



SUCCESS Christine Nikiel

Game couple solve the puzzle

Learning from their mistakes and building a solid relationship with their Chinese manufacturer has been the key to Kiwi pair winning international sales

ANDREW Baker got a B grade for the 3D maths game he invented while at teachers training college in the 1990s and his tutor doubted it could be developed for sale. Fifteen years later, Baker and his wife Briggita have sold more than 15,000 copies of the game, called miQube, and now license other educational games for local inventors and consult to other start-ups.

In February, they signed up their first United States distributor for miQube and have since sold five of the licensed games to overseas retailers or distributors.

As with many start-ups, the Bakers found the lessons they learned in manufacturing were the hardest but the most valuable. Unable to find a local manufacturer despite their willingness to pay a premium, the Bakers sought out cheaper Chinese factories, stumbling through several different manufacturers before they found one that made the game to the required standard.

They're stringent about the manufacturing agreements, especially after they realised they had to pay to destroy sub-standard product to ensure the game wasn't copied. Now a quality control inspector okays the product before it gets shipped, they don't pay for goods until they're happy, and if the goods fail the inspection, the factory pays.

Building a good relationship with their manufacturer has been a key to the smooth running of the business, says

Andrew Baker, who has visited the family-owned factory, flying to Shanghai and driving four hours inland.

Insisting on a quality wooden product over a cheaper plastic one means they miss out on big-clout mass market buyers such as Wal-Mart, but the pair are comfortable with their niche. They even turned down an offer from The Warehouse for fear that its discount approach would damage the game's long-term sales appeal.

They've also learned that some things are beyond anyone's control, as highlighted by the recent scare over the lead content of paint used on some Chinese-made toys. When the Chinese Government banned all outgoing shipments of children's toys for two weeks, the Bakers' game Foursite was due for its first shipment to an Australian distributor. They paid for it to be airfreighted, but the games still didn't arrive on time. However, they're philosophical. "It's just something you learn to accept," says Baker.

Another obstacle was learning to work together. The pair admit to "clashing" often in the early days due to their different approaches to the business.

Now there is "a clear division of roles", Baker says. Briggita Baker is the detail woman, dealing with the day-to-day business operation, while Andrew uses his corporate background to deal with the "high-level" strategy stuff.

After graduating, Baker shelved his invention, ditched the idea of teaching and went off to coach tennis in Germany. He



IQIDEAS

- Company set up in 2005 by Andrew and Brigitta Baker.
- First product was miQube, a 3D puzzle developed by Andrew Baker in the 1990s.
- In 2005, the game placed second in a US toy competition.
- 15,000 copies have now been sold.
- Company also licenses games for other inventors.
- Goal is to have 12 games in 12 markets in the next year and double that in the following year.

returned home to score a sales and marketing job for the New Zealand arm of French drug company SanofiAventis, rising to become country manager. When offered an overseas promotion, he turned it down, preferring to live and raise his two children in New Zealand.

Faced with something of a career plateau, he unearthed the game, set up IQIdeas to market it and, after a period working nights, eventually quit his job.

In 2005, the game was placed second in a North American toy competition, earning it valuable market credibility.

The Bakers also set their sights on overseas toy fairs and, after a successful five days in Melbourne, interest in MiQube escalated; unfortunately so did their costs.

By that time, the pair had spent \$75,000 of their own money on the business but, with their sights set on the world's largest toy fair, in Nuremberg, Germany, they approached the New Zealand Trade and Enterprise Escalator programme, which

links investors with start-ups. The investors were keen but the Bakers were unwilling to give away more than 25 per cent of the company and eventually walked away from the deal. Baker said that was one of the hardest decisions they made because of the wealth of experience and mentoring opportunities they were turning down.

A couple of mum-and-dad investor friends came to the rescue and in July the Bakers got their stand in Nuremberg. As well as signing with the US distributor, MiQube received interest from 28 countries and more than 100 companies, all keen to know what the Bakers would be bringing next year.

Brigitta Baker said being Kiwis was a selling point at the fair. She had wondered if advertising that they were from so far away would put off prospective buyers but "people were amazed we'd gotten on a plane and flown so far".

The pair aim to have 12 games in 12 markets in the next year and double that in the following year. So far, they've licensed three other games — the just-released maths game Foursite and two geography-focused games, Bust the Boredom and The Amazing Moa Hunt, which also has an Australian version, and an international version pending.

Graphic artist Beck Hunter and husband Minty take care of the boardgame graphics and packaging and the Bakers' web design, and have proved a useful marketing and market research connection: the Hunters are avid "gamers" and have played all the games at their fortnightly Carterton gaming night.

Meanwhile, artist Romina Marinkovich, the inventor of The Amazing Moa Hunt, is also working with the Bakers on another game. ■



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Andrew and Briggita Baker built their business together, but admit that their differing approaches caused clashes in its early days. Picture / Paul Estcourt