

Success is child's play

Local runs firm that tests ideas for toys

◆ **STAMFORD** — Creative Group Marketing acts as a go-between for inventors and toy manufacturers.

By **RYAN FLINN**
Hour Staff Writer

Gary Ahlert has a job that would make any kid envious: He plays with toys for a living.

The licensing businessman runs Stamford-based Creative Group Marketing, a company that evaluates products from inventors. If he likes the product, and thinks it will be successful, Ahlert will act as an agent between the inventor and manufacturers to help get homegrown ideas into stores. His office is littered with the games and inventions that people have sent him.

"Everybody thinks they will come up with an idea, show it around, and a company will flip and give the inventor millions of dollars," he said. "It's not like that."

Of the 50 to 100 products and toys Ahlert views a year, he chooses between five and 15 to promote. Since there is no "one formula" to determine what will succeed, he has to rely on his gut feeling and his experience in the business. It can also be difficult to persuade manufacturers to invest in a new product. Of the toys Ahlert promotes, only two or three will make it into the stores per year.

Sometimes turning down an inventor can be emotional. If a person puts his heart and soul into something, rejection



Hour photo/ERIK TRAUTMAN

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Gary Ahlert displays some of the new toys his company is helping to bring to market.

Local man evaluates toy ideas for a living

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can hurt, Ahlert said. He had one woman in tears recently when he told her that her game would probably not be picked up by a manufacturer.

"We might still take it to licensing, but I had to bring her back down to earth," he said. "It was upsetting."

In his business, trends are as fickle as a fifth-grader, so it's important to put money on winning products.

"Toys fascinate me, but in the toy industry, you never know what's going to happen," Ahlert said. Creative Group Marketing has not yet had what Ahlert calls a "runaway hit," but has licensed many products and brought them to market.

Some products are "hyped," or advertised extensively, and fail, and other products enjoy little or no advertising and explode onto the market. Beanie babies are one example of a little-known product that

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GARY AHLERT
CREATIVE GROUP
MARKETING

became a "must-have" item for kids and collectors.

One of Ahlert's most recent products to get picked up is an "Air Bazooka," a gun that shoots air. He said the toy was turned down several times by the same company before it was finally picked up.

"It's all subjective," he said.

Creative Group Marketing charges \$125 to evaluate a toy or product. Although the fee deters most non-serious inventors from sending in their ideas, Ahlert said he still gets packages from "the crazies."

For instance, one person sent him a plan for a singing

toilet seat, and someone else sent in an idea for "emergency handles," meant to secure residents who live in tornado regions. But the most bizarre idea was from a man who claimed to have designed a space station that could be made out of Jell-O.

"He wanted me to go to NASA with it," Ahlert said. "He even wrote thick booklets on it."

Ahlert comes from a creative family — his grandfather was president of the American Society of Composers, Authors and Publishers. His father, mother and siblings are in creative fields. His sister is a writer for the NBC TV show, "Will & Grace." Ahlert himself wrote the book, "Selling Your Idea or Invention: The Birthplace to Market Guide."

Diane Cardinale, spokeswoman for the Toy Industry Association, a trade group based in New York, said there are three avenues available to

manufacturers for getting toys. One option is to use an in-house research and design firm to develop products. This option is the one most used by large companies.

Another option is to use toy brokers or agents such as Creative Marketing Group. Cardinale said medium to small manufacturers use this option if they do not have their own research and design department.

The third option is to solicit designs from independent inventors, but these people have usually worked in the industry.

Ahlert said this last option is the least used by toy companies.

"The interesting thing is, most toys come from private inventors, but companies won't look there," Ahlert said.

Ryan Flinn is the business editor. He can be reached at 354-1047.