

G.I. Joe: Marketing Innovation and “Play-ability”

Hasbro Toy Company first designed and marketed the G.I. Joe action figure in February of 1964. The unfailing popularity of the G.I. Joe action figure for almost 45 straight years is due in part to innovative and dynamic marketing but also because it’s just a really great toy.



The name for the G.I. Joe doll was inspired by the 1945 United Artists film “The Story of G.I. Joe”. For Hasbro, the G.I. part of the name stood for “Government Issue”. Initially, there were four versions of the figure: Action Soldier, Action Sailor, Action Marine, and Action Pilot.

Because the G.I. Joe doll was to be a toy for boys, the doll’s creator, Stan Weston, coined the term “action figure” before pitching the idea to Hasbro’s Don Levine, Creative Director. Thus, the very first action figure was born. The first G.I. Joe prototype action figure sold for \$200,000 in 2003 and is considered to be the most valuable action figure in the world.

G.I. Joe was approximately 12” tall and fully articulated with moving arms, legs, even wrists and ankles. Joe was not to be confused with “dolls” of a similar size, namely the wildly popular Barbie. G.I. Joe was tough. He had a scar on one cheek, some versions had a full beard and moustache, he came with dog tags, boots, and a rifle.

G.I. Joe was an immediate hit with boys. Except for the 1967 G.I. Nurse version, which boys would not play with and girls avoided because it was not a “Barbie.” The 1967 G.I. Nurse is reportedly worth \$10,000 in its original packaging.

Over 2 million G.I. Joes sold in that first year and Hasbro, introduced G.I. Joe’s “stuff”. There were different outfits and uniforms, weapons, vehicles and boats, and a footlocker for storage. There were new versions of G.I. Joe as well: an African American, different hair colors, facial hair and feature variations.

Other toy manufacturers jumped on board the action figure frenzy with figures like astronauts and adventurers. The competition coupled with the anti-war movement of the late 1960’s caused the popularity of G.I. Joe to fall. But Hasbro responded in the 1970’s with a new Joe who was a member of an Adventure Team that ran environmental type missions instead of military based missions. Some versions of this Joe featured the new “Kung Fu” grip and more realistic hair. With the new look and the new approach the G.I. Joe was as popular as ever.

Hasbro introduced new characters at this time as well, forming the other members of G.I. Joe’s Action Team. There was a bionic hero, “Mike Power, Atomic Man,” based loosely on the popular character of the “Six Million Dollar Man” series. Bulletman and Eagle Eye were other heroes that worked together with Joe and Mike Power. The figures were packaged with comic books that drove home the team concept for the toys.



Popularity dwindled until, by the late 1970s, the high price of plastic and low sales caused G.I. Joe to retire for a time. Hasbro attempted to revive Joe and his team in 1977-78 with smaller 8” figures, but was unsuccessful.

The popularity of action figures rose again in the early 1980s with the release of the Star Wars movie and its accompanying merchandise. This time the action figure market was centered around 3 ¾” figures with vehicles and action sets.

Joe was reintroduced as part of a team with hundreds of new accessories plus a slew of new characters with their own personalities. At this time Hasbro partnered with Marvel to put out a monthly comic book, an animated Saturday morning show, and a television campaign. The results sent the popularity of Joe and his team soaring.



The G.I. Joe animated series included several 5 part miniseries. The individual parts played through the week with the entire movie airing on Saturday mornings. The “Yo Joe!” theme song linked the series and the toy commercials. Each episode of G.I. Joe ended with a public service announcement (PSA) for kids. The topics ranged from: “what to do if you catch on fire” to “have an ump ref your baseball game.” The PSAs always ended with the famous tag “Now you know, and knowing is half the battle!”

The action figure line included the good guys from the Action Team and bad guys from the Cobra organization. Each figure came with a collector card that described the character, his personality and his abilities. Between 1982 and 1994 over 500 different figures were produced including guys like: Snake Eyes, Dreadnok Ripper, Torpedo, Stalker, Croc Master, Beach Head, FireFly, and the Red Ninja.



The toys remain extremely popular with collectors and kids. There are several resources on the web regarding the action figure line including information on www.Ebay.com. Two great resources for collectors and pricing are:
www.gijoepriceguide.com
www.tibranch.com/beachhead/page5.html

Hasbro, in a partnership with Target Stores, resurrected the 12” model in a promotional Hall of Fame series in 1991. The G.I. Joe continues to be a popular toy even today.

Hasbro broke new ground in many ways marketing the G.I. Joe: a doll for boys, the first action figure, using comic books and TV shows as marketing vehicles, to name a few. But perhaps the real appeal of the G.I. Joe toys is their “playability”. In a market where so many toys play themselves and kids just watch, G.I. Joe, his action team and his enemies are toys designed with infinite possibilities that ignite the imagination of boys (and even girls) around the world. Yo Joe!