How to get parents to pay $169 for a toy robot

by Adriene Hill

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When you’re covering educational technology, you see a lot of gee-whiz tech gear and toys that claim to make kids smarter. Lots of those toys make similar sounds. And we wanted to find out why.

So we went in search of the real meaning in the sounds of ed tech.

Lots of those toys are also pretty pricey. And it turns out getting parents to fork over for them also has something to do with sound, too.

Think of it as the sound of the sell.

Because this story is a story about, yes, sound, we encourage you to take a few minutes to listen to it.
Along the way we meet a robot named Bo, whose sounds were developed by folks who’d worked at Pixar, the movie studio behind Cars and Toy Story. Bo is an educational toy, meant to teach young kids to code.

We meet Vikas Gupta, who heads Play-i (https://www.play-i.com/), the company that makes Bo. He tells how sounds can establish an emotional connections between a child and the robot.

We meet director and composer Steven Wilson (http://www.beautimusproductions.com), who wrote the music for Play-i’s promotional video (http://youtu.be/uLDQDaPHyqE). He tells us about all the tricks composers use when writing music meant to make us feel a certain way. To put us in a buying mood, as it were.

And, we meet Bruce Walker (http://sonify.psych.gatech.edu/~walkerb/), a professor in the School of Psychology and School of Interactive Computing at Georgia Tech. He talks us through the future sounds of our technology and how sounds help create emotional connections that can encourage us to buy.


What "don't do evil concept"?

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It seems that “Bo” may be a fun toy to play with, for some children of well-healed parents. Maybe fun for the parents, too.

There’s utterly no evidence that playing with such a toy would be better for cognitive or any other flavor of development or useful skills of any kind, than playing with any other fun toy.

The second half of the segment is all about a typical _Marketplace_ theme - the sewer of the Schools of Communications; specifically, advertising and in this instance the “educational technology sell”. It’s a confidence trick to reel in the rubes. The art and craft of such deception absolutely fascinates journalists, who are the poor relations of Communications Schools' Big Money Trio - public relations, marketing and advertising.

So how does this relate to the don't do evil concept?