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tokidoki



tokidoki Everything

CASE STUDY

tokidoki Everything

Known for its vibrant art and whimsical characters, tokidoki is a young brand that is hard at work establishing deep roots in the world of products and merchandising. With the world as its canvas, expect to see the globe become tokidoki-fied. **by AMANDA CIOLETTI**

Although, at its root, tokidoki means "sometimes" in Japanese, there is nothing intermittent or occasional about the pop culture-entrenched brand that has exploded in its short 13 years. In just little more than a decade, tokidoki has evolved to be a 365-brand that touches nearly every product category imaginable, from hard goods to home décor, apparel, accessories, novelties and soon to be hotels and animated content.

Founded in 2005 by Pooneh Mohajer, Ivan Arnold and Simone Legno, the brand's creative visionary, tokidoki is now a machine unto itself, securing an enormous amount



SIMONE LEGNO
chief creative officer and co-founder, tokidoki
POONEH MOHAJER
chief executive officer and co-founder, tokidoki

of business, partnerships and collaborations, all the while remaining an independent entity–a quality that, this writer suspects, is instrumental to its success. After all, the brand's bedrock is creative freedom.

tokidoki did not begin with the business partnership, but was born at the turn of the century from the mind of Legno, an Italy-based artist who was newly embarking on a career in media and advertising, and armed with an affinity for Japanese culture.

The first tokidoki website (circa 2001) was a showcase for Legno's art and featured early iterations of now famous brand characters alongside flash-animated imagery and games. It drew more than 17,000 visitors per day, says Legno.

"The minute I saw Simone's artwork–www.tokidoki.it was his professional calling card, and he was one of the best flash animators at the time–I literally began jumping up and down, screaming, 'Who is this guy? We have got to sign this guy!,'" says Mohajer, now chief executive officer, tokidoki. "I had never seen anything like it. And from the get-go, I had a vision for a global brand that I could see very clearly–its future, its potential. We are far from what we are going to be, even still."

Mohajer was by then a seasoned business professional, having had major success as the co-founder of color cosmetics brand Hard Candy, a revolutionary nail enamel company that ultimately sold to international luxury goods conglomerate LVMH, Moët Hennessy Louis Vuitton in 1999. At the time of tokidoki's founding, Mohajer was onto her second venture, damnBRAND, a full-service e-commerce management firm. It is within those walls that tokidoki began to take shape, leveraging damnBRAND assets to ultimately fund the current business venture.

It is safe to say that Mohajer knows a hit when she sees it.

"One of the things that convinced me to change my life and share my art was the vision that Pooneh had," says Legno, now creative director, tokidoki. "I saw that she was a dreamer like me, and a bit crazy, like me."

"Simone and I were immediately aligned," says Mohajer. "Now, everything I do, I see as a canvas for Simone's artwork and his creativity."

And what tokidoki does is a lot, both in the licensed consumer products space via partnerships and high-profile collaborations, as well as in-house manufacturing.

tokidoki, which borrows elements of Japanese "kawaii" (meaning exceptionally cute) and American street culture for its eye-popping artwork, all while infused with a European sensibility, hit the ground running first as a wholesale apparel brand, debuting at U.S. trade shows like MAGIC and Pool.

But the entrepreneurial spirit of the company did not keep tokidoki confined to one category long. Arguably, the products that raised the profile of the tokidoki brand and elevated it to the status we know today was thanks to its first collaboration with handbag and accessories company LeSportsac.

"I still remember it like it was yesterday," says Legno. "We designed a special, eye-catching box for LeSportsac and a few t-shirts that we printed on our nice printer–our printer was a major investment at the time!–and we just sent it over to them. It was so early in our business, we didn't even have a tokidoki email address."

But the timing was perfect, both for the brand to explode and in-market. Japanese-style art was having a major moment in fashion in the early 2000s, with everyone from Louis Vuitton partnering with artist Takashi Murakami for a celebrated range of luxury handbags, to Gwen Stefani's L.A.M.B. and its kawaii-infused apparel range hitting runways and airwaves. LeSportsac leapt at the tokidoki offering, creating an instrumental partnership for both brands and ultimately setting the tone for tokidoki's future business.

"The LeSportsac campaign was a great campaign–they did so much," says Mohajer. "Almost overnight, we became reactive as a company, having to triage the opportunity that began to pour in. The collaboration gave us great exposure on a massive platform."

The LeSportsac range was only intended to be a single season partnership. In actuality, it lasted nine.

The collaboration paved the way for future key partnerships, such as with Sanrio for now evergreen Hello Kitty offerings.

Kicked off in 2008, Sanrio tapped tokidoki to dress Hello Kitty in its kawaii creations in markets in the U.S., Japan and Brazil across items such as bags, accessories, vinyl toys, plush and more. The range further extended to a blind box collectible loyalty program, which made its way to 7-Eleven convenience stores in Hong Kong and Shell Malaysia, as well. That relationship continues





today with ongoing limited and seasonal collections.

Another early collaboration was with Marvel in 2009, and saw Legno re-imagine the iconic superheroes from the comic catalog in the tokidoki style.

And then there was Barbie.

"That was controversial and major," says Mohajer of the team up, which dressed Mattel's Barbie not only in tokidoki fashions, but dared to place tattoos across the icon's famous façade–a first for the doll.

"The response from mothers was incredible," says Mohajer. "They were saying, 'Finally! A doll that looks like me, with tattoos like I have!' It was a major shift."

Mattel tapped tokidoki for the collaboration, giving Legno almost total power to create a Barbie in his vision. Of course, Mohajer chose her nail color.

"Collaborations are a part of our DNA and something that we will always do as a company, even if just because it is so fun to work with other artistic talents, whatever they may be," says Mohajer.

Other partnerships have included Asics for its Onitsuka Tiger footwear collection; Sephora for a cosmetics and accessories range; Peanuts for apparel and accessories; renowned fashion designer Karl Lagerfeld for a broad swath of merchandise, from watches to vinyl figures featuring the impresario's beloved feline, Choupette; Major League Baseball for tokidoki-fied caps, apparel, bags, drinkware, plush, tech accessories and novelties; and JuJuBe, Clek and ZoLi for children's and infant accessories and hard goods and many more. More recently, tokidoki has been tapped to extend its brand to iconic Italian furniture manufacturer Kartell for its Louis Ghost chair and the Lou Lou children's chair, both of which launched in September; and Activision Blizzard, which will find tokidoki in a pairing for the "Overwatch" video game that kicked off at San Diego Comic-Con this summer. That partnership will continue to expand into 2018.



"We are proud to say that 95 percent of the collaborations we do are from companies that have reached out to us, including Lagerfeld, Peanuts, even Blizzard," says Legno. "We choose collaborators based on the companies we are interested in working with and the opportunity they offer to expand the variety of our fans. We believe tokidoki is an art brand, and not a brand with a single target, but rather anyone that appreciates a positive brand and good design."

Part of tokidoki's success in collaborations (and licensing as well–the brand counts more than 100 licensees on its roster with product in all major global markets) is its distinct aesthetic.

"When you see Simone's art, you instantly know it's his hand–that it is tokidoki," says Mohajer. "tokidoki is an interesting brand in that there is a unique artist behind it that is imagining these rich worlds, and there is something for everybody. Some of his work is mature and adult, and some of it is cute and kawaii, but appealing to children and 30-, 40- and 50-year-olds."

That "something for everybody" appeal is what has allowed the brand to continue to mature and grow.

The brand has multiple design iterations that tap into every sort of personality, from the Cactus Friends collection for the shy and vulnerable, to the 'Til Death Do Us Part range that's darker in tone. Salary Man, a newer character, is a riff on the suited up 9-to-5'er, while the Unicorno and Mermicorno collectibles pop up everywhere from Comic-Cons to cubicles. The Moofia collection, which centers on the character Mozzarella, the leader of the Moofia, and his posse of milk and snack friends, is one of Legno's earliest creations, and recently got a new spin-off, Moofia Breakfast Besties.

Not to miss out on the teen and tween consumer,



tokidoki has also launched Neon Star by tokidoki. The "little sister brand" isolates age-appropriate characters for cost-friendly items such as bedding, plush, toys, cosmetics, accessories and collectibles for retail at Claire's, Target and Toys 'R' Us.

Now tokidoki adopts a hybrid model for its licensing strategy, employing the mode in strategic categories and markets.

"For us, licensing is not designated by category," says Legno. "In certain countries such as China or Thailand, where we are developing retail, we need partners. For timing reasons, for merchandising reasons, for retail feeding reasons, we need to rely on licensees for local designs and to feed the local stores."

"But it changes, and it is ad-hoc, however, it is all intertwined," adds Mohajer. "In many markets, we sell both the product we manufacture as well as the product made by the local licensees in the same category. There's a convergence."

Current licensees include Aurora for plush (the U.S., the U.K., Europe and Southeast Asia), J. Franco for bedding (the U.S.), Blueprint for back-to-school and stationery (the U.K., Europe and the U.S.), Empire Apparel Group for apparel (Australia/New Zealand), Sestini for bags (South America), Dinasty for apparel (Russia), Chow Tai Fook for fine jewelry (China), World Look for apparel and retail stores (Korea), EZ-Link for metro cards (Singapore) and many more.

Leveraging licensing agents is also key to tokidoki's global growth, employing firms such as Versa Licensing in Mexico and Central America, Crazy Bell in Europe, We Are Bloom in the U.K., Brand4Rent in Russia and CIS, Haven Global in Australia and New Zealand, Agosin in South America, Pacific Licensing Studio in Southeast Asia and Charactopia Licensing in China, Korea and Taiwan.

The brand has a strong global retail presence, as well. In North America alone, tokidoki can be found in more than 16,500 doors at brick-and-mortar and e-commerce sites including Hot Topic, GameStop, Barnes & Noble, Toys 'R' Us, Claire's (also in Europe), Target, Walgreens and Bed, Bath & Beyond. In the U.S., branded shop-in-shops also appear in Los Angeles and Las Vegas.

"We've recently launched a shop-in-shop in Vegas with Kappa Toys, which is living on the promenade between the Flamingo and Linq hotels. These are curated pop-ups that are independent, but the next step for us will be to identify a national chain to partner with," says Mohajer. "These are great case studies that we'll continue to do."

Add to that placement in retailers like Primark, George, John Lewis, Bentalls, Harrods, Hamleys, JayJay's, EB Games and Zing! across the U.K., greater Europe and Australia/New Zealand, and the retail outlook is positive. Dedicated retail environments are also in the works for Thailand.

tokidoki is also bullish about China, where it currently has 10 branded stores, including a flagship Shanghai location at the IAPM Mall. More locations are aggressively in development and tracking to open throughout the country.

And then there are tokidoki hotels.

In partnership with master licensee Charactopia Licensing, the first tokidoki dedicated hotel will open next year, with the goal to grow the chain concept as quickly as possible. The boutique hotels will be targeted toward young adults and feature exclusive, tokidoki-themed décor. To say Legno is excited about this venture is an understatement.

"For us as a brand, and myself as a designer, it's going to be so fun to design this whole new presentation," he says. "The hotel will be more refined and up-market for the young professional traveler, but presented in a way that is very cool."

Content and animation is also a category that is on tokidoki's radar. Deals are in the works and hope to be announced soon, says Mohajer.

"There's a ton of opportunity there," she says.

Other products in-market include wine, slot machines and much, much more.

Truly, the sky is the limit for tokidoki, a brand that just a little over a decade ago was in its infancy.

"I always say that it's as though we're a start-up with a competitive advantage, even though we've been partners since 2003," says Mohajer. "We are still so far from where we see that we can be as a company. The amount of opportunity is exciting, and now it's about figuring out the best way to move forward, and what that entails for us." ©

