

>playthings

The Year in Play

Where toys are going: trends shaping the marketplace in 2016.

BY PAMELA BRILL

If toy retailers and manufacturers had the ability to gaze into a proverbial crystal ball and glimpse into the future, what would they see? After a year filled with product innovations, a surge in overall retail sales—with holiday 2015 projected to one of the biggest seasons in recent years—retailers and manufacturers remain optimistic about the future of play.

As to what trends will be shaping the industry and affecting sales at the cash register, industry insiders offer their own glimpse into the New Year and discuss the effects of technology, age compression and other factors in toy making and selling.

STEM Gains More STEAM

The buzzwords STEM/STEAM have been permeating the toy world for the last few years as toy makers meet consumer demand for incorporating more educational content into playtime. “For us, this means marrying our traditional logic puzzle format with an engineer-

ing principle,” said Bill Ritchie, co-founder, ThinkFun, which has been in full STEM force this past year with new collections. “We have had great success with Lazer Maze and Gravity Maze and have high hopes for our new Circuit Maze in 2016.”

Other manufacturers are finding success by zeroing in more on the STEAM aspect, which adds some Art to STEM’s science, technology, engineering and math. Everything from chemistry kits to buildable play houses, apparel, accessories and more, STEAM toys give kids a chance to experiment with all the elements, show their creativity by building something that’s customized for them.

“We like to highlight the art component that gives girls the opportunity to add their own personal touch to the rigorous scientific components that they learn in our chemistry kit,” said Amy

Compton, CMO/partner, Yellow Scope: Science Kits for Girls. The

company’s Foundation Chemistry Kit and its lab bench paper, a chalk cloth that girls can write on to label their experiments as well as its colored pencils and lab notebook for recording observations, fit the STEAM model.

“As STEM/STEAM become part of the common parlance of parents wanting to give their kids a leg up in life, the appeal of STEM/STEAM toys will only increase, especially for girls,” said Compton.

Educational Insights is putting STEAM through crafting. The company’s IllumiCraft line of



B Foundation Chemistry Set features 19 experiments. 8-12. \$44. Yellow Scope. nfo@yellow-scope.com. yellow-scope.com CIRCLE #843

educational crafts give kids an introduction to basic electrical engineering, these kits result in crafts that light up when activated. “We’ve put special focus on incorporating STEM/STEAM benefits...and communicating those benefits in an accessible, easy-to-understand package,” said Lisa Gulli, general manager, Educational Insights.

Toy makers expect to see a continued increase in these types of playthings in 2016, especially in the U.S. With a more continued focus on strengthening STEM-related fields within the U.S., the influence of STEM and STEAM continues to expand across toy and game categories. “Many of the current engineering jobs, for example, need to be filled by people that were not schooled in the United States,” said Esther Novis, founder, The Young Scientists Club.

This year, the company will be introducing its Science-Art Fusion line of kits, which tap into creativity through a series of projects and introduce basic science concepts.

While the STEM/STEAM trend may appear to be new, some toy experts feel it’s been there all along. “Essentially, there is now an acronym



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for what is a large part of old-fashioned, authentic and, most importantly, three-dimensional play," says Lea Culliton, president, Haba USA. "Blocks, construction, shape sporting, puzzles and anything else with matching of different sizes, shapes and colors are loaded with STEM/STEAM developmental pathways, and loads of fun and laughter."

Nathan Keeker, co-founder and CEO, Diggin Active, agreed. "STEM/STEAM is a useful acronym to say, 'Hey, this item has some educational merit,'" but beyond that it is not a particularly new



E Science-Art Fusion Bubbles includes 10 different experiment-style activities, including a lava lamp and bubble sculptures. \$19.99. The Young Scientists Club. 800.964.1320. theyoungscientistsclub.com

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