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After Build-A-Bear, Build-A-Toy-Car

Founder of Make-It-Yourself Plush Toys Backs a Variation

By JOANNE KAUFMAN

Lucky for one entrepreneur, the founder of the stuff-and-outfit your own plush animal phenomenon known as Build-A-Bear Workshop never got far on her idea to pursue a build-a-car concept.

Since 1997, when she opened the first Build-A-Bear workshop in St. Louis, that founder, Maxine Clark, has been besieged with people full of do-it-yourself ideas (make your own books and decorate your shoes, to name a couple.) A few years ago, Ms. Clark herself wrote up a build-a-car business plan, but said she was too busy with bears to do much else than put it on her to-do list. The bears are now available in 300 stores worldwide.

In 2005, Larry Andreini, 44, an entrepreneur from Fairfax, Va., with a background in financial services and customer loyalty programs, came calling with a concept called Ridemakerz, a make-and-outfit your own toy car business. "He fit in with our culture," Ms. Clark said in an interview. "He understood what it takes to bring a brand to reality."

She decided to collaborate with Mr. Andreini in the form of a \$3 million investment and an estimated \$15 million in back-office support from Build-A-Bear Workshop.

The first Ridemakerz store is scheduled to open Friday at an entertainment and retail complex in Myrtle Beach, S.C., followed in July by an outpost at the Mall of America in Bloomington, Minn.

"Through the partnership we're able to see every store performance of every Build-A-Bear," Mr. Andreini said. "We have access to data that tells us the best place to open our shops."

Fathers and sons make up 70 percent of his target audience. Here's what they can expect at the Ridemakerz store.

Customers select a chassis type (street or monster); body styles (stock or custom, a Ridemakerz brand hot rod, a Ford Mustang GT or Dodge Ram pickup, to name a few options); paint schemes; sound effects (for example, sirens or



Photographs by Briana Brough for The New York Times

Larry Andreini, the entrepreneur behind Ridemakerz, shows off a custom toy car, among many models that customers could make. He is being backed by Maxine Clark, founder of Build-A-Bear.



Ridemakerz will open its first store this week in Myrtle Beach, S.C. Another is planned in the Mall of America in Bloomington, Minn.

race sounds) and style of locomotion (free wheel or radio control).

After the 10- to 12-inch cars are assembled, there are ample customizing and accessorizing options: tire treads, grille guards, side pipes, snowboard racks and decals. Mr. Andreini estimates that a fully tricked-out vehicle will run about \$75, including \$25 for radio control. For the budget-minded, there's a stock tuner car for \$12.

Build-A-Bear has a 25 percent stake in Ridemakerz, a figure that will go up to 30 percent by January, though the companies will remain discrete entities. "There's tremendous potential here be-

cause there's nothing else for boys out there," Ms. Clark said.

While the do-it-yourself market "hasn't exploded, it hasn't faded," said Sean McGowan, a toy industry analyst and managing director of the brokerage firm Wedbush Morgan.

"Build-A-Bear continues to open 30 workshops a year and earns back almost all of its investment in a store in the first year," he said, "and I can't think of many other businesses that can say that."

Still, he questions whether there are "as many revenue opportunities" with cars as plush toys. "Hard plastic isn't as inherently profitable as cloth," he said,

adding that "Ridemakerz has a reasonable shot."

Jim Silver, editor in chief of the magazine *Toy Wishes*, is more skeptical. "If you want to make a plush animal, there's nowhere else to go but Build-A-Bear," he said. "But there are a lot of model kits that let you make your own cars at home. Ridemakerz will be competing with them.

"And with a car it's how you play with it," Mr. Silver continued. "It's about the set and the tracks. Ridemakerz doesn't offer that. Can they succeed? Yes. But it's a higher mountain than Build-A-Bear had to climb."