

Tween adds Bella Sara to stable

Retailer sold on horse trading cards for girls

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BY AMY SAUNDERS
THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH

In the girls' world of Tween Brands, something that's pink and purple and has sparkly unicorns on it could translate to profit.

So for the holidays, the New Albany-based youth retailer has tapped into Bella Sara -- sets of collectible, horse-themed trading cards that have reached 30 million in worldwide sales.

Bella Sara is the latest hot brand to hit the company's Limited Too and Justice stores, where non-apparel items such as Webkinz plush toys and Hannah Montana merchandise have been bright spots in a couple of disappointing quarters.

"I think it's a game that will pick up a lot of speed," said Paula Demaso, executive vice president of general merchandise. "It's kind of grass roots, like Webkinz was: No one west of the Mississippi knew about that a year ago."

Now, fueled in part by Webkinz, third-quarter sales in the "lifestyle" category at Justice and Limited Too stores are up 77 percent and 60 percent, respectively, compared with last year.

Similar to Webkinz, each Bella Sara card comes with a code that grants access to an online world, where girls can play games and feed and brush the virtual version of their horses.

With commercials appearing on Nickelodeon and Cartoon Network and a TV or movie deal in the works, the Bella Sara brand could grow to the size of the Pokémon media empire, said Peter D. Adkison, chief executive of publisher Hidden City Games.

Adkison would know: He's the one who, in the 1990s, took the Pokémon and Magic: The Gathering trading-card games worldwide under his company, Wizards of the Coast.

In 1999, Adkison sold the company to Hasbro for \$500 million and decided he was done with cards, unless he came up with a compelling reason to get back into the market.

He found one in Gitte Odder Braendgaard, a Danish social worker who was displaying her Bella Sara cards at a trade show last year. Named for Braendgaard's daughter and her first horse, the cards were decorated with pretty pictures and feel-good sayings such as, "Be the hero in your own story" and "Beauty comes from within."

In Adkison's view, that was an innovation. Until he acquired the rights to Bella Sara outside Scandinavia, he had never seen a card game catered to girls that he thought could survive. "Girls aren't really into face-to-face competition games (like Pokémon and Magic)," he said.

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HIDDEN CITY GAMES

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Bruce Langdon, owner of Armoury Games in Pickerington, said his store has been carrying Bella Sara cards for six months because his array of games and comic books mostly appeal to boys.

"This is something for girls who get dragged in here," Langdon said. "It's not a top seller for us, but it does well enough that I keep getting it back in the store."

Expanding the Bella Sara brand into other categories, like TV, could give it the push it needs to break into pop culture, said Cliff Annicelli, editor of trade magazine *Playthings*.

"It certainly has a lot of potential," he said. "Just look at My Little Pony. It's been around for 25 years -- all it is is a line of dolls in horse form, some pink and purple horses with hair. (Bella Sara) is certainly a more mature experience than that."

asaunders@dispatch.com