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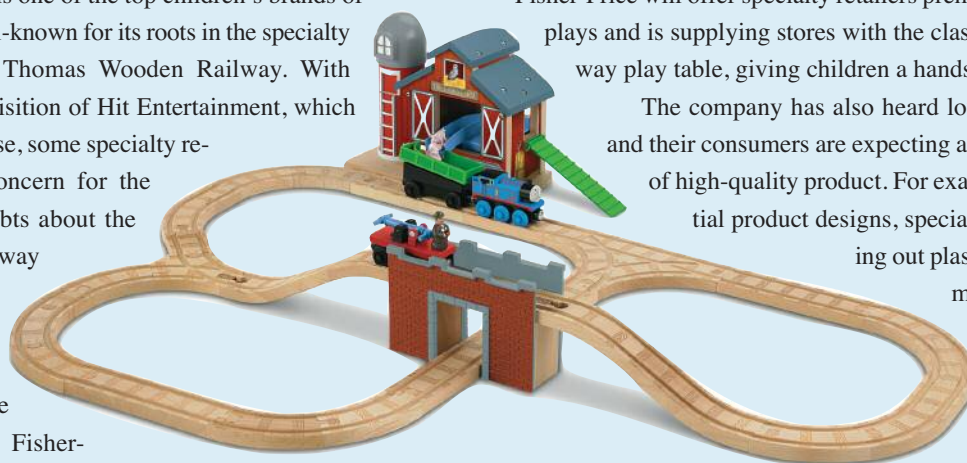
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Thomas Rides into the Future and Back to Its Roots

by Jackie Breyer

Thomas & Friends is one of the top children's brands of all time and is well-known for its roots in the specialty market with the Thomas Wooden Railway. With Fisher-Price's recent acquisition of Hit Entertainment, which includes the Thomas license, some specialty retailers have expressed concern for the brand's integrity and doubts about the future of the Wooden Railway System at the specialty level. To alleviate these concerns, and because they too want to see Thomas ride to the top, Fisher-Price has been working steadily with specialty retailers to make sure they get it right. The company understands that specialty retailers have unique needs and desire a more personalized relationship with their suppliers. The company is offering a variety of specialty-only exclusive products, including limited-release engines.



Fisher-Price will offer specialty retailers premium wooden shelving displays and is supplying stores with the classic Thomas Wooden Railway play table, giving children a hands-on in-store experience.

The company has also heard loud and clear that retailers and their consumers are expecting a return to the brand's roots of high-quality product. For example, when reviewing initial product designs, specialty retailers requested taking out plastic parts and incorporating more wood. Specialty retailers also requested more innovation that they felt had been missing. Fisher-Price responded by introducing new features,

such as multi-level play in the play sets, three-in-one destinations, and unique cargo loading features.

Another impactful change is the age grading on the engines being lowered to ages 2 and up; previously, some engines were age graded for 3 and up. "That was a concerted effort for us because we realize that Thomas Wooden Railway is often a child's first handshake with our brand," says Rick Glankler, vice president, marketing, at Fisher-Price. "It was important that we safety tested everything for the consumer as they're coming into the brand."

One of the retailers who worked especially close with Fisher-Price is Cindy Wyatt, CEO of Totally Thomas, Inc. With two brick-and-mortar locations in California and steady Internet sales, Totally Thomas—as its name implies—has a strong relationship with the Thomas brand. Wyatt is also a rather vocal member of the specialty toy industry and, therefore, the perfect person to make sure things stay on track. While Wyatt says that with her stake in the Thomas brand—20 percent of her store is devoted to Thomas, plus 90 percent of her web sales—she was especially concerned about the brand being placed in the hands of a mass-market manufacturer. But, after working closely with the Thomas team at Fisher-Price, she is confident that she and her customers will be quite pleased with the product line.

At a Glance

—Rev. W Awdry published his first *Thomas & Friends* story, "Edward's Day Out," in 1945. Awdry came up with tales about the steam engines to entertain his young son when he was in bed with the measles.

—More than 21 million pieces of track have been sold in the US. If you laid out all these pieces of track, you could drive your Thomas Wooden Engine from Boston to Cheyenne, Wyoming.

—Thomas & Friends experienced a 35 percent month-to-month ratings growth in 2012 and has rated in the top two programs for children ages 2 to 5, for the first time ever, in August, September, and October.

—200 million Thomas books and e-books have been sold to date.

—The Thomas digital portfolio boasts 15 Thomas apps with 2 million downloads.

—The new Thomas Wooden Railway line from Fisher-Price will feature more than 85 SKUs of engines, destinations, and track sets, all created from wood.



“They have been absolutely awesome in terms of consulting us [retailers],” says Wyatt. “They’ve been really leveraging the knowledge that we bring to the table. I’m seeing specific things in their new line that came out of those discussions. They have managed to focus on what’s important in the line, what the key things were, what we need in the line that is now missing, and I think they’re going to bring the line back to its classic focus that was the original appeal of the line.”

Wyatt notes that in recent years the wooden line had evolved from its original appeal and was becoming “very plastic-y and ho-hum,” and felt that the perceived value for the price had dropped.

“They’re bringing things back to the core values of wood in the line, and they’re really focusing on the right characters for the launch. They’ve taken some of their accessories and made little tweaks that really take a lot of the sets and accessories to a new level,” says Wyatt.

Since the Wooden Railway is, in many cases, a child’s entry point to the brand at the youngest ages, it was important for Fisher-Price and Hit Entertainment to focus on bringing that line back to its roots.

“The wood is the purest, most classic form of delivering the Thomas experience,” says Shari Donnefeld, vice president of global brands at Hit Entertainment. “It’s the young, classic, chunky, pure material that gets moms very excited. And kids can see how it’s spun out from the content. It gives them a chance to reenact the stories. It’s the storytelling and the train play that drive this brand.”

With the product now headed to retail, the next task is making sure parents are informed. With all four Thomas train systems under one

roof with Fisher-Price, the brand can be more efficiently marketed to parents and tailored to the way children interact with the brand at various stages of development.

“We can help parents fully understand what the benefits are for each child,” says Donnefeld. “It’s motorized, it’s take-and-play portability, it’s the classic wood line. We need to help consumers

understand how to navigate through our product and through a child’s preschool and early childhood to match the product to a child’s life stage.”

Since today’s parents do much of their product research online, digital advertising will be a focus of the program’s outreach.

“There will be a national digital advertising campaign focused on the wooden railway that talks about the benefits of Thomas and wooden train play for children,” says Glankler. “It’s driving traffic to individual retailers, whereas in the past it was left to the individual retailers themselves. Not only will it include banner ads and other digital spots on our site and other mom-related sites, we’re also creating a more robust mom destination on our website.”

Glankler says the new destination will be more than just information about the brand; it will engage parents by discussing the value of wooden train play and the benefits it provides their children.

“We’re having conversations with today’s mom in the way that she talks today,” says Glankler. “There are a lot of parents out there who are strong advocates for our brand, so it’s not just information for new moms, we’re also working on giving a voice to those advocates via social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter. Moms want to hear from other moms about the brand.”

With marketing and promotions supported by Fisher-Price and Hit Entertainment, the Thomas brand and the revamped Wooden Railway line are sure to be top of mind with parents whose kids are ready to enter—or are already a part of—the world of Thomas & Friends. For many specialty retailers it may seem like a tremendous leap to carry Fisher-Price product in their stores, but the company says it is committed not only to delivering a fresh, innovative, high-quality line, but it is also striving to work with specialty retailers.

According to Totally Thomas’ Wyatt, the Fisher-Price group working on the Thomas brand is indeed committed to working with specialty retailers. “It’s like they’re a separate group,” says Wyatt. “So far, I love these people.”

This page: Inspired by the spring 2013 DVD *Go Go Thomas*, the new Thomas Wooden Railway Search and Rescue destination features lights, sounds, and two levels of play. This destination will be offered exclusively in the specialty channel and is one of the items that introduces multi-level over/under play to Thomas Wooden Railway.

Opposite page: The new Thomas Wooden Railway Farmhouse Pig Parade set will be offered exclusively at specialty retailers and includes a new cargo loading feature. Roll Thomas to the barn, press the roof, and the pigs “walk” into his cargo car.