

## Toys for a green generation

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By Jonathan Birchall in New York

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Laurie Hyman had a busy time at this month's New York Toy Show, the US industry's biggest annual event, with more than 1,200 exhibitors. Her start-up company, Green Toys, sells toy teacups, bowls and gardening tools that are made in California from recycled plastic milk containers, and sold in boxes made from recycled cardboard.

"We're getting a lot of interest – from big retailers, from small retailers, from everyone," she says, showing off a jar holding the white shredded plastic used to make the toys.

Across the exhibition hall, Louise and Tim Scott were promoting their line of Anamalz wood and rope animal figures, under a big sign saying "Environmental Toys". Based in Australia, they launched the company last year and were at the show for the first time.

With their environment-friendly displays, Green Toys and Anamalz – both founded by young couples with children – were hardly typical of the toy show, which was awash with coloured plastic and synthetic fur.

But some in the industry see them as the sign of a coming transformation – mirroring changes seen in the US personal and household care industries where small entrepreneurial companies such as Burt's Bees, Seventh Generation or Tom's of Maine have taken a lead over the past decade in responding to consumer desire for more environmentally sustainable products.

"Two years ago I didn't hear anything about environmental sustainability issues," says Mark Randall, head of toys and baby products at Amazon, a major toy buyer. "Now I think the industry is at the beginning of that change process."

"I think we're at the beginning of a sea change," says Ed Schmults, chief executive of FAO Schwartz, New York's most famous toy store. Mr Schmults says that when he joined the company after a career that included working for Patagonia, the outdoor clothing company, he was taken aback by the toy industry's lack of awareness of environmental issues.

FAO Schwartz stores now list "product safety and environment" as among the five qualities they want the toys they sell to reflect.

"I think the toy business has been out to lunch on the environmental thing," says Mr Schmults. "If there's something positive to come out of the China recalls, it is that this is now getting much more attention."

Last year leading US toy manufacturers including Mattel and RC2 recalled millions of toys over unacceptably high lead levels in paint – while more than 4m children's crafts sets (known as Bindeez in Australia and Aqua Dots in the US) were recalled because of the presence of a chemical that became toxic when swallowed.

In other sectors, such as the household cleaning products industry, similar real or perceived risks from chemical ingredients have been a factor in driving demand for green products.

Last year's toy recalls were seized upon by US consumer activist groups concerned about potential threats from even permitted levels of chemicals. In December, the California-based Ecology Center launched a website, [www.healthytoys.org](http://www.healthytoys.org), that provides parents with independent test results on the chemical content of toys. The Toy Industry Association dismissed the findings, saying in a statement that "the mere presence of inaccessible substances in trace amounts does not mean a product is harmful".

But Mr Schmults says parents do not want to hear about even legally allowed trace quantities of chemicals such as lead, arsenic and cadmium in the chip board used in many toys. “As a parent should I be worried about that? I don’t know, but if someone said [it] has zero levels [of such chemicals] that would get my attention.”

Leading US retailers are beginning to respond to consumer pressures over the use of poly-vinyl chloride, which has been the target of environmentalist campaigns since the 1990s.

While the US chemical industry argues that there are no significant health risks from PVC, the three largest US general retailers, [Wal-Mart](#), [Target](#) and [Sears](#), have said they will work to eliminate the substance – commonly used in the toy industry – from their packaging and own-brand children’s and baby products. Sears, for instance, set itself the goal of “sourcing bio-based polymers that are sustainably sourced, have higher recycled content, and can be reused, recycled or composted”.

Mr Randall at Amazon points out that these environmental health concerns are already shaping toy marketing in Europe, which is ahead of the US on consumer awareness of environmental issues.

This was evident at the New York Toy Fair, where Haba, the German toy maker, prominently advertised its products as “100 per cent water-based non-toxic stains” and with “no lead paint”. HaPe International, a German-owned toy company which distributes the Anamalz line and entered the North American market in 2003, proudly displayed trailblazing products that include a “fast and eco-friendly” toy car line – coloured with water-based paints and made from bamboo.

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