Toymakers Relying On 'Mommy Bloggers'

Mae Anderson, AP Retail Writer

Emily Vanek is not buying up a bunch of LeapPad Explorers herself, but she may be at least partly to blame for some stores selling out of the $99 children's tablet this holiday season.

"The LeapPad is incredible," the Denver mother of three boys wrote to the 6,000 readers of her ColoradoMoms.com blog. "Not only do kids get to have a toy resembling their parents' tablet, it's durable and my favorite part?! It's not just mindless games they are playing."

These days, mommy bloggers don't just gab about spilled milk and poopy diapers. In fact, they've become so influential in the $22 billion toy market that toy makers go to great lengths to get their seal of approval. Their thumbs-up is particularly important during the holiday shopping season when toy makers hope to create the next hit toy.

It's a major shift for toy companies, which have always given out samples of new dolls, games and other playthings to drive sales. Five years ago, they handed out 98 percent of those products to TV stations, newspapers and magazines. But today, as much as 70 percent go to bloggers.

Mattel Inc., the world's largest toy company, has a database of about 400 mommy bloggers and their location, interests and the children's ages. Canadian toy maker Spin Master, which makes the trading card game Redakai, hired a dedicated staffer whose only job is to reach out to mommy bloggers. And small toy maker Cepia Inc., which makes robotic Zhu Zhu pets, gets feedback from mommy bloggers before its toys hit shelves.

It's hard for toy makers to ignore the monstrous number of mommy bloggers. Nationwide, there are about 4 million or so mommy bloggers who influence millions of other parents around the world.

"Mommy bloggers started because they wanted to share things about a new baby, but the most influential ones got into social media and realized they could make a difference," says Maria Bailey, whose BSM Media firm helps companies pick mommy bloggers with the most reach on the Twitter and Facebook social media websites. "Sometimes that difference is as simple as directing a mom to a toy that will save money."

That's why when LeapFrog Enterprises wanted to roll out its LeapPad Explorer kid-size tablet, it reached out to 200 of the top mommy bloggers. The goal? To get them to generate buzz for the tablet by throwing "mommy parties."

The Emeryville, Calif.-based company sent each blogger a kit that included a

LeapPad, a game for it and coupons. LeapFrog also sent tips on how many people to invite (about 5 adults and 15 kids) and suggested recipes (ice cream sundaes).

For bloggers like Vanek, the Denver mom who bills herself as the "go-to answer for all things mom and kids in Colorado," it was a chance to be a hero of sorts to other parents and their kids.

"It not only lets my own children get to try out the newest/hottest toys, it allows them to share them with their friends," she says. "It allows me to get to have my own friends over for something better than a Tupperware party where I'm doing a hard sales pitch."

But for LeapFrog, it was an opportunity to get word-of-mouth going early.

It was the first time the company had hosted "mommy parties," but it seems to have paid off. The company declined to give sales numbers, but the LeapPad has been selling out online and in stores across the country this holiday season.

Earlier this year, SpinMaster also used mommy bloggers to get the word out about its reformulated Moon Dough, a non-sticky PlayDoh-like moldable substance. Within weeks of the company sending samples to more than 500 bloggers, there were thousands of postings about the new product online.

"After playing with our other Moon Dough set just a few days before, I could immediately tell that this Moon Dough was much less flaky," blogged ohsosavvymom.com, a mom in San Antonio, Texas with more than 3,600 Twitter followers.

Harold Chizick, vice president of global communications at Spin Master, says in part because of reviews like that, the product had a double-digit increase in sales, though he declined to give details. If the company had used traditional ways to get the word out, Chizick says, the roll out would have taken several months or longer.

"It was much faster than expected," he says.

Sometimes, buzz from bloggers can backfire.

"If they like something word gets around very quickly, if they don't like something, word will also get around quickly," says Timetoplaymag.com's Jim Silver, a long time toy expert who works with mom bloggers to review products on his website.

In 2009, after Mattel released a silhouette of its new "tween" Dora the Explorer that seemed to deviate from the tomboy-esque look of the original doll, a number of bloggers complained. A Cafemom.com blogger wrote: "Can't they leave anything to the imagination these days?"

Mattel, which had hoped the silhouette would generate excitement ahead of the launch of the new doll, decided to release the full image of the Dora early to reassure moms that the doll wasn't too fancied up.

Crayola also faced scrutiny from mom bloggers this year when its Crayola Colored Bubbles, a product with a wand that kids can blow colored soap bubbles through, caused stains. After bloggers gave it negative reviews, Crayola made some changes, including updating the packaging and adding a warning about the possibility of stains.

"It's just like handing kids a bunch of fabric dye and telling them to throw it around," a blogger on Mommybrunchtales.com wrote.

Still, most toy makers find the risk is worth the reward.

Cepia LLC was relatively unknown until mommy bloggers made its Zhu Zhu pets a hit in 2009. Laura Kurzu, Cepia's senior vice president of marketing, works with bloggers every step of the way to develop toys, including a Zhu Zhu building set that it tweaked due to blogger comments.

"Bloggers can be really great evangelists for the brand, but you have to be invested in listening to what they say to you," she says. "You can't just throw something out there and expect gratuitous support."

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