

What is quality in licensing?

Children's TV and the licensing business

The topic of licensing in an issue on quality in children's television? Are the two not mutually exclusive? In public discussion, after all, it is rather the absence of licensed products which speaks in favour of quality programmes.

process – for example, child exploitation – are equally to be avoided. Such things aside, however, it is the individual professional background and positioning of the company which determine conceptions of quality. Here are some short excerpts of a few interviews.

Yet this view has long since ceased to correspond to the reality of consumer behaviour, the wishes of children, and – above all – the reality of children's programme financing: "Often up to 80 % of the costs will have to be regenerated through merchandise, especially in animation." (P. Vridstoft TV2, Denmark)

The question "What makes for quality in the licensing sector?" meanwhile cannot be omitted from a discussion which does not aim at a nostalgic idealisation of children's television "in the good old days", but rather confronts the realities of the present situation. In conversation with leading figures in the various sectors of the licensing business, the broadest possible consensus emerges on what must be avoided at all costs. T-shirts or bed linen which lose their colours in the first wash or toy sports arenas which break after one hour's use damage the brand name. Product recalls of toys because the colouring agents contain lead not only cost vast amounts of money; they palpably diminish parents' trust and (even if none of the interviewees mentions this) they can also harm the children's health. Scandals relating to the production

Extend the enjoyment of a great show

Neil Ross Russell (BBC Worldwide, Great Britain)

It is often underestimated that it is not just about actually creating the toys at the end. If you look at the value-chain in its entirety, there are two *choke points* – there are two sorts of bottlenecks at each end of our value-chain. One is with the broadcaster and getting the show on air in the first place – it is clearly absolutely critical in terms of building the awareness of any property. At the other end of the value-chain, you have the bottleneck of getting any product you may have in stores – getting it actually on to the shelves of the retailers. In terms of the first one often underestimated is the importance of making great TV shows. To produce a TV programme with your eye on the future merchandise property is setting yourself up for a fall. If you look at our *In the night garden* it is first and foremost a really fantastic television programme. It is produced with an impressive academic knowledge on the subject of child developmental



stages and a fantastic creative TV show, which plays as well in China, Canada, and South Africa, as it does in the UK. This obviously gives us a really good platform from which to build a licensing programme. Quality at this end of the value-chain means producing products that allow the children to extend their enjoyment of the shows. It is the chance to take the values of the show home with them in a physical form, and continue their interaction with the brand and the characters in a way that makes sense and is relevant to the underlying brand-values of the show. It's really important to us that we absolutely avoid 'brand-slapping', where you just take a brand, take a logo and put it onto an existing product where it has no real connection to the show. People start getting exhausted very quickly if the product loses its connection with the original programme. In building the licensing programme of *In the night garden* we have been very careful. We initially looked at

plush of the highest production and play value for children. The 'Blanket Time Igglepiggle' for example was one of the first products our licensee Hasbro launched in to the market (cf. Ill. 1). Children absolutely adore the character of Igglepiggle in the show and with this product they were able to sing, dance and play in different modes over and over again.

Offer relevant products while taking care of your characters

Jay Visconti (Disney Consumer Products, USA)



Quality is driven by relevance, the relevance of a particular story for the T(w)een target group. Over the last few years, Disney has found a unique

way of telling stories that have proven to be truly appealing to 6- to 14-year-olds. Stories that centre around the evergreen themes like music, love, friendship and mastering adolescence. The difference to other properties in the market is driven to a large extent by the power of the storylines, the appeal of the music and the charisma of the talent. Outstanding actors and music performers like Miley Cyrus, Ashley Tisdale, Vanessa Hudgens, Zac Efron, and the Jonas Brothers (to name a few) have managed to develop their talents

– under a careful and encouraging guidance of very experienced Disney producers. For me the most popular challenge (or mistake) is disregarding the personality of the character when developing merchandise products, known as Character Slapping. It's still around and working, sometimes, but never for long. Another trap is the assumption that Character merchandise works for the same age groups as media products: we have found out that there is a bunch of product-specific preferences in the different target groups that you have to consider, no matter how appealing the character is. As an example of a high-quality product take the 'Leomil' shoe range on *Hannah Montana* (cf. Ill. 2): both the product and the supporting marketing initiative (an online design competition to create your own shoe) have proven to be very relevant to the target group.

Keep classics alive – by dusting it off and with a 24/7 strategy

Patrick Elmendorff (studio100 media, Germany)



In merchandising we rely on individual brand names, because it is our conviction that everything is conveyed by means of the content. Our advantage in this respect is that we are not an agency, but instead the rights belong to us – above all, for the great classics such as *Maya the bee*, *Heidi*, *Pippi Longstocking*, *Tabaluga* etc. So we do not need to try and develop great brands – they are already out there and have been working fabulously for several generations. Quality in this case is a matter of investing in the content – dusting it off a bit, I might say – but without losing its recognition value. The series *Maya the bee*, for

example, has already been around for 35 years. Since then, of course, one or two things have happened in the animation business. In line with this we are working on a new run of the series which is up to speed with today's technical possibilities and whose content and length are geared towards pre-school children. Yet in the process it is very important to us that we retain the same look and feel. Anyone who sees the new series must be able to say at once: That's the same *Maya the bee* I saw as a child! After the series a feature film might follow, then one year later a stage show; in between, we are launching new radio plays. Here, quality is a question of regularly contributing fresh content in order to keep interest in the brand alive. This must be underlined by the license products as a high-quality product range where we pursue a 24/7 strategy. We want to give both little *Maya the bee* fans and their parents the opportunity to choose one of our products seven days a week, twenty-four hours a day. When a child wakes up, it should have the choice of doing so in *Maya the bee* bedclothes; if there are cornflakes for breakfast, it should have the choice of coming into contact with *Maya the bee* here as well (cf. Ill. 3) and so on. But in all cases the products must, however, be in harmony with the brand.



Be innovative and groundbreaking

Bettina Koeckler (Chorion, Licensing EMEA, Great Britain)

“Quality” for us means working on sustainable subject matter and marketing strategies. We manage only a few brand names and prefer smaller teams



committed to long-term collaboration with which we can then produce top-quality products.

We are looking for clearly delineated, interesting characters with a real story to tell. I think the biggest mistake that you can make is to underestimate children as they want more than just a superficial show. During production the aesthetic aspect is very important for us. We think that the animation must look better than anything else on the market. We can't rely on current trends; we have to be groundbreaking: it has to be eye-candy. We are always trying to be on the cutting edge of design. Innovation is another key element for us. We work with toy partners who embrace technological advance, for example our partnership with Spin Master on *OLIVIA*. The toys are still in development, but we are impressed with Spin Master's innovation and openness to collaboration. Our strategy is to work with partners on a long-term basis. The goal must be to create a really excellent product which makes everyone happy and successful.

Release kids' imagination

Holly Rawlinson (The Name Game, USA)

As owner of a licensing agency, quality in the products means that it releases imagination for kids. It should help them extend whatever fantas-



tic amount of experience that they had while watching the show, playing the video game, or seeing the movie; into their own creativity. Quality products really help them bring their imagination out, dress up like the characters, emulate the character, decorate their rooms, or anything that helps enhance creativity with kids – enhance a great play experience. It should be like playing with LEGO bricks. You can do what the kit tells you to do, or you do whatever you want to. I think that is a perfect toy. One of the problems with licensed products for kids is that they try to do everything for the child. I tend to like products that are high quality and reflect the license, but don't dictate to the kids exactly how to play.

When it comes to a little bit older kids, likeness is a central moment of quality. Kids are really savvy, especially boys, about action figures. They can tell a figure that is crap (excuse my language), or if the figure really reflects that character. If they *love* the character, they know that character; they know what colour the eyes are, what shirt they wear – *they know*. You want to make sure that you are captur-

ing that as much as possible. But also on a deeper level the product has to hit the core of the brand, what the brand is about. From my perspective, selling licensed diapers on a property that has nothing to do with babies makes no sense. If you have a flight-based character that would never go near the water and you are doing pool toys, it doesn't reflect the character.

Control quality at every single step

Christoph Ahmadi (SuperRTL, Germany)



The most important key aspect is, first of all, we obviously need to know the respective brand and have a clear product strategy that fits the position-

ing of this brand. Secondly, we need to know our target group and all requirements for products for children in this segment. Furthermore, it is vital to have a detailed and updated style-guide that also provides clear guidelines as to what is possible and what is not possible with the brand so that licensees have some orientation for the development process. Another vital and probably most important aspect for us is to have a well-structured art approval process and approval team that controls and steers the product development process. Overall, one needs to control quality on every step of the licensing process. ■

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