Saluting Innovation @ Mattel

by Kelly Kornet

Saluting innovation @ Mattel for making dolls that inspire girls to be whatever they want to be. Just in time for International Women’s Day, major multinational toy company Mattel Inc. expanded their “Shero” line of Barbies, adding three new sheros bringing the total to 17 famous engineers, chefs, artists, athletes, scientists, activists and entrepreneurs – who happen to be women.

Creating Female Role Models from Day One

In the mid-50s, Ruth Handler - cofounder of Mattel and inventor of Barbie - had the vision to identify a gap in the toy market and the grit to push her idea forward despite initial push-back from her company, the industry and potential customers. However, Ruth remained driven and successfully launched Barbie in 1959, skyrocketing Mattel into the Fortune 500 list just 5 years after her debut.

“My whole philosophy of Barbie was that through the doll, the little girl could be anything she wanted to be. Barbie always represented the fact that a woman has choices.”

Girls can be anything

A lot has changed in the 59 years since Barbie first walked onto the scene in her injection moulded heels. In 1960, the overall participation rate of women in the American workforce was just 38% and Barbie’s first career options included a fashion designer and a nurse, traditionally “female” roles. Fast track to 1990 and women make up 58% of the workforce and Barbie has the choice of being anything from an army ranger to a dentist, a veterinarian to a NASCAR driver.

Yet, even as early as the 1960s, Barbie has used her platform to help inspire little girls to dream. A female astronaut variation of the doll first hit stores in 1965, just one year after Russian cosmonaut Valentina Tereshkova became the world’s first woman to fly in space. In 2004, Barbie donned a red suit in her role as presidential candidate, 12 years before the United States would see the first female presidential candidate nominated by a major party.

Shero’s Journey

Since the beginning, Barbie has created space for little girls to dream of possible futures for themselves. What makes Barbie’s “Shero” special? With this collection, Mattel celebrates real women who have created impact. With the likenesses of Frida Kahlo, Katherine Johnson and Ibtihaj Muhammad, these toys are not just dolls, they are real role models for little girls to look up to. Each of the 17 dolls is presented alongside her story, her achievements and the impact she made towards paving the way for women to thrive today.

Beyond diverse job titles and interests, the dolls in the Shero collection reflect a range of nationalities, ethnicities and ages. In an increasingly diverse world, this collection recognizes the need for girls to find role models that “look like her” and provide an opportunity for every girl to envision her potential. We salute Mattel for moving from Barbies that inspire, to sheros that empower girls all over the world.

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Kelly is a consultant that draws from her experience in Strategic Foresight and Design Thinking to help clients drive breakthrough innovation. She is passionate about exploring emerging social change and shifting consumer needs and focuses on hiding her Canadian accent, eh.