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New toy in time for the holidays

By Helene Newberg

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For an established player in the building toy market, a new product takes at minimum a year and a half to reach the market.

Yet, already attracting attention, set up at South Station promoting awareness of the KIDS-IN-NEED program sponsored by South Station Equity Office, Aerobloks(tm) have gone from concept to market in just about one year.

Conceived and designed by Lexington inventor Dick Liou, the building blocks are the first in an anticipated line of products from Tinker Minds.

"Tinker Minds is a corporation we set up to develop products that improve peoples' lifestyles, using ergonomic design principles to help people do things faster, better, and that make life more fun," said Liou.

Aerobloks are large, inflatable squares and triangles of colorful, see-through, heavy duty vinyl. The blocks can be assembled in an array of designs and are designed to maintain stability even when built into tall structures.

Inspiration for the toy came from Liou's own children. Watching them build forts from sheets, pillows, tables, chairs, and anything they could find, Liou got an idea.

"To me it looked horrendous, to them the forts were wonderful. After a few days of looking at them and having to sit on the floor to eat my dinner, I thought, 'I love you guys to death but there has to be something better,'" he said.

Liou set out to find a better way. Analyzing the current range of large-scale building products, he came up with what he's betting will best the competitors. After three months of market research, Liou identified a few major areas he could improve on, including storage, material safety, and construction speed.

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"Some of those products take hours and kids get bored. I chose inflatable vinyl, engineered like other inflatable furniture popular with kids, because this thing has to be tough,," he said. It won't take pokes with sharp objects, he added, but it will take some punishment. According to a press release, the product will withstand 145 pounds of sitting weight.

The toy went through eight design revisions.

"The peeling strength for the Velcro took a month to perfect," he said.

Aerobloks are designed for a 6-year-old-size child. Liou made sure that an most kids could work with the block connections, but those connections would also be strong enough to be built up tall, crawled through, leaned or sat on, and still maintain their integrity.

Demonstrating Aerobloks at the recent National Association for the Education for Young Children conference in Anaheim, Calif., Liou attracted a lot of positive attention. Aerobloks engage children's confidence, social skills, design and project management abilities.

"Repeated success in building large structures increases their confidence and self esteem. It gets them to plan and design, working together with other children to communicate, negotiate, and manage the project. For a child to be able to quickly build something larger than him or herself that looks and feels good is a major confidence builder," said Liou.

The toy industry represents a new frontier for Liou, who has extensive product management experience in telecom, high-tech, and banking. He also has an ergonomics degree from Tufts.

"I'm familiar with every aspect of work in a corporation. This has taken a lot of work, but a bad day with this is better than a good day in a corporation," he said.

For more information, visit <http://www.aerobloks.com/>

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