

DOES MATTEL'S ICONIC BARBIE DOLL NEED A MAKEOVER?¹

Karen Robson and Stefanie Beninger wrote this case solely to provide material for class discussion. The authors do not intend to illustrate either effective or ineffective handling of a managerial situation. The authors may have disguised certain names and other identifying information to protect confidentiality.

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In 2015, almost 60 years after being introduced to the market, the Mattel Inc.'s Barbie doll was one of the world's most iconic toys. However, both the industry landscape and consumer preferences were changing, and Barbie was yet again in the spotlight as consumers criticized the toy for providing a narrow and unrealistic vision of how women should look, how they should dress, and the careers they should pursue. Sales and public perception of the doll were both on the downswing.² Was there a place for Barbie in 2015, or was this the end of the line for the iconic doll? What could Mattel do to turn things around?

MATTEL INC.

In 2015, Mattel was the world's second largest toys and games manufacturer. The company had three main brand portfolios: Fisher-Price, American Girl, and Mattel brands.³ Fisher-Price included popular brands such as Power Wheels, Winnie the Pooh, Sesame Street, Dora the Explorer, and Barney. The American Girl brand line included American Girl Today and The American Girls Collection. Mattel brands included Barbie as well as related doll clothing, accessories, homes, cars, and other lifestyle elements.

The Birth of an Icon

In 1944, wife and husband Ruth and Elliot Handler, along with Harold "Matt" Matson, decided to start a new enterprise that they called Mattel, a portmanteau of Matt and Elliot.⁴ When Mattel first began operating in 1945, the company sold mostly picture frames; later, it added dollhouse furniture made from picture frame scraps. When Matson left Mattel in 1945, the Handlers decided to focus primarily on toys.⁵

In the 1950s, a simple, everyday event changed everything for Mattel: Ruth Handler observed her daughter, Barbara (Barbie) Handler, playing with cut-out paper dolls and imagining that they were college students, cheerleaders, or adults with careers.⁶ Handler immediately identified that this sort of imagination and "safe experimentation" about the future was a part of growing up, and wanted to create a doll that would inspire her daughter and better allow her to imagine the possibilities of the future.⁷ However, nearly a decade passed before the Barbie doll was brought to market. In 1956, Handler again became inspired while on a trip with her then 15-year-old daughter when she saw the German Bild Lilli doll.⁸ Bild Lilli was a successful European product targeted primarily at adult men and sold in tobacco shops and

bars.⁹ There, the doll was sold with the tagline, “Whether more or less naked, Lilli is always discreet.”¹⁰ Although the doll was originally targeted at men, children also played with the doll.¹¹

Three years later, a doll called Barbara Millicent Roberts — more commonly known as Barbie — was born. Ruth Handler said of the doll, “My whole philosophy of Barbie was that through the doll, the little girl could be anything she wanted to be. Barbie always represented the fact that a woman has choices.”¹²

Barbie was brought to market on March 9, 1959 — the doll’s official birthday — at the New York Toy Fair, where she was sold for \$3¹³ as a teenage fashion model wearing a black-and-white striped bathing suit.¹⁴ Barbie was the world’s first mass-marketed doll that had an adult-look, a deliberate decision by Ruth Handler, who commented:

Every little girl needed a doll through which to project herself into her dream of her future. . . . If she was going to do role playing of what she would be like when she was 16 or 17, it was a little stupid to play with a doll that had a flat chest. So I gave it beautiful breasts.¹⁵

From her introduction to the market, Barbie was the first product in the toy industry to be marketed heavily through television advertising.¹⁶ In the first year after the release, 300,000 Barbie dolls were sold.¹⁷

Barbie Grows Up

Over the years, Barbie dolls were sold wearing various outfits, each of which reflected her career at the time. By 2015, Barbie had been sold representing more than 150 careers (see Exhibit 1).¹⁸ Before long, other dolls joined Barbie in the product line. On March 11, 1961, the Ken Carson doll — named after Ruth Handler’s son, Ken — was introduced to the market.¹⁹ Barbie’s friend, Midge, followed in 1963; her younger sister, Skipper, in 1965; and her friend, Christie (the first non-Caucasian doll in the Barbie line), in 1968.²⁰ Mattel acquired the rights to the competitor Bild Lilli doll in 1964 and stopped production of Bild Lilli.²¹

By the late 1980s, Barbie had become a \$1 billion brand.²² By the 1990s, sales reached a rate of two dolls every second,²³ and in the 2000s, annual sales were more than \$3.6 billion.²⁴ By 2009, Barbie merchandise represented more than 25 per cent of the U.S. market share in dolls and accessories.²⁵ As her sales and appeal grew, Barbie became more than just a doll — she became a cultural icon, with a brand encompassing everything from dolls and accessories to animated aerobics videos to Barbie look-alike competitions for women.²⁶

Barbie’s status was further solidified by the 1997 release of the hit song “Barbie Girl” by the Danish music group Aqua.²⁷ Mattel took legal action against the music group, citing copyright and trademark infringement, and claiming that the song lyrics were damaging to the pure image of the Barbie doll.²⁸ However, a judge ruled that the song’s parody was legal, in part due to Barbie’s status as a cultural icon.²⁹

Despite this iconic status, sales of Barbie fluctuated, both within North America and globally. In 2012, overall revenue from Barbie dropped 14 per cent from the previous year to \$1.28 billion, largely due to low sales in the United States, where revenue decreased 12 per cent (to \$458 million) from 2011 to 2012.³⁰ The trend of declining Barbie sales continued in the years that followed. By 2013, Barbie’s market share in the dolls and accessories segment was less than 20 per cent, and sales dropped again to \$1.2 billion; in 2014, Barbie sales decreased 21 per cent in the third quarter alone, resulting in overall yearly sales of \$1.0 billion — the lowest in more than a decade.³¹

Mattel and the Toys and Games Industry up to 2014

In 1955, Mattel had embarked on what was then a unique marketing strategy in the toys and games industry when it started to advertise its toys through the popular television series *The Mickey Mouse Club*.³² Mattel launched Barbie, its flagship product, in 1959, and became a publicly owned company the following year. By 1965, sales of all Mattel products reached \$100 million, securing Mattel a spot on the Fortune 500 list.³³ In the decades that followed, Mattel launched numerous product line extensions for Barbie, in addition to other popular toy lines such as Hot Wheels in 1968, and He-Man action figures in 1982. In 1975, the Handlers left the company, and Mattel embarked on a period of expansion by acquiring such companies as Aviva Sports, Inc. (sports toys) and Fisher-Price (infant and preschool toys).³⁴ The company also forged various alliances that gave it the rights to produce branded products, including a partnership with Disney in 1988, Sesame Street (including “Tickle Me Elmo”) in 1996, and Harry Potter in 2000.³⁵

In 2014, the toys and games industry was worth \$151.2 billion globally, with traditional toys and games accounting for \$85.1 billion and video games accounting for the remainder.³⁶ Traditional toys and games included, among other items, dolls such as Barbie, construction toys, plush toys, model vehicles, and puzzles.

Within the toys and games industry, Mattel faced major competitors, including Hasbro and LEGO. Mattel’s largest competitor, Hasbro, had several core brand lines, including Jenga, My Little Pony, and Transformers. Transformers in particular performed well, largely due to the success of the *Transformers* movie franchise.³⁷ In 2014, LEGO saw the best performance of the big three competitors in the toys and games industry, with annual growth of almost 16 per cent, which led to LEGO surpassing Mattel in sales to become the world’s largest toymaker.³⁸ Further, Barbie faced competition from rising sales by brands such as Monster High, My Little Pony, and American Girl.³⁹

Although the toys and games industry faced rapidly changing consumer demands, sales of traditional toys and games experienced growth in 2014, largely driven by consumer interest in two product categories: construction toys, where LEGO led, and licensed products.⁴⁰ Notably, interest in Mattel’s licensed products received a significant boost from the Disney hit film *Frozen*. Although sales of *Frozen* or Disney Princess dolls eroded sales of the Barbie brand, the popularity of *Frozen* was, overall, a huge financial success for Mattel. Licensed *Frozen* products were some of Mattel’s top performing products in 2014, with *Frozen* and Disney Princess dolls accounting for 7.3 per cent of total company sales.⁴¹ However, Mattel suffered a major setback in 2014, when the Walt Disney Company announced that, as of 2016, Mattel’s competitor Hasbro would take over the licensing rights for *Frozen* and Disney Princess merchandise.⁴²

CONTROVERSIES

The Barbie Body

Over the years, Mattel, and Barbie in particular, faced plenty of criticism — in fact, few toys had sparked as much controversy in their lifetime as Barbie.⁴³ The factor that had perhaps sparked the most controversy about the doll was the long-standing discussion around whether Barbie was an appropriate role model for young girls. Indeed, much of the controversy and criticism surrounded its influence on the development of girls and young women, ranging from concerns around teenage pregnancy to educational and career attainment. However, the most widely held concern about Barbie regarded her body aesthetic.

The classic Barbie was skinny, tall, and blonde. If Barbie were human, she would have a 16-inch (41-centimetre) waist, a waist-to-hip ratio of 0.55, and weigh 110 pounds (50 kilograms); in addition, her shoe would be a size 3 — a size that did not exist in the United States.⁴⁴ The probability for a similar body

shape to Barbie in real life was less than 0.001 per cent; and, when Barbie's proportions were compared with those of average women, models, athletes, and women with anorexia, models had the shape closest to that of Barbie.⁴⁵ The Ken doll was slightly more realistically shaped: the probability for a similar body shape to Ken was 2 per cent.⁴⁶

Some Barbie products and promotions further exacerbated the criticism regarding Barbie's unrealistic body image. For example, in 1963, a Barbie Babysitter came with a book titled *How To Lose Weight* with the advice "DON'T EAT!"⁴⁷

Barbie's Intelligence

Some Barbie products were met with criticism regarding the portrayal of Barbie's intelligence. For example, in the early 1990s, Mattel released Teen Talk Barbie, a Barbie who was programmed with certain pre-recorded phrases and statements. Teen Talk Barbie was met with criticism for some of the recorded phrases, such as "I love shopping!" and "Math class is tough!"⁴⁸ Eventually, the latter phrase was removed from the doll.⁴⁹

Concern was voiced again when Barbie became a computer engineer in a 2014 print and ebook entitled *Barbie: I Can Be a Computer Engineer*. In the book, Barbie's primary job was design work; she notes, "I'll need Steven's and Brian's help to turn it into a real game!" As the plot of the book progresses, Barbie causes viruses on computers, loses her homework, and requires the help of her male co-workers to fix her mistakes.⁵⁰ The backlash to this book spawned several responses, including such Twitter hashtags as #FeministHackerBarbie and digitally altered images from the book that showed Barbie creating the game herself, including all the coding.⁵¹ The backlash resulted in Mattel discontinuing the book and issuing an apology:

The Barbie: I Can Be A Computer Engineer book was published in 2010. Since that time we have reworked our Barbie books. The portrayal of Barbie in this specific story doesn't reflect the brand's vision for what Barbie stands for. We believe girls should be empowered to understand that anything is possible and believe they live in a world without limits. We apologize that this book didn't reflect that belief. All Barbie titles moving forward will be written to inspire girls' imaginations and portray an empowered Barbie character.⁵²

Privacy Concerns

In 2010, the U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) issued a warning about a new Barbie doll, called Video Girl Barbie, which had a built-in camera and video screen. The doll allowed children to record and share online up to 30 minutes of video: the FBI was concerned this doll could be criminally used by predators.⁵³

Another related controversy followed in 2015 regarding a doll called Hello Barbie, developed in partnership with ToyTalk, which allowed children to have conversations with Barbie via cloud-based software. The doll could remember what the child had previously discussed with it and could engage in two-way conversation, which led to privacy concerns, including whether Mattel would collect the responses and use them in its future marketing endeavours.⁵⁴

The 2014 *Sports Illustrated* Swimsuit Edition

In 2014, Barbie was featured on the cover of the *Sports Illustrated* annual swimsuit edition. In the face of controversy and criticism about the campaign, Barbie was unapologetic. Shortly after the release of the swimsuit edition, Mattel issued a statement: “As a legend herself, and under constant criticism about her body and how she looks, posing in the [issue] gives Barbie and her fellow legends an opportunity to own who they are, celebrate what they have done, and be unapologetic.”⁵⁵

Many consumers pointed out that Barbie’s appearance in the *Sports Illustrated* swimsuit edition was not an ideal way to empower women. In response, an official spokesperson for Mattel stated:

This is not a program targeted towards girls. As a brand that is always a part of the cultural conversation, Barbie, for the first time, has an active voice in the debate with her #unapologetic stance. The goal of the campaign is to empower fans to engage and celebrate all that makes them who they are.⁵⁶

Sports Illustrated magazine was similarly unapologetic, stating: “As with Barbie, every year the Swimsuit edition sparks conversations about women and body image, and Sports Illustrated stands unapologetically behind this issue that women, in reality, love.”⁵⁷

CHANGING CONSUMERS AND RETAILERS

The Rise of “Average Barbie”

At the same time that the Barbie brand was struggling with its image around body shape, consumer interest in dolls with realistic body proportions was increasing. With this growing interest in mind, entrepreneur and artist Nickolay Lamm was inspired to create “an average Barbie” — a doll with average proportions, saying: “There are a lot of studies that suggest fashion dolls on the market can lead to decreased body image, even anorexia. . . . If there’s even a small chance of that happening, why not create an alternative?”⁵⁸ The motto behind the doll was “average is beautiful.” With this motto in mind, Lamm proceeded to crowdsource the funds needed to develop the doll and achieved his goal of \$95,000 in just over 24 hours.⁵⁹ The Lammily doll was released in 2014. She was shorter than Barbie, had brown hair, wore minimal makeup, and had an average waistline.

In addition to having more average physical proportions, the Lammily doll came with stickers that could be added to the doll to give it other realistic features, such as freckles, scars, and cellulite. The idea of using stickers was not new in the toy market. For example, a 2009 version of Barbie — known as Totally Tattoos Barbie — came with stick-on tattoos, allowing children to customize the dolls.⁶⁰ Although the Lammily doll was positioned as a normal doll, Lamm was clear about his intentions: “It’s not an anti-Barbie. I just wanted to create an alternative.”⁶¹

Shifting Retailers

In the mid-2010s, the wider toy retailing industry was also experiencing change. Consumer attention was increasingly focusing on gender stereotypes in the toy industry and on concerns around gendered marketing.⁶² These concerns led to several changes.

Importantly, the second-biggest retailer in the United States, Target, decided to desegregate its toys and bedding departments. Target would no longer have separate boys' and girls' toy sections, previously denoted by the use of blue and pink, or signage indicating "girls' building sets."⁶³ Instead, toys would be arranged by interest or theme. Although the effect of Target's move on the wider toy retail industry was uncertain, many suspected that other retailers might soon follow suit, simply because Target was an innovative retail leader.⁶⁴

BARBIE IN 2015: IMAGINING THE POSSIBILITIES

In the face of declining sales, strong competitors, and changing trends in the industry, consumers, and retailers, Mattel had a big job ahead. In a bid to correct its plummeting sales, Mattel ousted its chief executive officer in early 2015.⁶⁵ The year also saw the introduction of new product lines and a new promotional campaign.

The Barbie Fashionistas Line

In June 2015, Barbie released the Barbie Fashionistas line, comprising 23 new dolls that included several new features. For example, the dolls' ankles were now movable, which, for the first time in her history, allowed Barbie to wear flat shoes, rather than high heels. The new line also included more racial diversity, including eight skin tones, 14 facial structures, 22 hairstyles, 23 hair colours, and 18 eye colours.⁶⁶

Barbie Moschino

In November 2015, Italian fashion house Moschino and Barbie jointly launched a limited-edition Barbie. Moschino's online advertisement for the product launch featured not only young girls playing with the doll but also a young boy.⁶⁷ The advertisement was shared quickly on social media, with many applauding the Barbie brand and the ad for its deviation from the norm and for breaking gender stereotypes about toys.⁶⁸ The limited-edition line sold out within an hour of its launch.⁶⁹

The "Imagine the Possibilities" Viral Video

In addition to introducing new product lines in 2015, Mattel released a new advertisement for Barbie. The advertisement, which was launched online, began by posing the question: What happens when young girls are free to imagine they can be anything? The remainder of the ad used hidden cameras to capture adults' reactions to young girls acting out their dream jobs as university professors, veterinarians, coaches, entrepreneurs, and many others.⁷⁰ Reactions of the adults in the advertisement include surprise and laughter. At the end, the ad reveals that the audiences were only in the young girls' imaginations as they played with their Barbie dolls and the added text, "When a girl plays with Barbie she imagines everything she can become," and the tagline, "You can be anything."

Evelyn Mazzocco, global senior vice-president and general manager of Barbie, stated:

We want to remind the world what Barbie stands for. Founded by a female entrepreneur and mother in 1959, the Barbie brand has always represented the fact that women have choices. . . .

This ongoing initiative is designed to remind today's parents that through the power of imagination, Barbie allows girls to explore their limitless potential.⁷¹

After a few weeks, the ad had been viewed on YouTube almost 8 million times and was covered by such media outlets as *The Huffington Post*, AdAge.com, and *The Daily Mail*, among others. As the ad was widely viewed and shared, reactions from the general public and the media seemed generally positive. For example, some viewers reflected on their own play with Barbie as a child. However, others were still not convinced that Barbie was the right role model for their children.⁷²

NEXT STEPS

Changing industry trends — including increasing competition from other dolls such as the Lammily doll, ongoing controversies over the message behind the Barbie brand, and decreasing sales and market share of Barbie over recent years — posed the question: Did Barbie need a makeover?

By 2015, Barbie had represented 40 different nationalities and had been sold in more than 150 countries around the world.⁷³ She had more than 150 careers, ranging from swimsuit model to flight attendant to arctic researcher. In the face of ongoing controversies, changing consumer demands, and shifts in the wider industry, was this as far as Barbie would go? What were the main challenges facing Mattel and the Barbie brand? Would sales and market share continue to slide? What could Mattel do to turn things around?

EXHIBIT 1: BARBIE CAREERS OVER TIME

1959	Teenage Fashion Model
1960–1969	Fashion Editor, Ballerina, Singer, Flight Attendant, Registered Nurse, Ice Skater, Tennis Player, Executive, Candy Striper Volunteer, Student Teacher, Astronaut, Pan Am Flight Attendant, Junior Designer
1970–1979	Surgeon, United Airlines Flight Attendant, Miss America, Figure Skater, Olympic Athlete, Olympic Downhill Skier, Ballerina, Actress
1980–1989	Aerobics Instructor, Veterinarian, Dress Designer, TV News Reporter, Business Executive, Teacher, Rock Star, Astronaut, Ballerina, Doctor, UNICEF Ambassador, Doctor, U.S. Army Officer
1990–1999	Naval Petty Officer, Rap Musician, Doctor, Presidential Candidate, Business Executive, Chef, Teacher, Marine Corps Sergeant, Radio City Music Hall Rockette, Baseball Player, Police Officer, Army Medic, Astronaut, Pediatrician, U.S. Air Force Thunderbird Squadron Leader, Scuba Diver, Lifeguard, Firefighter, Pet Doctor, Olympic Gymnast, Engineer, Dentist, Paleontologist, Rock Star, NASCAR Driver, Olympic Skater, WNBA player, Boutique Owner, Women's World Cup Soccer Player, Airline Pilot, Major League Baseball Player, Formula One Driver
2000–2009	Children's Doctor, Sign Language Teacher, Olympic Ice Skater, Art Teacher, Producer, Presidential Candidate, Baby Doctor, Pet Doctor, Teacher, American Idol Winner, Ballerina, Zoologist, Ballet Teacher, Chef, Pet Sitter, Baby Photographer, Zoo Doctor, Space Camp Instructor, TV Chef, Swim Instructor, Soccer Coach, Equestrian, Fashion Magazine Intern, Preschool Teacher, Sea World Trainer, Newborn Baby Doctor, Gymnastics Coach
2010–2015	Computer Engineer, News Anchor, Dentist, Pet Vet, Rock Star, Racecar Driver, Architect, Skier, Art Teacher, Movie Star, Chef, Presidential Candidate, Fashion Designer, Zoo Doctor, Paleontologist, Arctic Researcher

Source: "About Barbie: Careers," Mattel Inc., accessed February 23, 2016, www.barbiemedia.com/careers.

ENDNOTES

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