

Baby Love

Humming Along with NIT

You could be singing softly right now. Along with the Supremes on the dream-girl stage in your mind. Go ahead, take a musical moment. Now ... imagine you're a part of the Newborn, Infant and Toddler industry, where "Baby Love" could actually be your theme song. Yeah. After hearing from these industry leaders, you'll know where all this baby love is coming from.

Newborn, Infant and Toddler (NIT) is a business "that is inspired by the magical world of babies and young children," as Brent Hollowell, CEO of Little Me puts it. "People are having babies every day and it is nice to know that we can be a part of that special experience," says Elan Rolfe, President of Bon Béb . "There is an every-day need for our products," he says. Erwin Braha, President of Rumble Tumble concurs. He's inspired by "producing quality gift-giving and everyday-use garments as well as the challenge of being creative and designing

innovative product." Beside all this, the NIT industry seems to be friendly and fun. "It's a place where you can develop a nice business in a fun environment and be comfortable. That's what inspires me to stay," says Gary Simmons, President of Gerber Childrenswear.

Being part of the NIT industry also seems to have a positive affect on the big kids who run it. "Our focus around kids makes for a happy spot in every day," says Brent Hollowell. "That strong emotional connection with customers truly drives our creativity. Knowing that Little Me makes excellent products that fulfill the needs of babies makes our jobs so rewarding each and every day," he says. Elan Rolfe finds it rewarding to go into a store and see Bon B b  products on the shelf and Erwin Braha gets jazzed when he spots a child wearing a Rumble Tumble garment out on the street. "Being part of a great company like Rumble Tumble also inspires me to stay in this exciting industry," says Erwin.

Being part of a child's early life can also make the market relatively stable. As Jeanne Dullea, Vice President of Business Development, Gerber Childrenswear notes, "There are four million births every year. Our business can almost be recession-proof because generally speaking, if a parent doesn't have the money, they'll give up something for themselves and will spend on their children."



Gerber Childrenswear



You Must Have Been a Beautiful Baby

Gerber Childrenswear, Little Me, Bon Béb  and Rumble Tumble all make unique contributions to the NIT industry. Bobby Darin, take it away!

Gerber Childrenswear created the Onesies® brand one-piece underwear, which celebrates its 25th birthday this year. This instantly recognizable name could arguably be called the "Kleenex of the children's wear industry," but Jeanne Dullea puts it succinctly when she says, "You aren't buying a Onesie® unless you're buying a Onesie® from Gerber Childrenswear."

"We're one of the lifestyle brands in this category," says Gary Simmons. "We create our apparel so that when Mom buys it, it's good for her child, but it's also a product that's reasonably priced and is a key essential that she needs everyday." Whether it's daytime, feeding time, bath time or nighttime, "Mom has the ability to buy Gerber products for all parts of her young child's life."

Little Me is a leader in looking at specific product needs through the eyes of the child and the parent or gift-giver who cares about that child. "Little Me is one of the first national brands that helps to define how to design, package and market NIT products in innovative and successful ways," says Brent Hollowell. "We bring a lot of attention to the NIT market through consistent and strong market presence via product and advertising." Little Me also innovates new product designs and functions such as the cotton "stretchies" among others, and has a strong philanthropic record of giving back to the children, parents and communities that support them.

Bon Béb  likes to say, "We put the 'B' in 'Baby!'" Known for the highest quality layettes for baby, the company also produces desirable gift boxes for newborns and innovative gifts ideas from their Keepsake Collectables for baby's first year. As a result, Elan Rofe says, "We have challenged the integrity of our competitor's gift box products and compelled them to deliver higher quality products for the consumers."

Quality, more quality and the most quality is Rumble Tumble's claim to fame. "We offer only the best in fabric quality and value to our customers," says Erwin Braha. "Our designs are timeless, yet we also step out of the box when it comes to design, which caters to many different tastes."



up close

Baby, I Need Your Loving

As the Four Tops belt out this classic, what kind of challenges does the NIT industry face? Bon Béb  expresses them clearly. "Price, quality control and newness," says Elan Rofe.

Price and quality control seem to go hand-in-hand. "Price tolerance of consumers, adequate sourcing options, ever-changing duty/tariff structures and exchange rates, raw material costs - it all conspires against the NIT business where margins are at a premium to begin with," says Little Me's Brent Hollowell. "The price/value challenge at retail, where you have product that has improved, and price has to be maintained-" says Jeanne Dullea, "-that pressure is something that Gerber Childrenswear faces mostly because we're in the mass market," continues Gary Simmons.

Jeanne adds, "There is also a direct sourcing model that retailers are utilizing which is expanding their private label." Also, many retailers like to have their own exclusiveness "so that there's no carryover of the same product or brands from retailer to retailer," she says. Gary helps Gerber Childrenswear stay competitive by supporting their clear clean brand message and making sure "there's a point of difference and reason for being versus private label." To differentiate, Rumble Tumble's Erwin Braha thinks manufacturers have to be more innovative than ever. "Out of the box designing that fills niches is the way to go today," he says.

Gary Simmons is also inspired by the newness of the multi-cultural consumers nowadays, especially in the United States. "Gerber Childrenswear is attracting new customers with Hispanic, Black and Asian Americans being 44 to 46 percent of all new births." And Brent Hollowell compels the industry "to create a vibrant environment where the smartest and most creative people in business and design want to be involved," he says. "Everyone can play a part in this, but it will take leadership, creativity and true partnership between customers and suppliers in order for the NIT industry to thrive in coming years."

Baby, What a Big Surprise!

Little Me offers the perceptive insight that the media industry's intense attention and coverage on celebrities and their children focuses an even brighter spotlight on the NIT industry. "Today many people are consumed with what Brangelina got for their baby shower, what Tom and Katie's little Suri was wearing when coming home from the hospital and what Apple is wearing at her first birthday," says Brent Hollowell. "This coverage has helped to fuel the growth of the baby and children's wear market."

The adult fashion industry influences product ideas for Rumble Tumble. "The trickle down effect is the look most department store buyers are looking for," says Erwin Braha. "This idea has worked well for us especially in the toddler size range." The same influence holds true for Bon B b  and Gerber Childrenswear. "Also because of our focus on newborn, infant and toddler, the Consumer Product Safety Commission (CPSC) sleepwear regulations are a key factor that we watch," says Gary Simmons. Elan Rofe says, "As a one stop shop, Bon B b  wants to be able to offer a variety of looks, bodies and palettes, and we draw inspiration for our products from many different markets."

By the way, does anyone remember that it is Chicago singing our song?



Rumble Tumble
Childrenswear





Bon Bébé
Childrenswear

I've Got You, Babe

Cue Sonny and Cher: Brent Hollowell points out that there are very many NIT companies, but there are fewer and fewer customers to sell to today. As our soundtrack fast forwards five years from now, what could retailer consolidation mean for NIT? "Finding a niche and carving it out is the challenge," says Elan Rofe. "There are so many people out there with good ideas. The key factor is being able to execute and get them to market." Gary Simmons believes that the very process of consolidation, both in retail and wholesale, exposes opportunity for the right entrepreneur to go in and fill those niches created by the loss of these giants. "There is an opportunity for local and regional retailers to fill new needs in product and service that aren't being filled today," he says. "Our view is that there are categories such as hanging product and numerous other licensed areas that have not been focused on to date with the Gerber brand that we believe can give us substantial growth and presence in the marketplace." Erwin Braha sees many licensing deals that are not your traditional type licenses. "I think you will see a lot of famous artists and authors translating their work on garments," he says.

Brent Hollowell hopes the NIT industry sees solid growth year over year. "This growth is driven not only by apparel," he says. "Over the past few years, the NIT industry has expanded its scope with a focus on innovative hard goods such as cribs, strollers, high chairs, bedding and accessories." Brent sees success in NIT brands that are more lifestyle focused to meet the complete needs of the consumer. "Any type of convenience service that

helps in making life easier for Mom would come into focus," add Jeanne Dullea.

Jeanne also notes that if a retailer can get Mom into the store at the beginning of her child's life, they may keep her through the child's 18 years "as long as you build a loyalty with Mom," she says. "The stores have finally realized this over time, and have focused more on our category," continues Gary Simmons, "and we think that will continue."

Gerber Childrenswear, Little Me, Bon Bébé and Rumble Tumble all sense the impact that the Internet has on the NIT business, especially in retail. Gary Simmons says, "As we have more technically savvy consumers reaching the age where they're starting to have children, buying online will become a bigger and bigger part of our business." Jeanne Dullea pursues this even further. "The Internet could even rival the brick and mortar stores in strength," she says.

"Ultimately, brands that expand their mix at the same time they drive true creativity and superior design will most likely be the major success stories," offers Little Me's Brent Hollowell as a coda.

Can you just hear Linda Ronstadt crooning, "Ooo-Ooo-Ooo, Baby, Baby...?"

-written by Janet Gray Muniz 

up close