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Toy a joy for cats

Oshkosh man's products gets felines dancing and prancing; 8 million sold

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You know you've achieved success when a customer loves your product so much he independently shoots a video about it, then circulates the film on the Internet.

For Jim Boelke of Oshkosh, creator of the popular Cat Dancer cat toy, discovering that a college-age blogger in Texas made a video "mockumentary" about his product was a huge thrill.

"It is an amazing thing, which I had nothing to do with," Boelke said of the video. He stumbled across it while visiting the blog search engine, www.technorati.com. "You really need to see it to understand how people feel about our toys," he said.

In the humorous video, a narrator describes his cat Chloe's obsession with the Cat Dancer, a toy made from a piece of catnip-scented material on a piece of fine spring wire. Shots of Chloe playing with Cat Dancer are alternated with clips of a power-walking veterinarian who claims, "I studied every cat in the world. It took three years. They all love Cat Dancer."

A male character introduced as the "inventor of Cat Dancer" is



Chris Swan

Swan project drives home value of civic responsibility

Chris Swan, a Green Bay construction contractor, was the driving force behind the building of the nearly-completed Swan House, a three-bedroom home that will house the recipient of a rent scholarship.

The scholarship, and the house, will allow a single parent to raise his or her children while they finish college in the area. The project also provided more than 100 volunteers a lesson in civic responsibility.

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Jim Boelke, creator of the Cat Dancer, shows off a display of his creations. The Business News photo by J.A. Robb

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Cat/Owner says toys benefit pets and their owners

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shown soaking in a hot tub. The narrator asks him what he was doing for a living before he invented Cat Dancer.

"Stripping," the pseudo-inventor replies.

When asked how he feels about the felines who worship his creations, the character says, "I don't even like cats."

Like the collegiate blogger who created the video, Jim Boelke has a sense of humor. He was a student himself when he invented Cat Dancer in 1983. That's about where the similarities to the true story and the mockumentary version end, though.

When he created Cat Dancer, "I was a college guy with kittens and too many jobs," said Boelke, now 51.

At one of those jobs, he found some scrap wire on the floor. He took the wire home, and his cats went crazy playing with it. "I'd get the cats to do backflips during parties," he said.

Friends begged him to make them similar wire toys, and for four years, he did — for free. Eventually, he started selling the toys on weekends and evenings. He decided to pursue the business full-time in 1990.

"Cat Dancer was the first interactive cat toy," Boelke said. "It's not just something you throw on the floor, like a ball or a bell. It's a human and a cat playing together. The cats play with the cardboard at one end, but can't see the spring. They attack it and then wander off, like they've accomplished something great."

Twenty years ago, the word "interactive" was unfamiliar to many people. "In the 1980s, it was 'inter'-what?" said Boelke. "Today, more



The original Cat Dancer toy is a piece of catnip-scented material on a piece of fine spring wire that the cat can't see, making it look as if the object is floating in the air. The Business News photo by J.A. Robb

than 40 percent of all toys are interactive. We have more imitators than Elvis."

Initially, Boelke struggled with what to name his new venture. He decided to call in a professional marketer.

"We met at a local tap. He was drinking white Russians, and I was buying them," he said.

Boelke described his product, and asked for help coming up with a name. After three hours

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We have a new toy coming. It's radically different, the next generation of interactive. It will be the coolest cat toy ever made.

— Jim Boelke, creator of Cat Dancer Products in Oshkosh

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of drinking, the inebriated marketer told Boelke he didn't think he could help him.

"I told him, 'that's okay,'" said Boelke. "Then his hand landed on my shoulder. He was kind of falling. He pointed at me and said, 'cat dancing,' then almost passed out."

From "cat dancing," Boelke came up with the name Cat Dancer.

Twenty-three years later, Boelke's company makes five products: the original Cat Dancer, \$3; Cat Dancer with a catnip-infused mouse at the end, introduced last year, \$7.50; Cat Dancer Compleat, which includes a paw-shaped holder, \$5.50; Cat Charmer, a plastic and fabric interactive toy, \$7.50; and the Smart Brush for Cats, \$19.

The products, which have sold more than 8 million units, are sold at independent pet stores, pet store chains, and online at www.catdancer.com.

Cat Dancer has been recognized with

awards, including recognition as Chicagoland Tails magazine's "best toy" for three years in a row. Last year, its sister toy, Cat Charmer, took second.

Boelke believes his toys benefit both cats and their owners.

"People don't provide enough stimulation for their cats. We take a wild animal, and don't give it much to do. Then we wonder why they're overweight and depressed, with behavior problems," he said.

In order to keep up with demand for his products, Boelke's manufacturing facility in the Town of Vinland employs eight people. He admitted he feels guilty about "creating boring jobs" to manufacture his products.

"I've owned seven businesses and had 37 jobs," Boelke said. "I'm probably unemployable now. I'm not good at punching in."

To keep his employees engaged, Boelke has created a nontraditional work environment. "I made my first 50,000 toys myself, sitting in front of my TV, watching movies," he said, so employees are allowed to watch TV while they work. "As long as the products go out, why do I care?" he said.

"Some people might think that's silly," he said, "but I have eight employees, and four have been with me more than 16 years. We have very little turnover."

Now that his flagship product has been immortalized by an Internet video, what's next for Jim Boelke and Cat Dancer Products?

"We have a new toy coming. It's radically different, the next generation of interactive," he said. "It will be the coolest cat toy ever made."