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Office Space: Robert Pasin, Radio Flyer

In world of fast-evolving technology, 'chief wagon officer' Robert Pasin keeps little red wagon current, relevant and rolling

July 23, 2012 | By Kristin Samuelson, Chicago Tribune reporter



Occupying the office of his grandfather and father could leave Robert Pasin steeped in nostalgia. But the third-generation "chief wagon officer" of Chicago-based Radio Flyer has "mixed feelings about that word."

"Nostalgia comes from two Greek words: 'nostos,' which means 'home(coming),' and 'algia,' 'an ache or a pain.' So it's an aching for home, or remembering a time from long ago, usually in an idealized form," Pasin said, sitting in his second-story corner office overlooking a 21-foot-tall Radio Flyer wagon, the world's largest, on the headquarters' front lawn in the city's Belmont Cragin neighborhood.

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"Sometimes, nostalgia can be stuck in the past, best days behind you, and I always felt like we can have this nostalgic feeling with our brand and also be very current, vibrant and dynamic."

The Pasins have managed to keep the iconic brand rolling for 95 years, refreshing the little red wagon with bells and whistles such as soft seats and umbrellas, and adding tricycles and scooters to the mix.

"When a parent is pulling a kid in a wagon, it's actually transporting that parent to their childhood and feeling like they're connected to the great things like playing outside or being taken somewhere by someone they loved," Pasin said. "The real power of the brand is it transports people both physically and emotionally."

Antonio Pasin, Robert's grandfather and founder of Radio Flyer, began doing that with the first wagon model, the Liberty Coaster, which he named for the Statue of Liberty. He saw Lady Liberty upon his arrival to the U.S. from Italy when he was 16. In 1930, he changed the name to Radio Flyer to reflect the "high-tech buzzword" of the day and Charles Lindbergh's 1927 crossing of the Atlantic Ocean, Pasin said.

"That fact that the name doesn't quite make sense with the product is one of the powerful aspects of the brand," Pasin said.

But it stuck when Chicago-based art deco designer Alfonso Iannelli built a 45-foot wood-and-plaster exhibit of a "Coaster Boy" in his wagon for the 1933 Century of Progress World's Fair in Chicago. Miniature models of the sculpture are scattered throughout Radio Flyer's headquarters, and small metal plates engraved with the "Coaster Boy" are built into walls and doors in Pasin's office and around the building.

Still, Radio Flyer is firmly in the here and now, creating products that speak to a more modern style of play, including scooters equipped to accommodate MP3 players — something girls in focus groups enjoyed — and those that have added suspension to exaggerate bouncing, aimed at boys. Both will hit shelves in a month, Pasin said, accompanied by TV advertising, a first for Radio Flyer.

"We've been in scooters since the '30s, but we've been more into three-wheel scooters for little kids, so consumers don't know we're in this category as much as we want them to," Pasin said, adding that a TV commercial will point out the new, fun features better than packaging or a display model.

But store shelves matter to Radio Flyer. Pasin and members of his 70-member staff set up new products and packaging in Radio Flyer's "staging area" as they will appear in Target, Toys R Us and Wal-Mart, its three main retailers, to see how its toys stack up against those of competitors and to make sure the company is communicating the right message, Pasin said.

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"When I first started here, any time we'd look at packaging, we'd be in a meeting room," Pasin said. "This is where it happens, at the retail shelf. This is how consumers are making the decision. Compared to the Little Tikes Trike, is it really selling well?"

Pasin, 43, moved into his dad's job and office in 1997. He had it remodeled a few years later, and today it is a far cry from his grandfather's old work space. A floor-to-ceiling wooden bookshelf stands behind Pasin's regal, semicircle desk, occupying the once-empty office corner. The husband and father of three proudly displays photos and handmade gifts from his children on the shelves. Cream-colored curtains cover the windows, at one time framed by long, plaid drapes. Just underneath, on some new shelves, he displays an antique keepsake clock that belonged to his grandfather.

His trinkets are red — and only red. They include paper clips stashed in a miniature Radio Flyer wagon and peanut M&Ms in a bowl on a small meeting table placed near the door for impromptu meetings. On a nearby leather sofa sits a 7-year-old rainbow plush toy, which Pasin says gives employees "something they can hold" when he has to deliver bad news.

In 2009, Pasin decided Radio Flyer's headquarters needed the same attention to inspire staff and keep the brand fresh and relevant.

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