

Down To A Science

Hands-on toys and kits open a world of exploration to kids

By Karyn M. Peterson



Specialty toy stores are finally calling a truce with technology, at least when it comes to the educational TV shows and Web sites (from animal safaris to wild weather to the secrets behind the coolest gadgets and machinery) that are popular destinations with kids—and that help drive sales for science toys, kits and games.

As some in the industry bemoan kids' faster and faster immersion into the high-tech realm, a number of savvy independents are observing a welcome side-effect: free advertising for one of their top-selling staple categories. Manufacturers are noticing it, too, and are rapidly expanding their offerings to both specialty and mass of all kinds of hands-on products designed to excite and engage kids with the world around them.

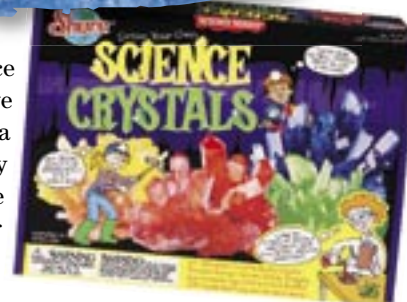
"For us, it's a category that's been very important from the start, so we do a lot with science," says Raymond Derouin of Ouray Toys, the Ouray, Colo.-based specialty toy store he opened with his wife 11 years ago as a retirement business for them both. "There's so much on the Internet now, especially in the science area," he says. "One of

the things I monitor all the time is the Mars Rover that's up there. I [check] once a week to see what the progress is...there's so much out there for kids to spike their interest."

Embracing pop culture

"Science is an area that's constantly evolving," agrees Kent Briggs, national account manager for Educational Insights, Rancho Dominguez, Calif. "There's just so much information at our fingertips. Things have changed dramatically, and I think it's even more prevalent with some of the environmental issues that are going on." Educational Insights produces backyard nature and exploration products, interactive experiment kits for multiple age ranges and hands-on science tools. "We're trying to help create a wow factor and spark an interest in taking a closer look at what's going on around us," Briggs says.

"Even when you look at the different TV that's on, there are so many channels that are related to science," says Brian Waldman, marketing and business development director of science products for NSI International, Farmingdale, N.Y. "There are...people that have made careers out of



linking kids and science together, and kids love science. We see it as a great, viable category and will continue to be in the future. Year after year kids, boys and girls both always select science as one of their favorite classes in school, and parents and grandparents are never going to feel bad about buying a child a science toy." NSI offers a full line of Smithsonian-branded experiment kits for specialty retailers and a number of big-box chains.

"It's always exciting to hear about new developments and even new technology because that's all about science as well," says Anna Johnson, sales and marketing director of SmartLab, Bellevue, Wash. SmartLab offers science kits on everything from chemistry and electronics to bacteria and dinosaur bones. "Kids learn best by physically doing



■ Fairy Triad plant growing kit, Dunecraft; (above right) Science Crystals kit, Shure Products



■ Giant Inflatable Weather Set, Learning Resources

something, not simply reading a book or playing with a toy...when they're done, they're holding something they build themselves, so there's really a high degree of satisfaction. It's definitely learning through play."

"The beauty of the science and nature category is that it is truly evergreen," says Frank Adler, executive vice president of Uncle Milton, Lake Forest, Ill. The company produces habitats and other backyard products as well as space- and chemistry-themed science kits and gadgets. "We stay on top of real world science and nature happenings," Adler says. "We pay close attention to pop culture influences...that may drive a spike in a specific interest."

And popular culture (and hot science topics in it) "always trickles down into the kids' area," adds Beth Swanson, marketing director for Action Products, Orlando, Fla.



■ Turbo Bug Vacuum, Summit Products

Swanson credits greater prominence of science-themed television shows and popular films for helping boost sales of the company's popular I Dig and JBI (Junior Bureau of Investigation) kits. "Dinosaurs are always really big," she says, though she notes that the JBI line is popular, too, partly due to network detective shows such as *C.S.I.* "[The kits] show you how to do a crime scene, and so that's something that's really hot, too."

"We have seen a resurgence of interest in science as a category," agrees Renee Whitney, vice president of sales and marketing for Salt Lake City-based Be Amazing! "It's really come up...and so what I see now is certainly this growth factor."

Creating a play space

Be Amazing! specializes in kid-friendly science equipment, instant snow, and all-in-one exploration kits that reinforce to kids "the idea that science is all around us. It's not isolated in something they might do at school," Whitney says. The company offers all its retailers free play days with a minimum order, providing a selection of its bestselling activities and products customers can sample right at retail.

Though the small size of his store (and year-round population of only about 700) prevents him from taking advantage of play days, Derouin still does a

lot locally to promote Ouray Toys—such as discounts in schools, gift certificates for teachers to give out, and a loyal buyer program—and to promote science within it.

"If I see [people] come in, I'll pull out the Levitron (an anti-gravity top by Fascinations) and it's amazing. It excites the kids and shows an awful lot what you can do with experimentation and a little bit of science." Derouin says full kits as well as impulse items have always been popular at Ouray Toys, both with customers and with the owner himself. "Magnets and magnetic fun does very well. Little things that will catch somebody's eye quickly—we go through those by the boxful. We always have a lot of that out...and I like to play with them, too," he tells PLAYTHINGS.

Derouin stocks a number of products from Be Amazing! and Klutz as well as kits from Scientific Explorer, Jazwares, NSI International and Wild Goose (with themes on spa chemistry, volcanoes, motors, electricity and more); bug catching/keeping products from Insect Lore, Tweber and Safari; and a wide range of those eye-catching supplemental items: magnet sets, gyroscopes, optical kits and kaleidoscopes from Dowling Magnets, Tedco and Fascinations.

Explore customers' minds

Recognizing just what their customers are looking for, especially in the science category, has been crucial to Ouray Toy's success, Derouin says—plus the shop's new Amazon.com-linked Web store (www.ouraytoys.com), from which buyers have their pick of 4100 total items and which helps the shop keep a large selection at hand. "We have a lot of very loyal people that come from quite a few miles around because of the inventory we're able to stock in support of the Web site," Derouin says.

At Curious Kidstuff, a 4,000-square-foot specialty toy store in Seattle, owner Anne Walker offers "a whole science section—that's everything from magnetic science to chemistry and the full spectrum, magnifying glasses, test tubes and that type of thing." Walker also stocks science learning games like *Cogno*, interactive kits from many different manufacturers, including Educational Insights and SmartLab, and science tools and kits for younger kids from Learning Resources.

"Kids need to play with things, they need to touch things, they need to move things around, that's how young children really learn," says Carl Benoit, editorial director at Learning Resources, Vernon Hills, Ill. Benoit says the company's fitness, solar system and skeleton products are very popular, as well as its Animal Classifying Cards, which focus on habitats and vocabulary. A new game incorporating elements of the cards is due out next year, he adds.

"Science, I think, is a comer here, and there's a public interest movement out there to get it more in people's minds," says Stanley Moore, owner of Over the Rainbow Toys in Austin. "I'm selling more of it!" Moore has increased the variety he carries to meet



■ Beetle Barn bug habitat, Insect Lore

the needs of his customers; he stocks SmartLab, Scientific Explorer, Educational Insights and Thames & Kosmos kits, plus Fascinations' magnet products and Learning Resources' science-themed products.

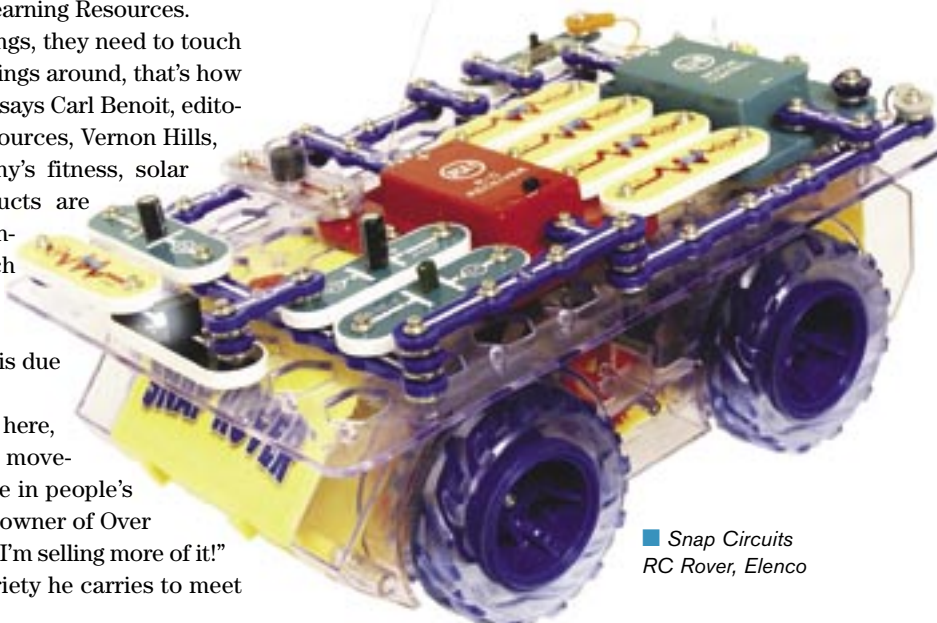
At Learning Tree Toys, Books and Games in Oklahoma City, customer loyalty and knowledge also plays a big role, according to owner Patti Tepper-Rasmussen. "People kind of rely on us to have something really different in science," she says. "My customers seem to appreciate that, and they keep coming back." Learning Tree offers kits from Scientific Explorer, Jazwares and ScienceWiz, smaller kits from Workman and Klutz (battery science and solar-power kits), electronics kits, weather products, and earth science products such as rock tumblers.

Kids' interest in science is always stoked by the latest discoveries to hit the news, Tepper-Rasmussen says. "I'm seeing an interest, too, in our earth. Kids just really have an interest in how our planet works and what's happening to it."

Bugged out

Another area of interest at Learning Tree continues to be popular: all manner of bug catching/keeping supplies and kits. "Anything bugs—Ant Farms, ladybug houses, bug vacuums, that kind of stuff we sell all year," Tepper-Rasmussen says. "Kids love bugs." She also notes that bugs and nature products appeal to both her boy and girl customers equally. "Girls love bugs and snakes as much as boys (do)."

Bugs are also popular at Adventure Toy, a specialty shop in Los Altos, Calif., says owner Leslie Chiaverini.



■ Snap Circuits RC Rover, Elenco



■ *I Dig Dinosaurs: Ceratosaurus Skeleton, Action Products International*

“Our butterfly kit by Insect Lore is by far a constant for us...we always have to have butterfly kits in, so that’s a real strong one,” she says.

Parents and grandparents are key customers that are driving a lot of interest and popularity in the outdoor/nature area, adds Kurt Hettinger, head of communications at Insect Lore. “We do see a trend in that our life kits do especially well with parents and grandparents [who] don’t want to buy electronics, they want something that’s educational, they want something that’s outdoors.” The company’s flagship item, a butterfly habit and growing kit, “steadily

Expansion plan

Simple science

A CURIOUS PERSON SAYS, “Boy, that’s weird.” But a scientist says, “Boy, that’s weird—I wonder why?” By this definition, all kids who like to explore are scientists, and even the simplest toys in your shop can be super science teaching tools. Science is simple—and it sells.

Here are the top 10 everyday toys you should be moving to your science section, and why. And if you don’t already carry these, get ‘em in stock right away!

—*Marcey Walsh*



1. A Slinky (Poof-Slinky) shows the concept of wave motion.

2. Basketballs demonstrate potential energy and air pressure.

3. Parachutes can be used to show energy transfer and for moving air masses.

4. Balloons can demonstrate static electricity, sound waves, air pressure, volume, and the mass of air.

5. Plastic bats/sponge balls both demonstrate force and direction.

6. Toy rockets also show force and direction—but much more dramatically!

7. Flying discs can illustrate Bernoulli’s Principle of pressure and velocity in a liquid.

8. Hoberman Spheres expand and contract, and illustrate centripetal force.

9. Thunder Tubes create sound vibrations, resonance, and teach about weather.

10. Finger traps illustrate for kids the concept of potential energy.

Walsh (www.highlycontagious.com) uses toys in presentations to over 40,000 kids a year to get them psyched about science. Her upcoming book is Move ‘em or Lose ‘em: Kinesthetic Activities that Teach Math and Science.

grows every year,” Hettinger says.

“There’s always been a fascination with bugs,” agrees Rick Mershon, head of sales for Summit Toys, Maple Grove, Minn. Summit offers bug collecting and habitat products, as well as a popular line of bug vacuums. Although Mershon notes that bug collecting has “been around forever,” he says Summit’s goal is to “take basic backyard play patterns and make them better for kids—and better for bugs!”

“Certainly that’s been a strong little area, the bug viewers and the explorers, geared for the kids that like to get outside and rummage around,” adds Educational Insights’ Briggs.

“It’s something that the boys are attracted by as well as the girls, the bug-catching thing,” confirms Ouray Toys’ Derouin. “Of course with the younger children, they all love that, they all love to experiment with it.”

Gross appeal

Another hot area of interest at specialty these days are the gross-out science products, such as kits for making slime, body parts and the like. “Kids love yuck,” Learning Tree’s Tepper-Rasmussen says. “If they can make slime, they love it.”

“Anything gross just kind of gets it,” adds Renee Whitney. Be Amazing’s gross-out kit (called Yuck!) “is one of our most popular kits,” she notes.

“The most popular categories that we have are the early childhood [and] the disgusting science anatomy and pranks, those are super popular,” says Susan Rives, head of product development at Scientific Explorer, Seattle. The company makes “disgusting” heart- and brain-building kits, spa science kits and a line of “My First” kits to teach weather, chemistry, geology and more to the youngest scientists.

Scientific Explorer’s kits are definitely popular at Adventure Toy in Los Altos. “They’ve got a nice variety for boys and girls, stuff like spa science and bath stuff for girls and perfume and they also have the disgusting science stuff for the boys, so they really have a nice variety,” owner Leslie Chiaverini says. She also stocks kits and science play products from ScienceWiz, Educational Insights, Learning Resources, Tedco and Action Products.

“I think it’s important for boys,” says Peggy Henz, head of design at Chicago-based Shure Products, of the gross-out area. “If you want to tap the boy market, I think



■ *Ultimate Spa & Perfume Kit, Scientific Explorer*



that this is a good way to do it. I think the boys are still very much interested in learning and knowing and making things...this appeals to them

very heavily.” The company (which is primarily known for its arts & craft kits), has recently added science kits to its catalog and expects it will expand those offerings of “learning with a healthy dose of fun” in the future, Henz says.

A family affair

In addition to kits with kid-perfect appeal, parents (and grandparents) are also looking for higher-end products that they can do together with the kids.

“In the time when your kids are more scheduled, you’re more scheduled; it’s hard to spend real quality time. So I think your big purpose in an educational or science area is [providing] something that you can spend quality time with your children,” says Grant Woods, founder of DuneCraft, Chagrin Falls, Ohio. The company manufactures themed plant-growing kits as well as mini-experiment kits, space sand and other science items. “With our products, this is a way of passing on not only an interest in plants but a respect for nature, how a plant grows, how to nurture something and a lot of times it starts a lifelong hobby...when you put our stuff in stores, it sells!”

Woods adds, “I think educational and scientific-type toys are something that are going to be in higher and higher demand by parents that get sick of toys that don’t teach anything.”

“I think that we got into the market right around the time when people were really starting to look for more science kits,” adds Thames & Kosmos president Ted McGuire.

“We hear over and over that



■ *QuizLab trivia game, SmartLab; (right) Science of Special Effects kit, Educational Insights*



the science category is growing...we do get a lot of positive feedback that that area is growing for a lot of customers, so I think it really is." The company makes high-end physics and chemistry kits, as well as a unique computer engineering kit.

"Right now, there's hardly a piece in my store," says Over the Rainbow's Moore, of his Thames & Kosmos kits. Moore says he first stocked the line skeptically due to its higher price points but "actually, we've sold it really well and we've reordered it... I'm going to have the fuel cell car, their physics kits and some of their other things. That's going to be my high-end science area, so that's an indication to you of what's happened here in the last couple of years."

Walter Larsen, national sales manager for Elenco, Wheeling, Ill., is also seeing a lot of parents interested in high-end products. The company produces the Snap



■ *Motorworks 4-cylinder kit, NSI International*

Circuits line of electronics kits. "What we've found out over these last three and half years is that more and more parents are becoming involved in their kids' learning process, and they're looking for something for the kids—particular in this age group, from age 8 and up," Larsen says. "All the kids at that age want to go to their computer, so we're finding that the parents really like this snap circuit idea, because it gives kids really a hands-on experience making these different experiments. When you get these bigger kits they can make voice recorders, radios, alarms, doorbells, you name it, they can do it, and that's why I think the parents are so interested and are recommending them."

And the kits are very popular with customers, retailers say. "I would say our best selling kits are Snap Circuits by Elenco," adds Adventure Toy's Chia-verini. "They sell really, really well for us."

A Growth Category

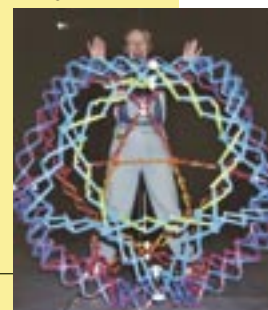
Kids will always want "products that make exploration fun—whether it's exploring your own backyard, exploring chemistry by making candy, or exploring space by learning about planets and constellations," says Kelly Petron, marketing representative for National Geographic. "Science

You can do it, too!

Building buzz

Five ways to create interest in science toys

1. Create a "How Come?" hands-on **SCIENCE STATION** in your store. Yet you needn't offer display models of your high-end kits; offer instead simple experiments using everyday items, impulse items such as magnets, or a simple animal habitat to view.



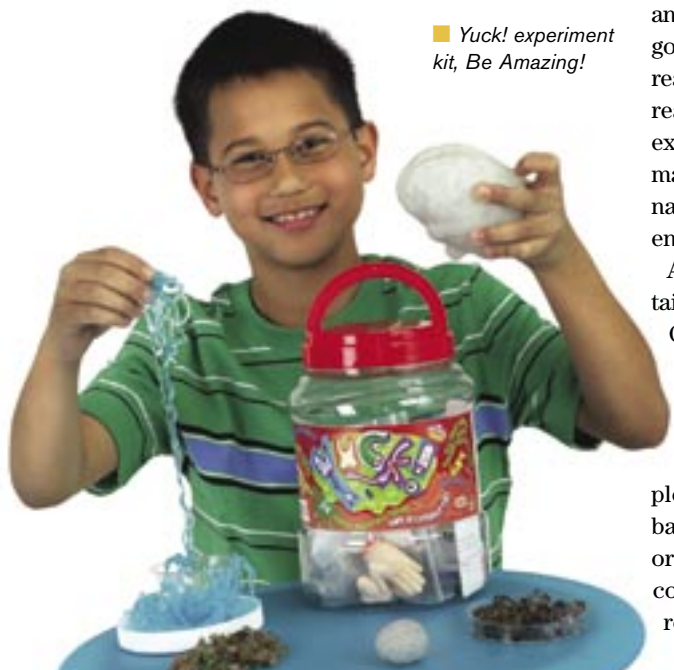
2. Stock plenty of related everyday **TOYS** in your science section, from Beanie Babies to Schleich animal figures to impulse items (such as sports equipment and other gadgets on the list below) that will supplement the types of experiment kits that you stock.

3. Host in-store **EVENTS** such as science nights, where parents and kids can complete a science kit together, and offer guest speakers (educators, museum experts, real scientists) to spark kids' science exploration at home.

4. Stock science-related **BOOKS** in your science section. Retailers say everything from activity books (Dover) to science-themed fiction and non-fiction (Kane Press, School Specialty, Kids Can Press) to full-color, photograph-heavy books (Dorling-Kindersley and National Geographic) are known for are all popular with their customers.

5. Create **THEMED DISPLAYS** to capitalize on the popularity of current science-related TV shows and movies. Stock related science, activity and discovery kits in these sections and they will fly off shelves. —MW

■ *Yuck! experiment kit, Be Amazing!*



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■ Star Theater SE, Uncle Milton

toys are good business. Children are excited about learning—it's cool to be smart! Kids want products that are first and foremost fun, but that also help them learn more about subjects in which they have interest."

Uncle Milton's Frank Adler agrees. "There's always a future in the science and nature category" as well as an abundance of companies that are ready and eager to tap into the "natural wonder kids have for things that are often times outside the scope of their everyday experiences," he tells *Playthings*.

"Until everyone can board a space shuttle or set foot on the moon, the science and nature category will fill that need for adventure and exploration into 'secret' worlds." ■

From every angle

As specialty retailers know, offering a selection of high-quality books is key to rounding out toy and game selections in each category. Science is no different—and offering the right books will take kids' interest to the next level, and keep them coming back for more.

"Science topics have entered the everyday world and are no longer relegated to the inside of classrooms and laboratories," notes Margo Gunsser of Kane Press, an educational publisher that markets popular science-themed mystery books to specialty retailers and teachers.

At Learning Tree toys in Oklahoma City, owner Patti Tepper-Rasmussen offers a full range of books overall and many in her science section, including activity books, zoology coloring books, anatomy and gross-out books, and books on space and other hot topics with kids. "I do have a book section but I try to keep the science stuff down here with the science...A popular one here is the "Brainiacs Gross-out Activity Book"—boys love this kind of stuff."

Stanley Moore also stocks science-themed books for kids within the science section at his Austin-based specialty store, Over the Rainbow Toys, as does Leslie Chiaverini at her shop, Adventure Toy in Los Altos, Calif. Chiaverini says she offers "a fair amount" of science titles, including the DK Eyewitness books. "They are really great visual books for kids, just really basic, interesting, educational stuff," she says. "We do lots of different book vendors, and a lot of DK—they're very good with science!" —KMP



■ Clockwise from left: Science Solves It: A Moldy Mystery, Kane Press, La Jolla, Calif.; How Nearly Everything Was Invented, Dorling-Kindersley, London and New York; Jurassic Poop: What Dinosaurs (and Others) Left Behind, Kids Can Press, Tonawanda, N.Y.; Encyclopedia of Animals, National Geographic, Washington

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