



**Level:** Grades 4-7

**About the Author**

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**Lesson Plan**

**Creating a Marketing Frenzy**

**Overview**

In this lesson, students look at the ways in which consumer frenzy develops around a particular product. They begin by brainstorming the characteristics that make a toy a "must-have" possession; and discuss and reflect on the "Tickle Me Elmo" phenomenon as an example of this sort of marketing occurrence. Older students discuss the ethical issues associated with consumerism, and how they respond to "gotta have it" pressures from peers and the media.

**Learning Outcomes**

Students will demonstrate:

- an understanding of the ways in which marketers use hype to sell products
- an awareness of how consumers respond to marketing hype
- awareness of the elements that make a product desirable

**Preparation and Materials**

- Photocopy the student handout *Tickle Me Elmo: Using the Media to Create a Marketing Sensation* (educational handout)
- For examples of fads and collectibles over the past few decades, teachers might want to visit the *Bad Fads* Web site, [www.badfads.com](http://www.badfads.com)

**Procedure**

- Ask students to recall any "must-have" toys over the past few years. (*Answers might include Beanie Babies, Pokemon cards, Sony Playstation, Furbies etc.*)
- What made these toys so popular? Why did so many children want them? (Write the students' suggestions on the board.)
- From this list, create a profile of the characteristics of a "gotta have it" toy. This list might include:
  - the "cool" factor – this toy is considered to be very cool
  - supply and demand – if it's difficult to get hold of, those who have it feel really special
  - media promotion of a toy, either through advertising, or programs and articles that talk about how popular it is
  - cool celebrities promoting or using the toy
  - a "buzz" about this product among the kids themselves
- Do you think that the time of year is important in building excitement around a particular toy? When are you most likely to have a consumer frenzy around a toy? Why might this happen?

- For younger students, summarize the main ideas from the student handout *Tickle Me Elmo: Using the Media to Create a Marketing Sensation*. Have older students read the backgrounder and summarize the main ideas as a class. Make sure that students note:
  - the role played by celebrities such as Rosie O'Donnell
  - the fact that it was close to Christmas
  - how keeping only a small supply on hand feeds the frenzy
  - the fact that people were willing to spend a great deal of money on a doll they hadn't even seen
  - the fact that Tickle Me Elmo was a toy intended for very young children, who were unlikely to watch TV themselves – so in this case it was the parents, rather than the kids, who fed that particular frenzy. What might make parents act in such a manner?

Ask older students:

- Do you think your parents are susceptible to this kind of consumer frenzy? What kinds of things might they be frantic to get?
- In your opinion, how long does a consumer frenzy last? What are some indicators that a toy might be losing its appeal?
- What is the difference between a fad and a trend? Provide examples of toys that have been fads, and toys that represent a trend (as in the difference between toys that are "one-hit wonders," and toys that inspire imitation and stand the test of time).
- Does this sort of frenzy apply to other things, such as music, celebrities or movies?
- What is the downside of consumer frenzies? What is the problem about putting so much emphasis on *things* and what we own?
- Can you do anything to avoid getting caught up this? What would you suggest to a friend?

### **Activities**

Using the suggesting activities on the *Tickle Me Elmo: Using the Media to Create a Marketing Sensation* activity sheet,

- Have students devise a marketing strategy for a new toy that involves arousing media attention.
- Investigate other frenzied toy-buying fads, and find out how they got started.

### **Evaluation**

- Marketing strategies and fad research.

### **Related MNet Resources**

- *Teachable Moment: Christmas Commercialism*

### **Mnet Recommends Reading, Viewing, Surfing**

- Bad Fads Museum  
www.badfads.com

## Tickle Me Elmo: Using the Media to Create a Marketing Sensation

### Background

The story of how a slow-selling, expensive doll become the must-have item of Christmas 1996, is a fascinating look at how the media can inspire a consumer-buying frenzy.

Tickle Me Elmo – a fuzzy red doll patterned after a Sesame Street muppet – went from languishing on store shelves to creating department store stampedes and making millions for its manufacturer Tyco Toys – all because a shrewd promotion involving talk show host Rosie O'Donnell and a little luck.

It all started in July 1996, when the marketing team sent a Tickle Me Elmo doll to the one-year old son of a U.S. talk show host and comedian Rosie O'Donnell and another 200 to the show's producer. Nothing happened until October when O'Donnell decided to pull an old Groucho Marx gag on her unsuspecting guests. Every time a guest said the word "wall", she threw a Tickle Me Elmo into the audience.

Because O'Donnell's core audience is at-home moms with preschool-age children, the stunt proved to be a marketer's dream-come-true. Retail sales of the doll jumped and they received a second boost in November when *Today* show co-host Bryant Gumbel held an Elmo doll on his lap throughout most of the show.

In the weeks leading up to Christmas, Tickle Me Elmo dolls were in such scarce supply that ads cropped up in newspapers asking for as much as \$2000 per doll.

"Tickle Me Elmo is a study in mob mentality", says Stephen Sandberg, a U.S. toy buyer. "People today are looking for Elmo without even knowing what it looks like".

### Activities and Ideas

- Devise a marketing strategy for a new toy that will involve arousing media attention.
- Investigate other frenzied toy-buying fads and find out how those trends got started.

