

Child's play By Bonnie Gretzner

Photo, video products use digital technology to give kids a starring role

Cartoon characters are beloved to young children, in both books and videos. Companies have capitalized on this interest to give children an interactive experience with their favorite TV and movie stars. Their products make kids the star of the show – and also offer a cherished, one-of-a-kind gift.

“We are noticing the greater use of licensed characters in photo-related products,” says **Marc Jaffe**, CEO of **PixFusion LLC**, New York, N.Y. PixFusion creates audio and photo personalized video products and services, and creates and sells children's branded video/DVD products through its **Kideo** brand at **www.kideo.com**.

“It makes sense for numerous reasons,” Jaffe says, “not the least

of which is providing instant consumer recognition and ongoing merchandising and promotional hooks, since there are often brand and license-related activities going on in the market, such as movie releases.”

The **Sequoia Media Group LC** (SMG), Draper, Utah, has a similar offering. The company has an agreement with **Warner Bros. Consumer Products** to feature “The Polar Express” licensed media in its aVinci (**www.avincimedia.com**) photo movie templates. The Sequoia patent-pending technology transforms digital photos into themed DVD movie productions, posters, and photo books.

The product was introduced during the 2007 holiday season in select markets, and showcased user photos in scenes from the movie. “The Polar Express,” based on the children's book by **Chris Van Allsburg**, was also made into a movie.

The product, says **Cody Dingus**, Marketing & Communications manager, Sequoia Media Group, has already proved popular with consumers and retailers. The company cited one customer who said, “My kids were amazed and captivated when they saw their photos alongside ‘The Polar Express’ characters. They thought they were real movie stars.”



PixFusion enables children to star in their own cartoon adventures. Spider-Man and Dora the Explorer are two of the most popular.

A simple solution

Dingus says the goal of the aVinci product line is to give women a reason to take and use more photos by providing new products every season and new, popular media titles throughout the year – not just at birthdays and holidays.

“Our goal is to inspire the photo mom to easily make personal productions that capture all life's memories, from everyday moments to lifetime events. We also create ‘new’ reasons by creating themed popular media templates based on current movies or pop culture.”

Dingus says SMG is currently in discussions with several licensing sources, including all the major motion picture studios, about licensing rights to create personal photo movies with movie titles similar to “The Polar Express.” SMG is exploring children's and family movie titles, cartoon characters, video games, major sports franchise licenses, and more.

Dingus says one reason the videos are popular is they offer a simple solution for a unique gift. SMG provides the entire template – the parent simply has to add photos. They don't need the skill to create a product from scratch – nor do they need to take the time.

The Amazing Alphabet Adventures books from Shutterfly, designed for children up to age 6, personalize content with the child's name.



“When given the choice to ‘make it yourself’ or choose a prebuilt themed production, women choose the prebuilt personal production 95 of 100 times,” says Dingus.

Reaching the market

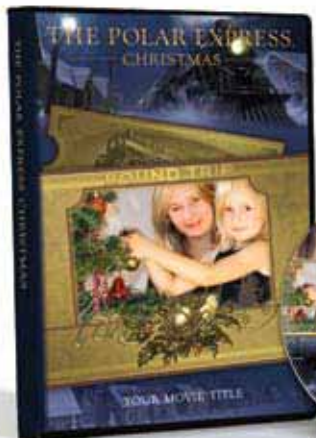
Similarly, the patented technology from PixFusion enables children to star in their own cartoon adventures with some of the most popular current characters, including **Dora the Explorer**, **Care Bears**, **Spider-Man**, and **Barney**, of which Dora and Spider-Man are the most popular, says Jaffe.

The DVDs generally range from \$29.95 to \$39.95, and the company has sold more than 600,000 units. “We are just beginning to penetrate the mass market and photo channels,” says Jaffe.

PixFusion is marketing the product in various ways, Jaffe says. The product has won honors such as the **iParenting Media Awards**, which provides legitimacy and credibility for parents, he says. iParenting focuses on parents through online, print, and broadcast channels.

“We have advertised on websites like **Nick Jr.**, which targets moms,” he says. “We have done cross-marketing promotions with **Hasbro** and **Marvel**. We have done email blasts with sites populated by moms and grandparents such as **KodakGallery.com** and **Grandparents.com.**”

The product is distributed in many online, kiosk, and offline environments, as well as mass merchants, drugstores, and photo specialty outlets populated by families, moms, and grandparents, he adds. Those sites include **Ritzpix.com**, **Wal-Mart**, **USA Drug**, **H-E-B**, **Reasor's**, **Scholastic.com**, **MyPhotoAlbum.com**, **Nationwide/Giggle**



Sequoia Media Group features “The Polar Express” licensed media in its aVinci photo movie templates.

Prints, **QVC/QVC.com**, and catalogs such as **Personal Creations** and **Johnson Smith**.

A personal book

In addition to videos, parents can create personalized photo books with their kids' favorite characters.

For instance, **Shutterfly Inc.**, Redwood City, Calif., last June acquired **Make it About Me!**, a publishing company that produces customized children's books, including “My Adventure on Sesame Street” and “My Amazing Alphabet Adventures.” The adventure books integrate the child's picture into the illustrations and storyline. The books require only a single photo, and Shutterfly says parents can create an engaging, personalized, and professionally bound hardcover book within minutes to share with their children.

Says **Jeffrey Housenbold**, president and CEO of Shutterfly, “We're very pleased to offer parents compelling, personalized stories featuring their child with beloved characters.”

The acquisition, the first by Shutterfly in 2007, augments its personal publishing platform with the addition of “Sesame Street” to a growing line of licensed content and themed characters, which also includes “Thomas and Friends,” “Clifford, the Big Red Dog,” and “Angelina Ballerina.” These character-themed photo books are available exclusively at Shutterfly. An 8-by-8-inch, 20-page book starts at \$34.99; and the 12-by-12-inch, 20-page book starts at \$59.99.

In “My Adventure on Sesame Street,” for example, the child will star alongside Elmo, Big Bird, Grover, and friends on a personalized journey to find the missing letter of the day, based on the first letter of the child's name (such as, “Mia will help her ‘Sesame Street’ friends find the letter ‘M’ for the great Letter of the Day parade”). The 40-page book measures 8.25-by-10.25 inches and is \$39.99. The book is featured at most **Target** stores.

“My Amazing Alphabet Adventures” is similar. Designed for children ages 1 through 6, the 54-page book measures 8.75-by-9.25 inches and also is \$39.99.

A Shutterfly spokeswoman tells PMA magazine, “Our Children's Adventure Books are very popular. We hear from our customers that they love the fact they can make a personalized gift in as little as 5 minutes. They've gained in momentum since we launched last year and recently increased in popularity again with the addition of new characters.” ■