

## Engaging Boys in Real and Virtual Car Play



**AN INTERVIEW WITH:**

**Lee Nadler**  
**Chief Marketing Officer, RIDEMAKERZ**  
**March 19, 2009**

RIDEMAKERZ is a toy company that allows kids—typically, boys ages 6 to 12—to customize remote control cars modeled after cars from its automotive partners, including General Motors Corp., MINI Cooper and Scion. The first store opened in June 2007 in Myrtle Beach, S.C., backed by investors that included the founder of Build-A-Bear Workshop. By the end of 2008, there were one dozen stores nationwide.

RIDEMAKERZ will launch a free virtual world designed by The Electric Sheep Co. in spring 2009. The company hopes to drive sales to its stores and make RIDEMAKERZ a hybrid online and offline experience.

Lee Nadler has worked in marketing for 20 years. Mr. Nadler began his career working for agencies, including WPP's promotional firm Einson Freeman and ad agency Kirshenbaum & Bond, launching and building brands such as Prodigy and Snapple. In 1996, he became part of the team that formed DoubleClick. In 1999, Mr. Nadler became president and CEO of Digital Pulp, a marketing and Web development firm for Web-based initiatives such as 1-800-Flowers.com, adidas, Citi, Columbia House and Scholastic. He and founded Sherpa Marketing Inc. in 2002.

Mr. Nadler spoke with eMarketer about taking virtual worlds from a marketing platform to a real customer experience.

**eMarketer:** How are you marketing RIDEMAKERZ?

**Lee Nadler:** We do different kinds of promotions and events in the local markets where we have shops and with our car manufacturer partners. We worked with MINI on their program “MINI Takes the States,” where they travel with MINI owners across the country and set up fun local events. RIDEMAKERZ was there to give the kids something fun to do. We set up a demolition derby and a track for the RIDEZ. We also put together a limited

edition “MINI Takes the States” RIDE for sale. All the proceeds went to MINI’s charity, Motoring Hearts. [Editor's Note: Motoring Hearts is a charity that connects MINI USA drivers to volunteer opportunities that match their own unique interests.]

We’ve also done a lot of different programs where we’ve reached out to moms and dads through various PR initiatives, as well as looking at several online properties we want to work with. We’re connecting with mom and dad bloggers. We’ve also done radio where we actually bring the DJ down and have them go through an experience of making a ride and race.

We’re really trying to get people talking about the experience, because this is much more than just a product you pull off the shelf. It’s an experience where customers get to build something completely unique.

**eMarketer:** You have licensing arrangements with auto manufacturers like Scion, Dodge and MINI, so that RIDEMAKERZ cars look like real models. Let’s talk about that.

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**Mr. Nadler:** We have agreements with the manufacturers, so we can take renderings of their cars and turn them into RIDEMAKERZ RIDEZ. A 10-year-old can trick [it] out how they want and drive a MINI Cooper S as a model car in the real world or in our virtual world. The beauty for the manufacturers is that they’re allowing kids to imagine what their first car will be. The power of that versus just an advertisement is immensely compelling when you start to allow kids to explore, discover and create.

In many cases, the kids are collaborating with their dads when they’re putting together these RIDEZ. A big opportunity here is also that this is one of the few experiences beyond sports where dads and sons can connect and do something fun and rewarding together. Auto manufacturers and other companies in the automotive space, like tire and fuel companies, see the potential power of this.

**eMarketer:** Do you have any plans to further develop relationships with these automotive companies in order to help them market to tweens?

**Mr. Nadler:** We have a section on our Website called RIDERZ ED where we teach about the manufacturing process, the culture of customizing and so on. Some companies have a great message and content to share with kids about things that kids are already interested in. For example, RIDEMAKERZ provides a great platform for fuel companies to teach kids about alternative fuels.

Automotive racing is filled with different companies that sponsor teams. We have an opportunity through both the shops and the virtual experience to allow some of these companies to bring something authentic to the experience, in terms of their presence in our virtual world on the site.

**eMarketer:** How is your virtual world different from say, Scion’s virtual world presence in Whyville? Why make your own virtual world?

**Mr. Nadler:** We talked extensively about different options. RIDEMAKERZ is a hybrid experience both offline and online. For us, the virtual world is much more than a marketing channel, so we wanted our own virtual experience.

**eMarketer:** Are you focusing more on one part of the experience?

**“[T]he virtual world allows us to reach a mass audience across the country. Hopefully, they’ll have a fantastic experience and want to build a real RIDE as well.”**

**Mr. Nadler:** It’s twofold. We have our local shops, so in those markets we are driving business to those local shops, having kids physically build a RIDE and then maybe bringing it to life in the virtual experience. But with 12 shops, there are a lot of people we don’t necessarily touch in our shops. Thus, the virtual world allows us to reach a mass audience across the country. Hopefully, they’ll have a fantastic experience and want to build a real RIDE as well.

Kids today are absolutely blurring the line between the real world and online. To them it’s play, and the expectation is that they’ll be able to play with this RIDE online as well as put it together and take it apart physically.

**eMarketer:** What are some best practices for making a virtual world for boys?

**Mr. Nadler:** RIDEMAKERZ is focused on being an exciting, fun place for boys ages 6 to 12 to play and express themselves. Looking at research and the experience we’ve had with this core audience led us to build features you won’t find in other virtual worlds. One is the visual perspective that makes the world feel more immersive, instead of a top-down view like some virtual worlds. We took a cue from racing video games.

Many virtual worlds try to say they’re gender neutral, but target girls, and their actual users are actually younger than their target. We built a lot of the games and the experience is for 10-to-12-year-old boys.

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We kept boys in mind with planning game communication. In a lot of virtual worlds, there’s chat. We’ve watched play patterns and took cues from how boys want to interact. Boys don’t want to just chat—they want to compete and race and have fun. We don’t have chat in our virtual world. Instead, we put together ZMOTES, which are basically expressive ways for boys to communicate with one another, like, “Wanna race?” They can also give a thumbs up, shoot rockets at racers or pass gas. These are on a dropdown menu. There’s also a huge benefit in terms of safety and parents being worried about chatting and so forth.

RIDEMAKERZ is designed for what we call “Show or Go.” Customizing the cars and then playing strategic games is a big part of the experience. Boys can have their car in the virtual world be the same model car they have or a completely different one. Different cars will perform differently in different games. Unlike other virtual worlds, we’re not focused on avatars walking around.

**eMarketer:** One virtual world strategy was the decision to make it available Flash-based, so there’s no download required.

**Lee Nadler:** Right. That was a huge technology hurdle that we got over. We want to be the next-generation virtual

world, in terms of the advanced graphics and 3D-like immersive quality, but without a download. Download is a big barrier when it comes to kids' virtual worlds. There can be issues with the download, but it's more because we want boys to easily be able to get right into our experience.