

Flipping the script on 'gender-specific' toys

 By Leigh Andrews

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With lack of diversity and gender equality strongly in the media spotlight this month, the timing of Y&R Cape Town's #BreakTheMould campaign couldn't have been better.

Imagine a big bad dinosaur – ridden by a flaxen haired dolly with wings in a sparkly pink dress. Or take your typical 'mommy with baby in a pushchair' figurine and turn it into a stay-at-home father... called Darth Daddy.

That's the premise behind Y&R Cape Town's #BreakTheMould campaign, which was recently awarded at the Creative Circle Award of the Month and iDidTht's #WorkToWatch feature, as well as being selected for BestadsonTV. See just why this was such an effective strategy below:

Megan Hall, client service director at Y&R South Africa explains how the campaign was conceptualised for a panel discussion on Cape Talk's Pippa Hudson Show, which sought to explore the role of gender stereotyping in toys by leveraging the power of creativity to address early cues of gender-stereotyping that can lead little girls to believing they have limited options...

1. How did the #BreaktheMould show on Cape Talk come about?



Hall: Cape Talk is committed to starting important conversations and staying relevant in today's ever-changing competitive market.

Y&R South Africa's Cape Town office started a topical conversation to establish Cape Talk as forward-thinking, while challenging gender bias when it comes to kids' toys.

The objective of the panel discussion on the Pippa Hudson Show was to stimulate a candid conversation around the issue and to encourage parents and retailers to ask themselves: Are we doing enough to broaden children's horizons when it comes to toys?

2. Definitely relevant. Explain the process of how a few of the non-

gender-specific toys were reimagined.

Hall: The challenge lay in the question: How do we start a meaningful debate while shedding light on the role that both retailers and parents play in constructing messages that children receive through gender-specific toys? This sparked a thought: Wouldn't it be interesting to take gender-specific toys and mix and match them to create a new kind of toy? So we took some of the most typically 'for-boys' and 'for-girls' toys and paired them up in different ways to create characters based on new concepts.

The resulting creations were engaging gender-neutral toys: Diva Turtle, Iron Chef, Darth Daddy, Ninja Fairy, Princessaurus, Captain and the Kitty Cats, and My Little Avenger. These re-imagined gender-neutral toys were sent to key retailers and a child psychologist to invite them to the show and aid in the discussion around how toys can either aid or limit children's development. The toys became a conversation piece and steered the discussion to some of the approaches that can be taken by retailers and parents to impact children positively.

We also gave the re-imagined pieces to families with kids and filmed an experiment, documenting both the parents' and children's reactions to the toys. This video was shared on social media with a call for commentary in order to maximise awareness and extend the conversation.

3. What were those findings of the social experiment?

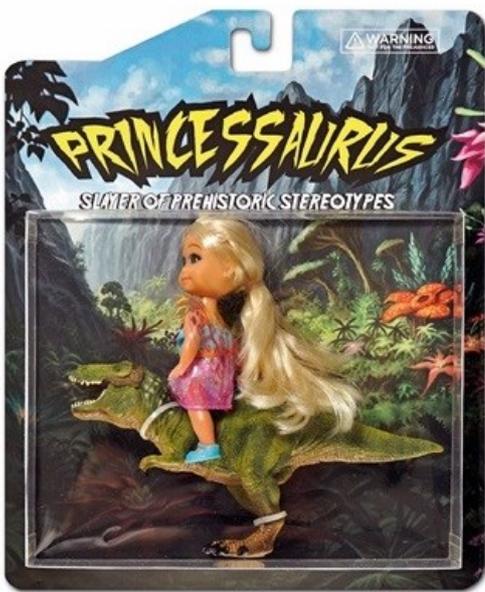
Hall: It was so interesting to polarise the children's approach to the toys vs the parents' perceptions and comments.

Most of the parents were perplexed when receiving the toy and some were quite vocal about their child not playing with a specific type of toy, because it was for a boy/girl. The children, on the other hand, happily played with the toys without prejudice.

4. Talk us through the importance of offering gender-neutral toys in the context of 2016.

Hall: Talya Ressel, the child psychologist who participated in the campaign, shed light on how breaking the gender bias in toys can have a positive impact on children's professional and social development.

In the context that we find ourselves in in 2016, preconceived gender roles are becoming increasingly blurred as we see more women taking leadership positions in business, and more men taking on more responsibility in the home than in years gone by. As this continues to evolve at a societal level, so too should the messages that our children are exposed to – and the onus is on parents and retailers alike to start the transformation.



Gender-neutral toys would be a great stride and tangible intervention with the ability to become the catalyst of redefinition of the previously 'accepted' norms for what boys and girls should play with.

Young children just see toys at an early stage of development – the notion that an object is meant for a girl or a boy specifically is the handed-down and recycled preconceptions of parents, retailers, or even marketers. It is this subconscious perception that influences how children perceive their roles in society as they grow up.

5. How does this then tie in to boosting children's self-worth and ambitions in life and the overarching message of #WomensMonth?

Hall: It's wonderful that women's issues and triumphs gain prominence during #WomensMonth in terms of editorial and brand communication. It is, however, quite a fresh angle to address the topic of self-perception of young girls and the subtle cues that initiates perceptions of self-limitation, as is the case with gender-specific toys. Ultimately, the desire to #BreakTheMould is a message that is not only empowering to women, but to everyone that seeks to critically ponder societal constructs without the intention of vilifying anyone.

6. What's the impact for retailers and marketers alike?

Hall: It really opens the door to tell richer stories and create something that doesn't have to fit into a predefined box. A

mandate that empowers us as retailers and marketers to play an active role as change agents and to open and legitimise the discussion about gender roles with parents. Ultimately, these kinds of small contributions now have the potential to lead to a more developed, fair and equal society in future.

Marketers and retailers, I hope you're taking notes...

ABOUT LEIGH ANDREWS

Leigh Andrews AKA the #MilkshakeQueen, is former Editor-in-Chief: Marketing & Media at Bizcommunity.com, with a passion for issues of diversity, inclusion and equality, and of course, gourmet food and drinks! She can be reached on Twitter at @Leigh_Andrews.

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