



Work in the business of *play*



Think work in the toy industry sounds like **fun**? It can be, but there's a **serious** side to it, too. Find out if you're game.

Matt Nuccio's work is all about fun and games. Nuccio is a full-time toy designer: He brings toy ideas to life.

The toy industry is dynamic, interesting—and, say Nuccio and others, fun. It includes the creation, distribution, and sale of everything from infant toys to action figures to games. “People in this industry are in the business of making kids happy,” says Adrienne Citrin of the Toy Industry Association. “And at the end of the day, that’s what it’s all about.”

Many workers are responsible for creating toys and bringing them to consumers. For example, some workers develop ideas for toys; others arrange for their manufacture and importation. Still others sell and market them.

Elka
Maria
Torpey

Elka Maria Torpey is an economist in the Office of Occupational Statistics and Employment Projections, BLS. She is available at (202) 691-5719 or torpey.elka@bls.gov.

This article describes workers who advance a toy from concept to consumer. The first section discusses the industry. A second section profiles three toy-related occupations—toy designer, product or brand manager, and advertising account executive—and includes job descriptions, earnings, and required skills and education for each. Following these profiles are brief descriptions of additional employment options and a discussion of the fun—and frustrating—aspects of working in the toy business. A final section suggests sources for more information.

More than child's play

According to data from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), there were about 187,000 U.S. workers in toy-related industries in 2007. These data do not include the self-employed. Workers whose employers do not deal primarily with toys, such as those in advertising firms or at large retail stores, also are excluded.

Toy employers are of three basic types: hobby, toy, and game stores; doll, toy, and game manufacturers; and merchant wholesalers. Hobby, toy, and game stores employed nearly 80 percent of all workers in the toy industry in 2007, according to BLS. About 13 percent more worked for merchant wholesalers, the establishments that distribute toys to other wholesalers and to the stores that sell them to consumers. Fewer workers were employed by the manufacturing companies that create the ideas for toys and produce them.

The toy industry is often characterized as having a few large employers and many small ones. Workers at large toy companies often perform specialized tasks; those at small companies typically have a greater range of responsibilities. “At the smaller companies,” says toy salesman Jeff Cepielik of Glendora, California, “you’ve got to wear multiple hats.”

And this industry is subject to fads. “One of the things that’s unique about the toy industry, as opposed to some other industries, is that it’s sensitive to trends and fashion,”

says Jim Green, general counsel for a Wisconsin-based toy and game company. “Something will be popular for a short time, and then not, so you have to constantly come up with new ideas.”

Citrin echoes that observation. “There is a constant influx of new products, new ideas,” she says. This constant change can add an element of excitement to the work.

The toy industry is also competitive. According to industry insiders, there are frequently more jobseekers than available jobs, so even experienced workers sometimes have difficulty finding employment.

Employment growth may be limited for toy workers in some areas, but opportunities should arise as workers leave the industry, especially those who are retiring. And as Kathleen McHugh of the American Specialty Toy Retailers Association points out, demand should continue for the products that toy workers create. “People will always buy toys as gifts,” she says. “Parents and grandparents will always buy toys for their kids and grandkids.”

Toy careers for the young at heart

There are many jobs in the toy industry. But few are as integral to it as those jobs involving toy design, development and marketing, and advertising. Designers, product or brand managers, and advertising account workers all play a role in putting toys into the hands of consumers—especially the littlest ones—who will enjoy them most.

Designers

Toy designers help to create toys and toy packaging. Their specific tasks, however, may depend on where they work. Some designers work for toy companies, others work for toy design firms, and still others are self-employed.

Designers begin the creative process by determining the general characteristics that a toy will have—for example, its size and shape

and the materials that it will be made from. During this phase, they also must consider the cost to manufacture the toy. They might be given specific requirements to work with, or they might come up with their own ideas.

Sometimes, designers research the type of toy, or user preferences for the toy, that they hope to produce. Research, for example, might help them to be sure that they're accurately representing a cartoon character or to verify that an idea hasn't been used before. And designers use information about children's stages of development to create toys that are safe and encourage emotional, physical, and cognitive growth.

Matt Nuccio, who works for a toy design firm, says that a typical project might involve developing a summer line for a toy

manufacturer. Nuccio and his coworkers, like other designers, begin by drawing dozens of sketches, such as those of a popular cartoon character playing activities outdoors, for creating a doll and its accessories. "We need to be cute, funny, edgy," he says.

Next, toy designers might meet as a group for a brainstorming session and select some of the sketches for refining. After settling on ideas, designers make prototypes, or samples, of the toys that will be produced. This involves different types of artistic, hands-on work. "If it needs to be sewn, we sew it," says Nuccio. "If it needs to be molded, we mold it."

Toy designers also test their models to ensure that they work the way they are intended to. Designers usually send sketches

Brainstorming is often an important part of a toy designer's work.





and prototypes to others for input or approval, after which they might revise their designs. For example, they might meet with product and brand managers or engineers to discuss the feasibility of a design's manufacture.

Toy designers often specialize. Some concentrate on a particular type of toy or on toys designed for a specific group, such as toddlers. Others focus on designing packaging for toys, which can be important in helping a toy sell. But the best prepared designers are versatile and able to work across all types of product categories, groups, and specialties. Although many toys are created by staff designers at toy companies and design firms, some toys are invented by freelance designers. These designers work for themselves and then sell their ideas to a company or firm that will produce it.

Freelance designers have additional tasks not required of staff designers. For example, they usually must find a company to purchase their idea. Some freelancers choose to manufacture and distribute the toy themselves, but doing so is expensive and risky.

Jon Moffat is a freelance designer of card and board games. He recently sold the copyright for a game to a company that will produce, market, and sell it. "It's a lot like publishing a book," he says. "I hunted around and got lucky and found someone willing to buy my idea."

When searching for a company to buy an

idea, designers should target companies that deal with products similar to the one they hope to sell. Moffat, for example, identified potential buyers by looking for board games similar to his and then finding out the names of the companies that sold those games.

But many toy companies don't accept ideas that are sent to them from freelance designers. Small or medium-sized manufacturers are more likely to do so, say industry insiders. And although some designers

hire agents or brokers to help them sell their ideas, experts stress the importance of careful research to verify that these agents are legitimate.

Freelance designers also should obtain legal protection for their ideas through a patent or trademark. Some toy companies, say industry insiders, look only at ideas that have been legally protected.

Wages. In May 2007, wage-and-salaried commercial and industrial designers, a small subset of whom are toy designers, earned a median annual wage of \$56,550, according to BLS. A median wage means that half of all designers made more than that amount and half made less. The highest earning 10 percent made \$95,620 or more. The lowest earning 10 percent of commercial and industrial designers made \$31,400 or less.

Wage and salary data do not include earnings of the self-employed. Earnings of self-employed designers in the toy industry usually vary more than those of full-time staff designers. Many freelance designers are paid royalties, or a percentage of the total sales of their toy. A popular product that sells well will earn more than one that sits on the shelf. So, the more successful a designer's idea, the more money he or she makes.

Freelance designers' earnings are often low, however, and they risk losing the money that they spent developing an idea if the toy does not sell. "It's very difficult to make a living doing this," says Moffat, who also works full time as an electrical engineer. "You have

to get really lucky, have capital, and have a good idea.”

Skills, training, and education. Toy designers are creative, inventive, and artistic. Being able to communicate with others and to communicate ideas visually are other important skills. These workers must understand the play needs of children, as well as the market for their products.

Hands-on experience with different artistic disciplines, like that usually offered in high school art classes, provides a good foundation for a career in design. And proficiency in a diverse set of styles and media helps build a designer’s portfolio.

Nuccio compares the skills of a toy designer to those of an artisan. Designers usually must have a wide range of abilities, from drawing to sculpting to working with computer design software. They also should understand how toys are manufactured and marketed.

Many toy designers have a bachelor’s degree in either toy design or industrial design. No formal education is required, but many employers prefer to hire workers who have one of these degrees. Two schools offer programs that lead to a bachelor’s of fine arts in toy design: the Fashion Institute of Technology and Otis College of Art and Design. These programs cover everything from model-making to production methods and materials. They also provide designers with an opportunity to begin making contacts and networking.

However, education alone isn’t enough to succeed as a designer. As with many occupations, toy designers gain some of their most valuable knowledge from experience with the work itself. “There are a lot of people with a degree, but it’s also a learned trade,” says Nuccio, whose family has been in the toy business for decades. “After enough time, you get a feel for what’s been done before and what will work.”

Product or brand managers

Nearly all toy companies employ workers to oversee the development and marketing of toys. Although their job titles and duties may

vary, these workers are commonly known as product managers or brand managers.

Brand managers are often responsible for an entire brand or group of products, such as a company’s action figures and all other toys connected with them. A product manager, in contrast, might oversee only one specific line of toys under that brand, such as the superhero action figure line. Brand managers are sometimes more senior than product managers, but their work is similar.

Managers’ duties usually fall into two categories: product development and marketing. For product development, these workers help to define the toys of the future. They guide the creation phase of toys and toy packaging by meeting with toy and packaging design, safety, and engineering teams. In these discussions, they ensure that the proposed toys meet design or licensing specifications, target costs, safety standards, and other requirements for the product line or brand. They manage timelines, offer feedback to designers and others about their ideas, and give final approval for the toys and prototypes to be produced.

Kerry Flagg is a brand manager at a large toy-manufacturing company. Product development, she says, is a significant aspect of her job. “We work with the design team, packaging and engineering a toy as it goes from sketch to sculpting, painting, and engineering,” says Flagg. “We’re a pretty big part of it. And we take it through to production.”

Brian Turtle also has a role in development, as a product and sales manager at a small toy and game company. “We take the skeleton of a game idea or product, kick it around, shape it, adjust the rules,” he says. “The inventor might have an outrageous game idea, and it’s terrific, but it would cost too much to make. As with a ball of clay, we shape the idea to the point where it’s a working prototype.”

Managers have the additional responsibility of ensuring that toys are safe. For example, if part of a play set could become a choking hazard, the safety or quality control department of a toy company might inform the product or brand manager, who then would

work with the design team to fix the problem.

Many product and brand managers also are involved in—or oversee—the sourcing of parts and supplies for their toys. Some might, for example, look for companies to supply the materials that are used to make their toys, such as the wood for a puzzle. Or they might locate a facility to produce the toys. Sourcing can also involve negotiating the costs of parts or production with suppliers.

In addition, product or brand managers must deal with changes in business

conditions. If the price of a material used in a toy goes up, for example, managers need to rework their budget, or maybe the toy design, so that they can still produce the toy at a reasonable price.

These workers also direct the marketing of their toys. For example, they might set wholesale or retail prices, determine overall production costs, decide how, when, and where to sell and promote the toys, and manage their distribution. They keep track of relevant details about the toys, often in a master spreadsheet. And they share these details with engineers, distributors, sales representatives, and upper management for business purposes.

Finally, these managers might make sales presentations to prospective buyers. And they are responsible for the financial success of their products or brands and must track the profits and losses associated with each of the toys that they manage.

Wages. Marketing managers, the occupation that most closely relates to product or brand managers, had median annual wages of \$104,400 in May 2007, according to BLS. The highest earning 10 percent made more than \$145,600, and the lowest earning 10 percent made less than \$53,520. Like wage data for designers, these data are for wage and salary workers and do not include earnings for the self-employed.

Skills and education. Most product and brand managers are outgoing, organized, and able to deal with and adapt quickly to change. Project management, interpersonal, and oral and written communications skills are essential, as is the ability to motivate others. Also important are basic computer skills, such as experience using spreadsheets, databases, and presentation software.

Product and brand managers understand both the financial and the fun aspects that go into making toys. “You have to have a handle on the numbers and the creative part,” says Flagg. “It’s very right brain, left brain.”

People interested in this career can begin by taking a broad range of high school classes, especially in math, business, English, and the arts.

Product and brand managers are responsible for the financial success of their toys.





Many product and brand managers have a bachelor's degree, often in business administration, marketing, or a related field. Some have a master's of business administration; depending on the employer, this type of degree may be required.

Internships are encouraged as a form of career preparation for product and brand managers, especially at larger companies. Flagg, for example, had internships with two large toy companies during college. She says that her first internship helped her to land her second, which in turn helped her to get her current job.

Work experience for product and brand managers doesn't have to be in the toy industry, though. Some managers start out in other consumer products industries, which also have product and brand manager positions. Others, like Turtle, who began his career in retail, enter from different business-related paths.

Advertising account executives

Advertising account executives, sometimes called advertising account managers or directors, help use television, online, print, and other communications to promote toys and other products.

These workers manage all aspects of an advertising campaign for a particular client or account. They usually work for advertising agencies, although some might work at the in-house advertising departments of toy

manufacturers or stores. (The job title of advertising account executive also is used for workers who sell advertising services to clients, a different occupation from the one described here.)

Advertising account executives in the toy industry work to understand their clients' needs and objectives and help them develop an advertising strategy. For example, they might help a toy manufacturer decide which products to promote and what types of advertising to use. To develop an effective strategy, they learn about their client's toys and the people who are expected to buy or play with those toys. They also might study competitors' products or advertising.

Some of these executives' job duties combine managerial and administrative tasks. For example, they manage advertising schedules and budgets, making sure that projects are completed on time and within specific financial targets. They also might help to prepare and negotiate contracts between the advertising agency and its clients or develop sales projections for the advertising campaign. Sometimes, they help clients decide when and where to place an advertisement, often working with those who purchase media space.

Jerry Siano is an account managing director who oversees advertising for a producer of infant and toddler toys. He coordinates the creation of television, print, and online ads that promote his clients' toys. "I partner

with clients to map out a business plan for the year,” he says. “Our entire job is based on creating and sharing ideas, and we have to find a way to articulate a strategy or idea so that our clients can see it and say, ‘Yes, that’s it.’”

When account executives receive a project—for example, to develop an advertising campaign for a toy that helps babies learn to crawl—they often start with a document that contains the marketing objectives, timeframe, audience, and other pertinent information. Using this document as a guide, account executives might write a creative strategy brief that summarizes these objectives. They then meet with the creative team that will work on developing the ideas for the advertisements.

Throughout this creative execution stage, the account executive acts as an intermediary between the client and the creative team. He or she conveys the client’s preferences to the team, which revises ideas accordingly. After a client approves an idea, the advertising

account executive oversees ad production—the process of turning an idea into an actual advertisement.

Many people, including writers, photographers, and artists, work as a team to produce advertisements. Account executives oversee the work of these groups, ensuring consistency across all of the advertisements created for a client. For example, executives might review layouts of Web site designs, storyboards—series of visuals mapping out the story of a television commercial—and the text of an advertisement. During the process, they communicate with clients by phone or e-mail or in person.

These workers’ roles are largely managerial, but they also might offer their creative input, because, Siano says, a good idea could come from anywhere.

New account executives often work on a variety of types of advertising, not just on ads for toys. “When you start out, you’re more likely to be a generalist,” says Siano. At lower levels, he says, it’s more common and beneficial to get a broad range of advertising experience, from packaged goods to financial services. As workers advance, they



often become more specialized in the types of accounts that they handle.

Wages. Advertising and promotions managers, a small number of whom work in the toy industry, had median annual wages of \$78,250 in May 2007, according to BLS. The highest earning 10 percent made more than \$145,600, and the lowest earning 10 percent made less than \$38,400. These data are for wage and salary workers only and do not include the self-employed.

Skills and education. Strong leadership and communication skills are essential for advertising account executives. Creativity and flexibility also are important. And advertising account executives should be able to manage projects and coordinate people. “You have to be able to work with people,” says Siano. “Absolutely.”

High school students who want to pursue a career in advertising should take classes in business, English, and communications or speech.

Advertising account executives usually have a bachelor’s degree in advertising, marketing, business administration, or a related subject. Some have a master’s of business administration.

A number of workers are hired through internship programs, which give employers the opportunity to see whether a candidate might be a good fit for the position. “We start recruiting when people are in school,” says Siano of his advertising agency. “They work here their junior year or during the summer, and if they do an outstanding job, we hire them.”

On-the-job training for new employees also can be an important part of an advertising account executive’s preparation. Many advertising agencies have training programs, says Siano, including his firm.

Although people often are recruited immediately after graduation, most advertising account executives work up to their position. A typical career ladder might progress from junior account worker to assistant account executive to account executive. Job titles and career paths differ by employer.



Other occupations in toyland

In addition to the occupations described in the previous section, other work common in the toy industry includes the following:

Buying and merchandising

Buyers make purchasing decisions for toy, hobby, and game stores and for merchant wholesalers. These workers attend trade shows, visit production facilities, negotiate

Advertising account executives manage all aspects of an advertising campaign.

with vendors, and track sales. At smaller toy stores, the store's owner or top executives may perform these tasks.

Merchandisers, many of whom are employed part time or seasonally, set up displays of products within stores and give in-store demonstrations.

Distribution and warehousing

When toys are manufactured or imported, they often go to large distribution centers or warehouses. Workers in these facilities handle incoming and outgoing shipments, coordinate transportation, and track customer orders. They also might work with Federal agencies, including U.S. Customs, to ensure that proper importation procedures are followed.

Engineering and technical

Engineers help to improve the design or function of toys, reduce costs, and determine the best production methods. They may work closely with designers or independently assess toy designs. Engineers also work at the factories that produce toys, including factories abroad.

Technical workers have a variety of tasks. For example, a computer programmer might help to create a Web site for children to use along with their toys; a computer software engineer might design, test, and develop software for an electronic game.

Legal and licensing

Legal specialists, such as lawyers, assist toy companies with a range of issues. Some examples are drafting and interpreting contracts, advising companies about laws and regulations, and securing copyrights, trademarks, and patents for new products.

Licensing specialists have become increasingly important in the industry as rights are sold to develop products using a particular brand, image, or idea. These specialists understand the specifications within which companies may create products. And they might negotiate the terms and conditions of licensing agreements, approve ideas and final products, and work to increase licensing sales.

Manufacturing

Although most toys sold in the United States are produced overseas, some—including certain craft and specialty toys—are still manufactured here. Depending on the type and complexity of a toy, many workers may take part in manufacturing it.

Among the production workers involved in manufacturing toys are computer-control programmers and operators, who, aided by machinists, cut and shape individual pieces for intricately designed toys. Another example is assemblers and fabricators, who fit together these small pieces into a fun, child-safe product.

Sales

Wholesale and manufacturing sales representatives sell products to toy stores and other businesses. They meet with prospective customers and attend trade shows to promote the toys that they sell.

Retail sales workers, supervisors, and managers help to sell products to consumers. They might demonstrate how a toy is used, assist with buying decisions, restock shelves, or help customers to purchase items. Managers also are responsible for overseeing a retail store's operations.

Is a toy career for you?

One of the biggest attractions of the toy industry, say insiders, is that it allows workers to follow their passions. Someone who likes cars, for example, might pursue a toy career for the opportunity to work with remote- or radio-control cars.

But it takes more than a love of play to excel in the toy industry. Networking is important for getting started and moving around within the industry. Most successful toy workers have creative talent and business savvy. They usually are outgoing and understand children and their unique culture. "You have to have a sense of fun, but temper it with a real sense of business and engineering," says toy expert Chris Byrne. "You're asking the

question, “What does an 8-year-old like?”

People who work in the toy industry also appreciate the type of environment it provides. Often, it is different from that in other industries. “It’s not your normal office,” says Nuccio of work in a toy company. “It’s more fun. People come to work in sneakers and shorts. We have rubber band fights and listen to music.” Employers encourage comfort, he says, because from comfort comes creativity. And creativity is essential to what many in the toy business do.

The toy industry isn’t all fun and games, though. In this relatively small—and competitive—industry, being successful is not always easy. “If you’ve been in the business long enough, you’ve had phenomenal successes and catastrophic failures,” says Byrne. “Everyone has.”

It’s a lot like the music business, says Nuccio: Many people hope to develop the next big toy or work with the top companies, but only a limited number will.

Toy workers frequently must put in long hours to meet tight deadlines. “We’re constantly at full tilt,” says Turtle, and the fast pace can make the work stressful. But recruiter Tom Keoughan sees the toy industry’s demands as a good fit for the right personality. “The industry is good for someone with a lot of adrenaline, a lot of get-up-and-go,” he says. “It’s not for the person who likes to play it safe.”

Byrne agrees: “It’s very high pressure and stressful. It’s very high risk,” he says. “But people love it.”

For many workers in the industry, part of that love comes from the sense of accomplishment they feel when their efforts come to fruition. “I love seeing a new toy, one that we’ve developed, on the shelf,” says Flagg. “It’s a lot of work, and it’s great to see when it’s done.” A highlight for Nuccio is watching his kids play with toys that he’s helped to design.

For others, job satisfaction comes from creating products that encourage both fun and development. “The games that I make are for people to get together and have fun,” says Moffat. “And to have people say that they like playing the game, or to have them say that it’s kind of cool, that’s the reward for me.”

Adds Siano, “Toys are designed to help kids grow. Being a part of that growth—that’s really rewarding.”

For more information

Learning about careers is a good way to find out about your interests and the types of jobs that are available. Begin this search by visiting your public library, school counseling office, or local career center. To find a career center near you, go to www.servicelocator.org; call toll free, 1 (877) US2-JOBS (872-5627) or TTY 1 (877) 889-5627; or e-mail info@careeronestop.org. The Web site also



has links to career exploration tools and other job-related resources.

Another helpful career-information source available at many libraries and career centers is the *Occupational Outlook Handbook*. The *Handbook* also is available online at www.bls.gov/ooh. The *Handbook* has detailed descriptions of hundreds of occupations, including some that are described in this article.

For general information about the toy industry, contact

Toy Industry Association
1115 Broadway
New York, NY 10010
(212) 675-1141

www.toyassociation.org
info@toyassociation.org

The association has a free publication on its Web site that may be helpful to those considering this line of work. From the site's home page, click the "Tools" tab, and then click the "Inventors & Designers" box on the right to download The Toy Inventor & Designer Guide.

American Specialty Toy Retailers
Association

116 W. Illinois St., Suite 5E
Chicago, IL 60654
Toll free: 1 (800) 591-0490
(312) 222-0984

www.astratoy.org
info@astratoy.org

To learn more about degrees in toy design, contact

Otis College of Art and Design
9045 Lincoln Blvd.
Los Angeles, CA 90045
(310) 665-6985

www.otis.edu
toydesign@otis.edu

Fashion Institute of Technology
227 W. 27th St., Rm. B-231
New York, NY 10001
(212) 217-5120

www.fitnyc.edu
judith_ellis@fitnyc.edu



For career information and a list of advertising agencies, contact

American Association of Advertising Agencies

405 Lexington Ave., 18th Floor
New York, NY 10174-1801
(212) 682-2500

www2.aaaa.org/careers/Pages/default.aspx

American Advertising Federation
1101 Vermont Ave. NW., Suite 500
Washington, DC 20005
Toll free: 1 (800) 999-2231

www.aaf.org
aaf@aaf.org

For information about product and brand managers, contact

American Marketing Association

311 S. Wacker Dr., Suite 5800
Chicago, IL 60606

Toll free: 1 (800) AMA-1150 (262-1150)
(312) 542-9000

www.marketingpower.com

Association of International Product

Marketing and Management
2533 N. Carson St., Suite 1996
Carson City, NV 89706

Toll free: 1 (877) 275-5500

www.aipmm.com

officecontact@aipmm.com



Photos on pages 6, 9, and 13 courtesy of Patch Products, Inc.