star Wars because we knew by Nov. 1 they would be sold out.'

—John Beck, Kenner representative

February, Beck said Darci had climbed into Kenner's number two selling spot, right behind Star Wars. Other long-term best sellers include the Easy Bake oven and Spirograph, which Beck called one of the best engineered toys of all time.

"It's versatility and appeal are virtually limitless," he said.

Still, not every Kenner venture has met with such success as Darci, Star Wars and the Easy Bake oven.

"Our most spectacular flop was a Boy Scout doll. We thought that it would be wildly successful. Kenner spent months making preparations, with dozens of meetings between the designers and the Boy Scouts to see that the uniforms were perfect down to the last detail.

"It was a spectacular flop. You know what the kids wanted? At the same time the Boy Scout doll flopped, Six Million Dollar Man was selling, like gangbusters."

Which only goes to prove her point,

said Ms. Ayres. "Little girls don't want the boy (or girl) next door. What they want is a doll that is exciting. They are developing role models earlier."

Exposure to television, fashion magazines and exciting people is responsible for a lot of their expectations.

"It also relates," she said, "to the fact that children demand more today from their toys. Years ago they used sticks and fantasized them into play objects. But, the idea is still the same. Being a photographer who takes the pictures while Darci models, or being the DJ while she is dressed for the disco is much more than being placed in a passive role."

KENNER HAS yet to provide Darci

and Dana with the extensive wardrobe and accessory collection that Mattel has built up over the years for Barbie. But, said Ms. Ayres, there are ideas and plans in the making that will give Darci a competitive position.

Darci spokesperson, Leah Ayres (right) not only travels with the trendy new doll and its companion Dana, she also wears the same fashion, disco and lifestyle clothes that are included in Darci's growing wardrobe. She said the Kenner Co. learned that little girls don't want dolls that represent the boy or girl next door after the disastrous introduction of the Boy Scout doll. Today's more sophisticated junior misses are looking for beautiful, glamorous and sophisticated dolls, a need that the company expects Darci and Dana to fill this Christmas.



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