ANIMATED FIGURES:

Moving with the times

Christmas decorations have gone high-tech, and with the increasing adoption of animated figures into displays in the home, retail and corporate environments this market seems poised for impressive growth.

By Bridget White

A wreath on the door, a brightly lit tree visible through the window and lots of presents tied up with bows. This description typifies a classic Christmas scene, but these "old-fashioned" Christmas decorations are often not sophisticated enough for today's technology-crazed consumers…and they certainly are not enough to feature in the courtyard at the multimillion-dollar shopping center down the road or the town's central square.

Over the past four or five years, as technology has made manufacturing feasible and affordable, decorators and consumers alike have started to adopt animated Christmas figures into their standard holiday offerings. Whether the classification "animated" refers to a Santa Claus that waves, a polar bear that blows bubbles or a Christmas tree ornament that spins, animation is a pretty hot trend in Christmas retailing. No longer a perk for the wealthy or an extravagance relegated to large, public displays, animated figures can now be found in every specialty Christmas store.

While no one has yet started keeping sales figures on this segment of the industry, manufacturers estimate strong growth in the category and a market share of approximately 2-10 percent of the more than $500-billion worldwide Christmas market. These estimated figures, coupled with a steady increase in the number of suppliers from all parts of the globe, indicate that animated Christmas figures are becoming an important part of decorating for the Christmas season and a lucrative part of holiday business.

THE ANIMATION TREND

According to Robert Arrow, business development manager for UK-based Christmas consulting firm and Internet retailer Christmastime UK, his company has seen a steady increase in the number of requests for animated figures. "More and more we are using animated figures because people are always looking for moving silhouettes and figures these days. Santas are the most predominant request, but reindeer are also very big on the list."

Arrow theorizes that animation is becoming so popular because it helps to bring a scene or display to life and catches the eye better. Plus, it gives the display a bit more individuality. "People will stand and watch when you put animation in a display; that's why we tend to use them in areas where people have room and time to watch. We use static figures for something like a window display that someone is going to be walking past quickly."

Rita Gabriela Cipolatti, director of production and projects for Brazilian Christmas decorator Cipolatti Designs, believes that animated figures have become so popular because people have become accustomed to being entertained all the time. "Having the beautiful decorations is not enough any more," Cipolatti explained. "Customers need a show; they need something working with the decorations, so the decorations have to be entertainment. Moving figures or even real live actors make the scene more like entertainment instead of just decorations."

And while life-sized figures that move or speak are the most glamorous segment of this industry, they are not the only part, and certainly not the most common purchase for home use. As Wally Bronner, owner of Bronner's Christmas Wonderland, Frankenmuth, Mich., put it, "You really have to ask what is animation…an ornament on a tree that spins or plays music, that's animation, too."

Richard Adler with Kurt S. Adler Corporation, New York, N.Y., believes that expense (retail price for middle-grade, life-size animated figures averages approximately $500 each) and durability (many figures are not suited to indoor/outdoor use) are possible limitations to home use of high-end animated figures. According to Adler, tabletop figures and ornamental trim are much more accessible to home users who might have limited space or time. He sites plush products that move or make noise when you squeeze them or get close to them, Christmas tree ornaments that make noise or move when plugged into electric lights, and figures that blow bubbles as being more widely accessible. Since the price point is lower on these items, consumers tend to replace them often as their décor or preferences change or to keep up with current trends.

ANIMATION STANDARDS

The designs and features of animated figures have dramatically improved over just the past few years. One of the main causes for these improvements is tied to advancements in the worlds of consumer electronics and computer microprocessors. Some of the best technological advancements in animated figures include small, inexpensive data chips for voice recording; more realistic movements; and higher quality materials.

Arrow cautions that realism is one of the most important factors in selecting animated figures. According to Arrow, realistic movements help viewers personally identify with the characters and enable them to imagine the characters are real.

"We always pay special attention to the way the figure actually moves," explains Arrow. "You don't want it to look too robotic. It needs to sort of move freely. So for instance, if it was waving or something like that, it would be moving its hand backwards and forwards in a real humane way, as opposed to being very robotic so that you think a mechanism is moving the hand backwards and forwards. Also, you would expect the figure to look lifelike and characteristic of whatever it was representing."

The success of some of the best new animated figures, however, has very little to do with technology; instead, it is the result of pure artistic vision. Throughout the world, the creations of Pennsylvania-based Mary Daub have set a new standard for animated figures and are widely recognized as some of the best, most realistic figures available.

According to Daub, her process is a time-consuming transformation of latex and paint into one-of-a-kind figures that look almost real. The first step is to mold liquid latex over a real person to get an individual look for that particular figure. Once the latex is dried and set, it is stretched over a fiberglass body mold and hand-painted with layer after layer of paint to achieve the realistic look of color variations in actual skin. As a final touch, the figures are programmed and dressed to specification. Daub's creations are usually pre-ordered and designed to fit detailed specifications from the client. A hands-on process such as this is not designed for mass production (figures can often take as long as one month from start to finish) but for quality, and the finished product speaks for itself.

At the other end of the spectrum are small, low-cost, high-output pieces created under the same manufacturing model as any other product. Golden Bridge, based in China, creates a line of small, basic animated products for shipment all over the world. Ping Kong, international relations manager at Golden Bridge, said that his company's products continue to gain in popularity, not because they are unique but because they are inexpensive to produce, creating a low price point. Once the mold is created and the workers are trained, they can produce an infinite number of each item.

"We create millions of each shape every year," said Kong. "Dancing Santas, wreathes that sing when you get close enough, both are very big for us. We make a low-cost toy that everyone can afford, and we make lots of them that are just the same. Big, expensive figures are not better than ours; we have high standards for quality and make a good product. Manufacturing here is just cheaper and because we make so many of each item each one costs less."

WHAT COMES NEXT?

With the category already advanced to its current level, it was hard to imagine what could be the next big thing for animated figures, but Arrow believes that there is a lot of exploration and development yet to be done. "As technology has advanced," explains Arrow, "you can get figures that can be programmed so they can do a number of poses or movements without ➧

HOLIDAY TRENDS

Top-of-the-line, realistic animated figures like this one may take months to create and cost thousands of dollars.

anyone having to reset them. They actually work on fancy computer systems that allow you to program a whole series of movements at once. Also, you could have the figure so that it looked like a static figure, but it would have a sensor in it so that if you got closer to it it would start to move or speak or such. I think there is going to be a lot more development done in this area."

The area Arrow speaks about has seen tremendous advancements over the last few years. Microprocessor chips that control a figure's movement can allow for a seemingly endless assortment of movements and movement combinations. Motion sensors allow a figure to remain static until a viewer is close enough to enjoy the show, at which time figures become fully animated until the program is complete. And most recently, realistic voice chips have allowed for "conversations" to be programmed between figures.

Adler sees the addition of a voice component as the most significant of the recent improvements in animated figures. "The real advancement," says Adler, "has been the advent of small, affordable chips that go inside of the figure. Right now, you can record about 30 seconds of material on the chip — just about anything you want it to say. You can even record several things on the chip and have them rotate in a loop so that the figure says different things each time it is activated."

All of this praise about the current technology is not to say, though, that we should expect this category to become inactive any time soon. Advancements in the electronics and computer industries will open new doors for advancements with animated figures.

One of the new technologies in the works at Kurt S. Adler Corporation is an easier activation mechanism for small animated figures. Currently, these figures are activated either by motion sensors, which is not always desirable, or by squeezing a pressure point. Adler reports that his company is in the process of developing a line of touch-activated figures. So instead of having to squeeze a certain point, often a difficult task for small children, the figure would be activated whenever its surface is touched.

Cipolatti Design's main customers are shopping malls, which are some of the biggest users of animated Christmas figures, and Cipolatti explains that her customers come back every year asking what her company can do the next year that will be better or more than the previous year. She argues that good, old-fashioned competition is the biggest driver of her decorating business.

"There are many, many shopping malls all over the world now," says Cipolatti, "and they compete a lot between them to see who can have the best decorations. They think that if they have the better decorations or a better show than their competitor down the street then the customers will come to their shopping mall to see it or maybe that the customers will stay longer at their shopping mall because the decorations are so beautiful."

"What I see for us in the future," adds Cipolatti, "is each year we are improving so much it is sometimes a very big job to do better next year. The way we are able to do it is to work on many different projects and to search all over the world to find the best materials, best technology, best products to do better than last year."

Certainly at some point in the future, you would expect this category to stop advancing as quickly as it is now, but for the near term, manufacturers, retailers and designers are all still in the market for the next innovation, technology or design that will make them the leader in animated Christmas figures.

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