

Keeping the kids happy for the holidays

K mart's senior toy purchaser now at work for next Christmas

By Sharon Dargay
staff writer

If you're beginning to feel like a mindless GoBot after standing in unending toy store checkout lines, or seem driven to make colelaw out of the whole Cabbage Patch gang — take heart.

When the holiday spirit gives way to GI-Joe fatigue, think of George Colgan.

He's the corporate counterpart of Santa Claus, responsible for buying the toys that fill shelves in more than 2,000 K mart stores nationwide.

With a mere 12 months left to finish 1986 Christmas shopping — just days before this year's yuletide buying stampede — Colgan is swamped with retail merchandising decisions that can make or break an entire season.

For the Troy-based corporation, the second largest retailer behind Sears, that's no minor consideration.

"It certainly is a significant factor in the profit structure. We represent 5 to 6 percent in the company's total business."

"It's next Christmas I'm working on. I'm up to my ears this week."

The 52-year-old Birmingham executive already has a good idea which toys consumers will stow under the Christmas tree or select as Hanukkah gifts next year. By using a combination of instinct, experience and arithmetic, the senior buyer aims for toys that will turn an "acceptable" profit and keep customers coming back to K mart stores.

Top-heavy inventory means too many markdowns, a condition that can quickly turn a profitable season into a loser when balanced against total operational costs. On the other hand, bare shelves don't create an ideal situation either. Operating without some markdown items means customers went home empty-handed.

"YOU HAVE to have been in the retail buying and selling game for an appreciable amount of time to be able to make what I would call an educated guess and have a good track record," he said. "It's a matter of being perceptive enough to pick the items that are going to be good and a lot of that comes from

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pure, old, simple experience of buying goods day in and day out, visiting your stores and knowing the marketplace."

The risks in toy sales are as costly as in any other line of goods. Children, like their parents, are "precise" in their preferences for merchandise.

"If you make a bad buy, it's going to cost you and it doesn't matter if it's a child's item or an adult's item."

Colgan can't recall any miscalculations in holiday toy purchases last year, although demand for Michael Jackson merchandise has dropped precipitously, creating a potential overstock that may lead to post-holiday markdowns.

"There were a lot of sure bets last year and they were sell-outs — Cabbage Patch and Care Bears."

"If I looked at the toy I enjoyed marketing the most over the past 15 years, I'd have to be Cabbage Patch. There's been an awful lot of aggravation because of lack of sufficient product."

"But it's exciting to look at its offshoots — a teeny tiny doll or puzzle — and try to select the one that will be equally as good in its own way."

COLGAN EVALUATES trends and conducts test markets in a smattering of K mart stores before stocking toys nationwide. The cyclical market went from basic items, such as cars and toy planes, 10 years ago to the recent trend of hand-held battery and electronic television games.

"Customers were spending \$30 to \$40 for one piece and they were forced not to buy three or four items of basic goods," he explained.

Basic toys have gradually regained a

foothold in the market, while the popularity of television-fed games has waned.

Several toy manufacturing companies also have remained consistently strong over the past several years. Colgan said Fisher-Price takes top place as preschool toy manufacturer. Mattel, with the ever-popular Barbie line of dolls and accessories, is a leader in girl's toys. Kenner, with GI-Joe and Mattel, with Masters of the Universe figures, share equal footing for boys toys. Milton Bradley and Parker Brothers continue to out-produce other manufacturers.

"The last two years, Coleco has been the doll maker for everyone to catch," he added. "It's a phenomenon that has never occurred before and may never occur again. They got into it by accident. There were at least three major manufacturers I know of that turned the Cabbage Patch concept down and Coleco was smart enough to buy the concept."

COLGAN DOESN'T often get a chance to test market the toys himself. He said his youngest child, now 14, is "more interested in Ferraris" than cuddling teddy bears or playing with toy soldiers.

He keeps two toys in his office. The original "Grumpy" Care Bear sits in its box on a window sill and the autographed "Night Rider" car decorates his paper-laden desk.

"We don't take a toy home and test it with all of the neighborhood kids and decide we're going to buy it on that. We're dealing in millions here."



MINDY SAUNDERS/staff photographer

Cabbage Patch Kids, Masters of the Universe, Transformers, Care Bears, Rainbow Brite and

Trivial Pursuit join the perennial seller Barbie as the hot toys for this holiday season.

INSIDE ANGLES

Know someone doing something notable? Let us know. Write: Inside Angles, Farmington Observer, 33203 Grand River, Farmington 48024.

TIMOTHY A. DOOT, son of Mr. and Mrs. Lewis Doot of Farmington Hills, is studying for his doctorate in piano performance at the University of Texas in Austin. He was awarded the "Life Member Scholarship." The Life Member Scholarship fund provides scholarship assistance to outstanding students.

IT'S GOODFELLOW TIME. The Farmington Goodfellows served over 200 families last year and 100 senior citizens. The objective of the Farmington Goodfellow Organization is to conduct activities as required to operate a non-profit organization, whose aim is primarily, but not exclusively, providing help to needy children and senior citizens during the Christmas season, for residents in the cities of Farmington and Farmington Hills. There are many areas that volunteers are needed for the paper sale on Nov. 30, packing food and clothes and secretarial work to name a few. To volunteer your time, call 474-3440.

AIRMAN PAUL SCHNELL, son of Richard and Schnell of Farmington Hills and Margaret Zuber of Albany, Ga., has been assigned to Goodfellow Air Force Base, Texas, after completing Air Force basic training. During the six weeks at Lackland Air Force base, he studied the Air Force mission, organization and customs and received special training in human relations. In addition, airmen who complete basic training earn credits toward an associate degree through the Community College of the Air Force. Paul is a 1983 graduate of Wallied Lake High School.

DIANE MARIE BUZZELLI of Farmington Hills has been initiated into the Phi Alpha National Honorary Society of Social Work. Diane is in her second year of graduate studies in the School of Social Work at Michigan State University. She will have her master's in social work this June. Her career interest is Medical Social Work in a Hospice Program.

ONE OF GILBERT AND SULLIVAN'S most popular operettas came to Albion College. The play, "The Mikado," was presented in Goodrich Chapel. Karen Fulton, daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Ralph E. Fulton and a 1983 graduate of Harrison High School and Doug Jenkins, son of Mr. and Mrs. Kenneth R. Jenkins, and a 1983 graduate of Farmington High School, performed in the play.

APRIL ARABIAN of Farmington Hills is a

member of the 1984-85 Gold Company, Western Michigan University's internationally regarded jazz show vocal entertainment ensemble. The 16-member student ensemble and small back-up combo is one of seven vocal ensembles at WMU. Members are selected by audition from Western's enrollment of 18,200 students. This past September, the group participated in a 35th-anniversary celebration for WOTV-Channel 8 in Grand Rapids, and will be featured on several "Be There" commercials singing the theme song.

PFC. CHRISTOPHER FOX, son of Carl and Beverly Fox of Farmington, has completed the radio teletypewriter operator course at the U.S. Army Signal School, Fort Gordon, Ga. The course provides instruction for the soldier to install, operate and maintain field radio teletypewriter sets and related equipment.

DAWN PIERSON, daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Robert Pierson of Farmington Hills, was recently named to the dean's list at Albion College. Students must maintain at least a 3.5 grade-point average while carrying a full schedule of classes to earn a spot on the prestigious roster.

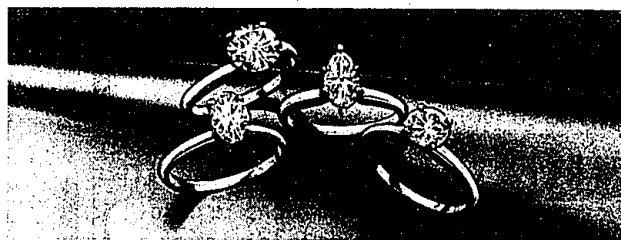
LAWRENCE S. BENACH of Farmington Hills has been appointed a district representative for the Lutheran Mutual Life Insurance Co. in this area according to a recent announcement by President I.R. Burling. He will be an associate of the Bernard Alter Agency of Farmington Hills.

DAVID JOHN WEICEL, son of Mr. and Mrs. John Weigel of Farmington, has been awarded an academic scholarship for the 1984-85 academic year at Evangel College, Springfield, Missouri. A 1981 graduate of Farmington High School, David is majoring in accounting.

TODD SZOTT, son of Mr. and Mrs. Thomas Scott of Farmington Hills, has joined Tau Kappa Epsilon Fraternity at Michigan State University. Tau Kappa Epsilon is the world's largest college general fraternity with over 280 active chapters on college and university campuses in the United States and Canada.

LORI WINKEL, daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Alvin Winkel of Farmington Hills, was inducted into the Olivet College Chapter of Omicron Delta Kappa. Omicron Delta Kappa inductees must be either a junior or senior and maintain a cumulative grade-point average of 3.0 or better. Besides scholarship, they must also excel in all areas of achievement: athletics, social service, religious activities and campus government; journalism, speech and the mass media; creative and performing arts.

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