

2. Projects such as these often win prizes and even sabbaticals for their authors. Prizes help quality storytelling get recognized, but they also have been the occasion for scandal. On balance, are awards good for the profession?
3. How might the *Enquirer's* coverage serve as a template for other news organizations that want to start doing the same type of beat coverage in their communities?

## CASE 6-F

### GOLDIEBLOX: BUILDING A FUTURE ON THEFT

SCOTT BURGESS

*Wayne State University*

For more than 100 years, boys' toys have included Legos, Erector Sets, and Lincoln Logs—toys that help them build math and engineering skills. Girls, by contrast, played with tiaras, Barbies, and ballet shoes. Debbie Sterling, the founder of the Oakland-based toy company GoldieBlox, sought to change this dichotomy. Sterling started GoldieBlox in 2012, the first girls-only toy company that also develops computer apps and publishes books that focus on keeping girls interested in science (GoldieBlox, 2017).

GoldieBlox wants to “disrupt the pink aisle in toy stores globally” and challenge gender stereotypes “with the world’s first girl engineering character,” according to the company’s website. The company began with \$280,000 raised in a Kickstarter campaign after many people were inspired by the company’s mission (Sterling, 2013). For the next year, GoldieBlox received a small amount of favorable press as a fun, feminist-oriented business with strong ideals.

That changed in November 2013, when the company released the YouTube video “Girls.” In the video, three girls get bored watching a television show in which girls in pink taffeta dresses dance on a sofa. So, with a revised version of the Beastie Boys 1987 song “Girls” playing in the background, they grab work belts, safety goggles, and tools and build an elaborate contraption using many of the pink toys in their house.

The video received more than 8 million views on YouTube and 100,000 shares on Facebook in a few days. The company and its founder were featured on news programs, magazines, and newspapers around the world. While the privately held company does not release sales reports, some estimates suggest that sales tripled immediately following

the video. Sterling claimed the company sold every toy it made during the 2013 Christmas season (Li, 2014).

One group, however, remained disappointed in the video: the Beastie Boys. GoldieBlox had not sought permission to use the song, and the band previously had never allowed its music to be used in commercials. Further, when Beastie Boy Adam Yauch died in 2012, he specified in his will that “in no event may my image or name or any artistic property created by me be used for advertising purposes” (Cubarrubia, 2012).

The two remaining band members, Michael Diamond and Adam Horovitz, approached GoldieBlox about the use of their music in the advertisement, and the toymaker responded with a lawsuit claiming fair use.

“As creative as it is,” Diamond and Horovitz said in a statement, “make no mistake, your video is an advertisement that is designed to sell a product, and long ago, we made a conscious decision not to permit our music and/or name to be used in product ads. When we tried to simply ask how and why our song Girls had been used in your ad without our permission, YOU sued US” (*New York Times*, 2013).

GoldieBlox, now facing a legal and public relations backlash to a dying man’s wishes, took down the video and issued the following statement:

Although we believe our parody video falls under fair use, we would like to respect his wishes and yours. Since actions speak louder than words, we have already removed the song from our video. In addition, we are ready to stop the lawsuit as long as this means we will no longer be under threat from your legal team. (Michaels, 2013)

The Beastie Boys filed suit against GoldieBlox, claiming copyright infringement (Michaels, 2013). In March 2014, GoldieBlox settled with the Beastie Boys. The company issued an apology and agreed to pay a portion of its proceeds to the Beastie Boys, which in turn would donate that money to charities that furthered development of girls learning science and math (Itzkoff, 2014). (The original video is still available on YouTube.)

Furthermore, the negative publicity from the legal battle with the Beastie Boys also may have put a brighter light on GoldieBlox, which was accused of “pink washing” its toys. Critics accused GoldieBlox of claiming to provide toys for girls that would inspire them to pursue careers in engineering while still perpetuating the very stereotypes the company says it wants to tear down. Pink is used as a primary color in GoldieBlox toys, and among their collection is a kit to build a

parade float for princesses. Sterling has fought this criticism, saying in interviews that “girls should be able to design their own princess castles” (Miller, 2013).

### Micro Issues

1. Both versions of the GoldieBlox “Girls” video are widely available on the internet. How does the message in the advertisement change without the inclusion of the Beastie Boys song?
2. Compare and contrast the “Girls” advertisement with more traditional “girls’ toys” advertising such as commercials for Barbie dolls.

### Midrange Issues

1. Do companies claiming to take on social issues have more responsibility for transparency to their customers than companies that do not make such claims?
2. What are the ethical responsibilities of media outlets reporting this case? Should they show the original commercial that includes the Beastie Boys song?
3. Critique the final statement of Sterling above. Does the fact that girls are invited to design mitigate the fact that the project being designed deals in stereotypes?
4. GoldieBlox is a privately held company. Would any of your answers change if this company had stockholders? If so, in what way?

### Macro Issues

1. Can a company such as GoldieBlox “disrupt the pink aisle in toy stores” and still use pink as a primary color in its toys?
2. Where should companies draw the line between advertising and activism?
3. Do the creators of the GoldieBlox ads have an obligation to follow the wishes of the Beastie Boys on the use of their music? What about filmmakers?
4. What are the responsibilities of consumers when they make decisions to purchase such products? Is it reasonable to expect the average consumer to be aware of the desires of the Beastie Boys with regard to how their music would be used?