Holiday toy shopping is a dilemma amid recall scares

by Jennifer Davies

It's a holiday tradition for Marcus and Marian Ordonez to hit the early sale at Toys "R" Us to buy gifts for their four children, and they saw no reason this year should be different.

NOT PLAYING AROUND - A Thomas the Tank Engine toy set at Geppetto's toy store in San Diego momentarily occupies 16-month-old Abby Levy. Despite high-profile recalls of Chinese-made toys, many parents are still out looking for Christmas gifts. CNS Photo by Earnie Grafton. Despite recalls of 21 million Chinese-made toys, the couple said that they have no plans to change their buying patterns. They've been vigilant about keeping track of recalls, and in any case there are few alternatives, they said.

"Unfortunately, most of them are from there," Marian Ordonez said. "There's just no way around it," her husband added.

With more than 80 percent of toys made in China, according to the Toy Industry Association, parents are facing a dilemma. On one hand are concerns that more toys could turn out to have defects, such as the recalled items that contained dangerous magnets or high levels of lead. On the other, with Christmas just weeks away, no one wants Santa to come empty-handed.

"If you have a kid under the age of 7, the only country of origin they care about is whether it's from the North Pole," said Chris Byrne, an independent toy consultant.

The stakes are high for the toy industry, which has been battling flat sales amid increased competition from electronics and video games. While toy sales rose by 2 percent last year to $22.5 billion, video game sales jumped 35 percent to $14.4 billion.

Retailers and manufacturers have worked to allay parents' fears with increased testing and rapid response to

recalls. For instance, in November the chief executive officer of Toys "R" Us sent a mass e-mail to customers, pledging to work vigilantly to ensure that the toys on shelves are safe.

Still, for some parents that might not be enough, said Britt Beemer, chairman of America's Research Group, a research firm in Charleston, S.C. A recent survey by the group found that almost 22 percent of parents said they would buy something else instead of toys this year.

The survey also found that parents want more information about the toys they buy, with 42 percent saying they would walk out of a store if they couldn't get their questions answered.

Because of that fact, Beemer said, large retailers that are understaffed could see a significant impact on their business.

"Will the consumer trust them enough and go back and shop?" he asked. "That's the $64 billion question."

Ovi Para, 41, was waiting outside a San Diego Toys "R" Us to buy Legos, both because his son likes them and because they're mostly made in European countries.

"I don't really buy anything from China," Para said.

Ross Glickman, CEO of Urban Retail Properties, a retail management firm, said the big winners in the toy market could be small, independent retailers because consumers often view them as more conscientious.

"The consumer looks at the mass-market retailers and wonders, 'Have they taken everything (bad) off the shelf?'" he said.

Brian Miller, owner of the San Diego County toy-store chain Geppetto's, has already seen a spike in business in the wake of toy recalls. Sales growth is in double digits for November and is almost double what Miller originally forecast, he said.

While his business is booming, Miller said he has his own concern regarding the toy recalls - being able to get his hands on enough product. Playmobil, a European toy company, told Miller to stock up as its toys were in peak demand as consumers turn away from Chinese-made toys.

Maple Landmark Woodcraft, which makes wooden toys in America, has so much new business that it takes as long as three weeks for it to fill orders. In the past, Maple Landmark would fill orders in as little as three days, Miller said.

Jonathan Samet, publisher of The Toy Insider, said he sees no issue with supply and called much of the concern over toys made in China overblown.

"Toys are not going to stop being made in China. I can tell you that," Samet said.

Nicole Thornton of San Diego said the toy recalls have made her more careful about the toys she buys for her children, ages 10, 5 and 3. While she now avoids toys with smaller pieces, Thornton has no problem buying Chinese-made toys.

"I don't look at it like, 'Oh, is this made in China or the USA?' I just look at what's going into them," Thornton said as she stood by her shopping cart, filled with such Christmas toys as Dora the Explorer's Magic Castle and Power Ranger figurines.

Byrne said the media frenzy over recalls is making parents unnecessarily fearful.

"I feel bad for parents who are really scared, because being scared is not really justified," he said.

Recently, however, consumer groups complained that despite the recalls and new testing, toys with unacceptable levels of lead were still on the shelves. The Center for Environmental Health in Oakland, Calif., said that of 100 toys it bought recently, nine contained lead above the legal limits.

Still, Brian Goodman said he's pretty confident that most toys are safe. He was shopping for Thomas the Tank Engine toys at Geppetto's recently, even though some of the pieces had been recalled early in the year.

"I know they wouldn't have the recalled ones on the shelf," Goodman said.

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