



Still Playing With Toys? Talk Inc.: Hoping for Some Pillow Talk

"Aimee Markelz is one inventor who's forging ahead on her own with Paddy Pillow, a colorful, stuffed toy that comes with an illustrated children's book and an original CD with the Paddy Pillow theme song that encourages kids and adults to share their feelings.

Markelz, 35, got the idea while volunteering on a Chicago abuse help line a few years ago. She noticed a lot of

people had a hard time explaining their feelings. She wanted to make conversations about feelings "an everyday, normal" thing that could be fun and educational, too.

Markelz put the concept on paper in 1998, but kept it quiet until she left her 12-year marketing career to start her company, Talk Inc., in March 2001. "I knew [this idea] had market potential," she says.

Her first year in business--which she bootstrapped with \$100,000 of her own money and funds from two family members--was spent developing Paddy Pillow prototypes and conducting formal focus groups to hit her target market: moms with kids ages 2 to 6. "You have to build it step by step to discover what's not working," she says.

Today, Markelz has an agreement with Crystal Lake, Illinois, plush toy company Senario to import her product from China. Paddy Pillow retails for \$29.95 at Borders Books locations in Atlanta, Chicago and Dallas; through a growing number of Hallmark, Learning Express and Zany Brainy stores; and direct from her Web site. Markelz is working toward full national distribution within a year. She's still test-marketing the product and building inventory, so sales this year are hard to predict. "On the low end, we might sell \$20,000 worth, and on the high end, \$200,000," she says. "Anything can happen."

One thing she hopes will happen is that Paddy Pillow will become a hit TV show for kids. She's started a petition on her Web site, gathering signatures from people who would like to see Paddy Pillow become a TV show or video, and she's in the process of developing animation samples to shop to networks. Markelz is also working on a number of product extensions and raising awareness through in-store demonstrations. In a post-September 11 world, people "need this more than ever," she says.

So will Paddy Pillow become a megabrand like Barney? Maybe, Markelz says, but her ultimate goal is for it to become an "evergreen"--or classic--product like Raggedy Ann, which was recently inducted into the National Toy Hall of Fame in Salem, Oregon. "This industry is highly competitive and highly fickle. It moves fast," she says. "But if an educational product is good, it'll be enduring."