

# Is Harry Committing Suicide...

A quick quiz: What do toothpaste, toothbrushes, chocolate, CDs, hair gel, building blocks, games, calendars, films, chewing gum, cups, and... (could I forget?) four books have in common?

You guessed right. Harry Potter!

I'm sure neither J.K. Rowling nor any of the rest of us expected Harry Potter to become, within only four short years, one of the most sought-after kids' brands ever, competing head to head with venerable names such as Disney, Nintendo, and Sony.

The amazing and positive fact is that a book, for the first time in over a decade, has managed to become the key attraction for kids all over the Western world, despite the competing presence of computer games, the Internet, interactive television, and mobile phones. But a shadow is looming, one that's likely to cast a pall over the amazing brand story.

Between 9 a.m. and 9 p.m. yesterday I was exposed to Harry Potter more than 20 times. Of course, magazines and newspapers accounted for most of the exposure. But the thing that concerned me was the character's insistent presence in places such as the supermarket, the local burger bar, the kiosk on the corner, the gas station, the dentist, the bank, the hairdresser, the toy store, and, naturally, the book store.

Now, I've been in the brand business for more than a decade, and I can't recall another brand that was so widely exposed so

quickly and so intensely. Never. Not even Coca-Cola, Disney, or Microsoft has achieved such powerful visibility in the retailing environment across the globe. The really scary part of the story is that I saw exactly the same situation two weeks ago in Japan as I did this week on Australia's Gold Coast.

I pay all respect to the author. Who wouldn't respect a person who can create a character that captivates a generation of children (and their parents) and inspires them all to discover the joy of reading? But is there too much hype? Is Harry in danger of dying prematurely? I remember the son of LEGO's founder observing that his father never wanted LEGO to become a fashionable toy, because as soon as it did it would be out of date in a summer. I am still, to this very day, convinced that he was right. Just think about Pokémon and a whole bunch of other brands that reached dizzyingly high popularity -- brands that became crazes in a way the world never had seen before. But they disappeared as quickly as they bloomed. Ironically, LEGO is one of the three toy manufacturers producing Harry Potter toys.

As well-planned and successful as Harry Potter's global launch has been, the very success that's propelling the brand toward its huge potential is likely to drive it toward catastrophe. It seems as though after Warner Bros. purchased the rights to the brand name, it instantly began milking the brand for every potential cent. And this rapacity is despite Rowling's clever embargo against

Coca-Cola using Harry Potter's or any of his companions' images on Coke bottles. The author's conditions were that Coca-Cola's multi-million-dollar sponsorship should come with a global obligation to teach kids to read. But the fact is, when I last saw a Harry Potter Coke bottle, I didn't even notice that Harry's face was missing. I realized the trick days after I'd seen the bottle. Simply displaying the brand name persuaded me to believe that Harry's face was on the bottle. A great fairy tale, eh? Amazing branding.

But is all the publicity and promotion the best way to use the Harry Potter brand? By the time the fourth movie is scripted, will the brand be overused and fatigued, or even dead? Would a slower market launch secure the Harry Potter brand a more permanent place? Would a more tempered strategy help ensure the longevity of the brand, granting it the type of endurance enjoyed by Mickey Mouse, Donald Duck, or any other decades-old Disney figure? Is it possible to engage in a more moderate brand launch without sacrificing an opportunity? Or will the revenue that's currently pouring in dry up in two years' time, when Harry has evaporated from the minds of youngsters and been replaced by the next brand sensation?



I am inclined to think the latter may be the case. No matter how much I love Harry Potter, admire Rowling, and am amazed by the fascination the books have engendered all over the world, I fear that the Harry Potter brand is on its way to committing suicide. Not today, not tomorrow, but in two years. That is, unless Rowling can conjure up some magic again.

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