



S.A. company touts toys as 'brain-drain breaks'

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Many bosses throughout corporate America have long tolerated cubicles adorned with stuffed animals, squeeze balls and the occasional Slinky or Magic 8-Ball.

But office workers' tastes have evolved to include office voodoo kits and employee action figures. That hasn't hurt business at KlearGear.com, which moved to San Antonio from near Minneapolis 18 months ago.

The company sells a large assortment of "geek toys," including a \$54.99 computer-controlled foam missile launcher that is one of its bestsellers, said Will Bermender, company president and chief geek.

The USB Missile Launcher "is a state-of-the-art deterrent against those bored and aggravating individuals that loiter around your desk when there's nothing better for them to do," according to KlearGear.com's Web site.

Taking time to play in the office relieves stress and ignites creativity, Bermender said.

"These toys allow brain-drain breaks throughout the day," he said.



(Helen L. Montoya/Express-News)

KlearGear President Will Bermender brings playtime to the cubicle set — and stuffed animals won't do these days. One of the gadget-seller's hottest items is a radio-controlled foam missile launcher, billed as a 'deterrent against those bored and aggravating individuals that loiter around your

desk when there's nothing else for them to do.'

MORE INFORMATION

- [KlearGear.com](#)
- [ThinkGeek.com](#)

KlearGear.com sells 1,300 items, including the bladerunner indoor helicopter, levitating picture frame, caffeinated lip balm, computer-powered lava lamp, office voodoo kit and an assortment of office worker dolls housed in different cubicles with themes from information technology worker to motivational speaker. It's all about kids play in the workplace.

KlearGear, with 12 employees locally and warehouse operations in Dallas, is not the only company in the office toy marketplace. Thinkgeek.com also does a brisk business, and it has an entire category devoted to "Cube Warfare." In fact, Google.com lists 121 million entries under "office toys."

Some of KlearGear.com's best customers are human resources and information technology departments, Bermender said. They buy all kinds of toys for their employees, from dolls to Bug Out Bob, a stress squeeze toy popular for several decades, he said.

"Toys also make great thank-you gifts," said Susan Vobejda, vice president and career expert at Yahoo HotJobs.

Last year, Yahoo HotJobs began distributing a "super recruiter" action figure to its customers at trade shows. They liked the toys so much that the company doubled its order this year. "People love action figures," Vobejda said.

The trend is that creative workplaces have more toys, more games and more fun, said Jennifer Berman, managing director of CBIZ Human Capital Services, based in Chicago. "Less creative, more conservative employers may discourage things they see as nonproductive."

But a new category of workplace toys called "office warfare," which includes missile launchers, fake hand grenades and rubber band machine gun shooters, might create a hostile environment. On top of that, harassment and discrimination complaints can result from employees bringing inappropriate toys that are too risqué or stereotypical into the workplace.

Toys are OK as long as they don't infringe on the sensibilities of anyone else, experts say.

"You don't want to create a work environment that's an 'Animal House,'" Berman said, referencing the 1978 movie about a college fraternity.

Some games and toys provide team building in the office, but toys that fire objects at co-workers have gone over the top, said Stevanne Auerbach, a San Francisco toy expert known as Dr. Toy.

"You are going beyond stress relieving and the usual gags of bubbleheads and fun things that are conversational into another category," she said. "There is an issue of when is this appropriate to play."

Despite the concerns, Auerbach forecasts that KlearGear.com will become successful selling its office toys because they're what people want.

KlearGear.com is betting on that. It now ships more than 50,000 orders annually and gets more than

500,000 unique visitors to its Web site each month, Bermender said.

"It's just a lot of fun," he said.

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