

She's not buying a doll, she's adopting a space baby

By Ronald D. White, Los Angeles Times on 12.14.18

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Image 1. Four-year-old Sydney Stephens of San Diego, California, holds "Susiking," one of the babies from the planet "Neonatopia," at the Distroller World store in the city's Fashion Valley Mall. Photo by: Howard Lipin/San Diego Union Tribune/Zuma Press/TNS

As Claire Talerico made a video of her daughter Mia finalizing baby adoption paperwork with a nurse, two things stood out.

For one thing, Mia is just 10 years old. For another, Mia's baby resembled a pink lacrosse ball with a tiny body attached.

This wasn't a real adoption. The fictional nurse was an employee of Distroller World. It is a boutique Mexican toy chain that is about to open its third U.S. store, in Glendale, California.

"There are no other toys like them," Mia said of the 12 Distroller babies she has adopted. "At home, we made them a nursery, then I built a little school for them. We even make up voices for them."

Distroller World is an elaborate example of experience-based retail. This is where shoppers get to do something rather than just buy something. It's a style that merchants increasingly are trying out to recapture business lost to the Internet.



At Distroller stores, parents and children are swept up in the story of a planet called Neonatopia. They have 22 different types of babies need adopting.

The adoption paperwork is finalized with an employee dressed for the part of Nurse Tania. Then children follow the arrival of their babies via a "spaceship" that travels around the store via a pneumatic tube.

"We create experiences," said Daryn Fillis. He is chief executive of Distroller North America. The El Segundo company operates from offices that feature the bright, children's-style furnishings of a preschool.

"We focus on the emotional bond between the child and the brand through a product," Fillis said. "You can't call these dolls. They're babies. They aren't for sale. You adopt them, so there's an adoption fee. The language that we use helps tell that story."

Experience retail is a promising concept to help physical stores. Each year they lose a little more ground to online merchants, experts say.

Apple is considered a leader in the experience retail game. The tech company last year rolled out a "town square" store design. It had natural light, indoor trees, meeting spaces, "inspiration" programs and more product interaction.

Another example is the Nordstrom department store chain. It is expanding its Nordstrom Local concept beyond the original Los Angeles store. The store offers manicures, styling, onsite alterations and curbside pickup of online orders.

In the void left by the demise of Toys "R" Us, mainstream retailers such as Target and Walmart went into the all-important holiday shopping season with bigger toy departments. This includes play areas and special events.



"If you are going to take a child to a store, you want to have an experience with them, something interactive, not just looking at products on shelves," said Jim Silver. He is the chief executive of toy review website TTPM. "That's only possible in brick-and-mortar stores."

Distroller operates more than 70 stores. They are primarily in Mexico and Latin America. The stores most closely resembles U.S. retail chains Build-A-Bear Workshop, and the American Girl doll line, owned by Mattel, Silver said.

"You get to create something and then you get to take it home," Silver said. "Build-A-Bear has tons of licensed characters. There are so many experiences for customers with the American Girl store."

But experience retail can have drawbacks. It may involve more training — and possibly bigger paychecks — for employees. The employees must then act out the roles they play well enough for an enjoyable consumer experience.

Recruiting, training and retaining employees who can fulfill this kind of role-playing "within the razor-thin margins of retailing will be difficult," said Denise Lee Yohn. She is a branding expert. She is also author of "Fusion: How Integrating Brand and Culture Powers the World's Greatest Companies."

And it isn't just one story that has to be mastered and presented. If the experience doesn't evolve with new elements and events, it will quickly grow stale and lose its appeal, experts said.

"You have to constantly freshen things up," Silver said. "It can't be the same old, same old, or a child will go two or three times and get bored."

The first Distroller World, the brainchild of artist and entrepreneur Amparo "Amparin" Serrano, opened in Mexico City in 2004.

The idea for the babies came from Serrano's desire to give her nieces something that would inspire them to be more caring and nurturing, Fillis said. Serrano named the chain Distroller, pronounced "destroyer." It was named in honor of an earlier candy venture that Mexican health authorities refused to allow. They said the product was so sour and acidic it eliminated good flora from the small intestine.

For the toys' introduction to the United States, "we started looking at how we could enhance the idea, how to communicate the story and make it commercially successful," Fillis said. Serrano's large-eyed creations also include dolls that pay homage to the Virgin of Guadalupe, Frida Kahlo, luchadores wrestlers and Day of the Dead skeletons, although those distinctly Mexican products have yet to make the trip north.

Distroller's U.S. stores offer three types of so-called neonate babies — nerlies, zygotes and espongies — that cost \$19.99 to \$36.99.

The toy company has followed some fairly traditional retail paths, including developing a line of accessories big enough to make Barbie envious. Ongoing playtime is driven by a broad range of accessories, priced at \$3.99 to \$54.99, that include vitamins, food, outfits and incubators.

There is a limited number of new babies. New ones are introduced a few times a year.

"There's the collectability, which makes it aspirational," Fillis said. "There are also some marketing tricks we're applying and that's what bridges the gap from the artist to the commercial experience."

The company's first U.S. stores, in San Diego and Houston, opened last year. The Glendale store is to open this month.

Anyone planning to work at a Distroller store had better be prepared for more than the standard memorization of toy specifications. Distroller employees are handed a 150-page training manual. And they are expected to master it.

"There's a full brand induction because you've got to be able to tell the story," Fillis said.

Each store contains an adoption center and a medical clinic. "The training is challenging because children invent all sorts of things that are happening with their babies when they come back in for checkups," Fillis said.

There have been some bumps in the road. Brand expert Yohn, for example, warned that cultural differences might throw experiential brands a curve.

Distroller has already run into at least one of those, with parents who strongly oppose vaccines.

"We were cyberbullied on anti-vaccine day last year, which really hasn't been an issue in Mexico," Fillis said. "And we actually had to turn off our review feature on Facebook. We just shake it off. If a parent wants, they can say 'no vaccinations,' and we'll respect that."

There have also been some unforeseen benefits for Distroller in the U.S.

Traditionally, the chain's sweet spot has been small, within an age range of 6 to 8.

But the toys have begun attracting older children in the U.S., such as budding Internet influencer Mia Talerico, whose primary YouTube page, Miatalerico101, has posts that have drawn as many as 91,500 views.

"It took eight hours for us to drive down to that store and back," said Claire Talerico, of the Santa Barbara-to-San Diego round trip with Mia.

"She still talks about it all of the time. It was absolutely worth the effort."

For Loreanne Switzer, age 36, and her daughter, Fiona, age 5, the trek from the Bay Area to the San Diego Distroller store and back took 16 hours.

Switzer said she was amazed at the staying power Distroller's babies have in keeping her daughter's interest.

"Every time they come out," Switzer said, "she's really excited to see what the new babies will be and which ones she might want to adopt."

Quiz

- 1 Which sentence from the article would be MOST important to include in a summary of the article?
 - (A) Distroller World is an elaborate example of experience-based retail.
 - (B) Serrano named the chain Distroller, pronounced "destroyer."
 - (C) The company's first U.S. stores, in San Diego and Houston, opened last year.
 - (D) Traditionally, the chain's sweet spot has been small, within an age range of 6 to 8.

- 2 Read the list of details from the article.

- 1. Anyone planning to work at a Distroller store had better be prepared for more than the standard memorization of toy specifications.*
- 2. Distroller employees are handed a 150-page training manual. And they are expected to master it.*
- 3. "There's a full brand induction because you've got to be able to tell the story," Fillis said.*
- 4. "The training is challenging because children invent all sorts of things that are happening with their babies when they come back in for checkups," Fillis said.*

What central idea does this evidence support?

- (A) Distroller World is a company that is gaining a lot of attention.
- (B) Distroller World has high expectations for their employees.
- (C) Distroller World is attracting older children in the United States.
- (D) Distroller World offers many different types of baby choices.

3 Read the paragraph from the article.

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Why did the author include this event in the article?

- (A) to illustrate some of the benefits the Distroller company has received after expanding to the United States
- (B) to explain some of the problems and cultural differences the Distroller company faces in the United States
- (C) to demonstrate that most parents in the United States have a positive reaction to the Distroller company and babies
- (D) to show that the Distroller company has not been successful in getting kids in the United States interested in their babies

4 How does the author build understanding of Distroller babies' popularity in the United States?

- (A) The author begins by explaining the adoption process for Distroller babies in the store. Then, the author focuses on the business model that was used to market the babies.
- (B) The author begins by explaining the adoption process for Distroller babies in the store. Then, the author describes how cultural differences have made children in the United States more likely to buy them.
- (C) The author begins by highlighting one YouTube star's experience with the babies. Then, the author demonstrates how far kids and parents are willing to drive to find a Distroller store.
- (D) The author begins by highlighting one YouTube star's experience with the babies. Then, the author explains that the United States will soon have more Distroller stores than Mexico does.

Answer Key

- 1 Which sentence from the article would be MOST important to include in a summary of the article?
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