



Start-ups Part 2: Starting a business in the toy industry

Smartek Toys – From company foundation to universal genius

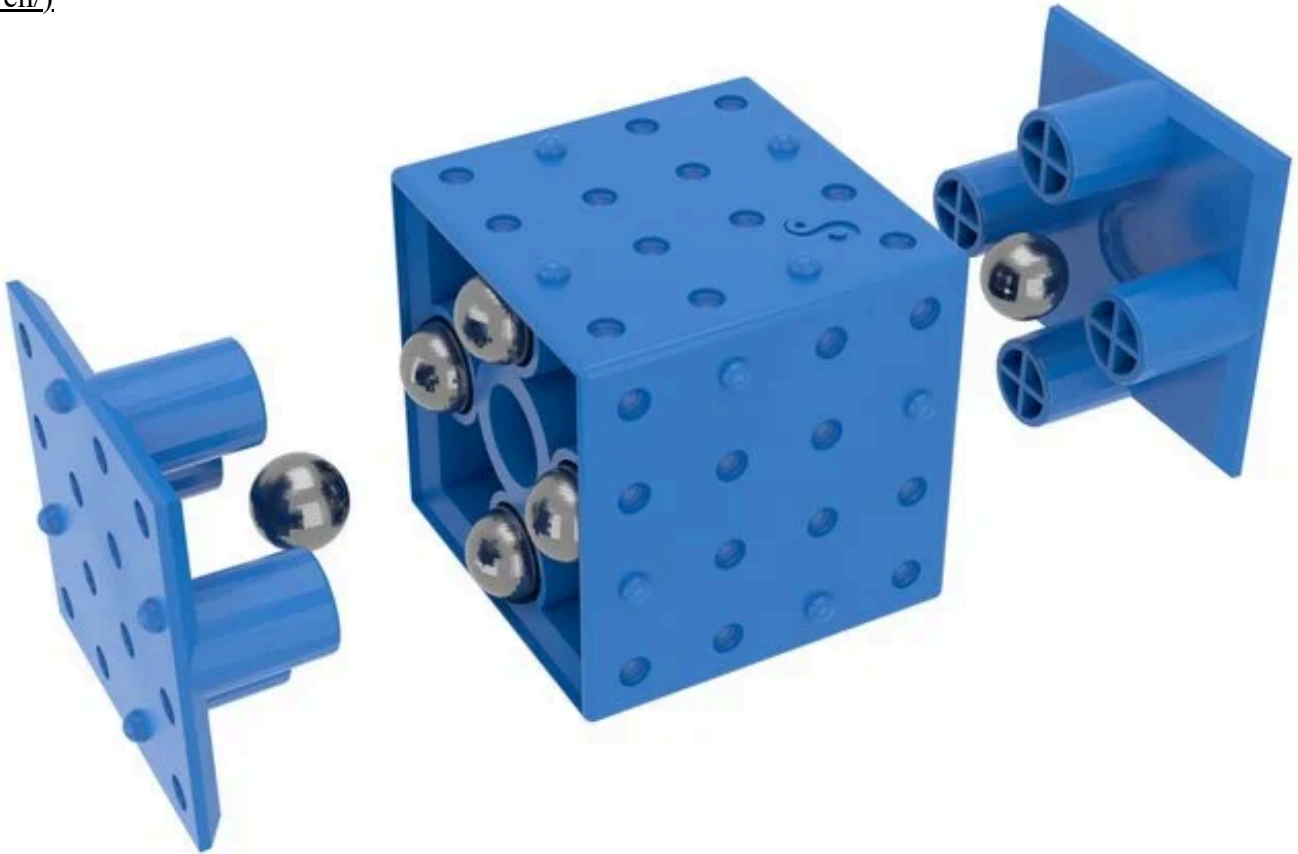
Starting a company isn't child's play: the laws of the market dictate how business is done – in the toy sector as in any other industry. However, this colourful and diverse branch does, of course, have its own special start-up success stories.

In the starting blocks: Smartek Toys

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As simple as it is ingenious – a one-click building system

Building beyond limits thanks to magnetic building blocks – this is the basic idea behind the Smartek system. Imagine blocks with magnets inside them. This means that they're able to automatically align themselves and attract each other. Each side always connects to any other side. Patented balls and holes ensure, in combination with the magnets, that the blocks are also perfectly aligned with each other. It sounds easy, but it was a rocky road for founder Bartek Gedrojc.

Interview with Bartek Gedrojc

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Bartek, what led you to start your company?

Bartek Gedrojc: I'd always wanted to have my own company, even as a teenager. Before Smartek Toys, though, I never had an idea I could actually turn into a business. But that changed when I discovered magnets and 3D-printing. I was finally able to turn my ideas into reality. That was a decisive turning point for me.

Did you get any funding or did you have to take out a loan?

Bartek Gedrojc: When I first started out, I got some help from family and friends. You know, the kind of funding we call the 3Fs: friends, family and fools.

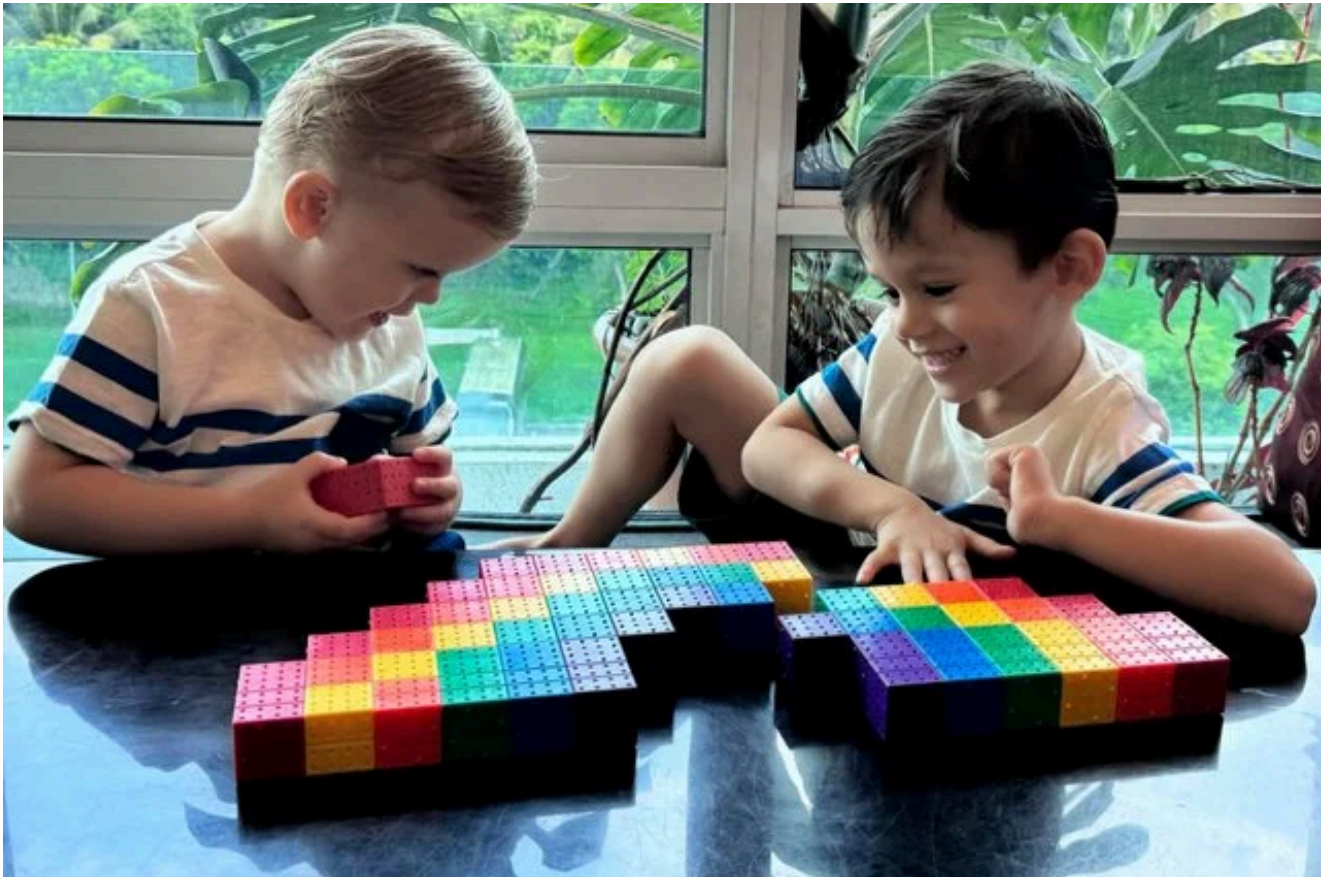
Give us a sentence about your product

Bartek Gedrojc: I've developed a magnetic building block.

Do you think the industry you developed your product for is innovative?

Bartek Gedrojć: In my experience, the toy industry isn't particularly innovative.

~~Spielwarenmesse~~ ^{very} focused on trying to distinguish themselves from their competitors. What I don't see, though, is the combining of different building system technologies. Most of these systems are described as open-ended. For me, though, genuinely open-ended systems should also be able to work with other systems.



Unlimited building fun with a child-friendly feel to it

Why did you choose this product in particular?

Bartek Gedrojć: It just happened. I grew up playing with Lego in the 1970s, when my parents brought it back from the Netherlands to Poland, where I was born. I later grew up in the Netherlands and took part in various Lego competitions. After I finished studying at the Technical University, I finally had some disposable money to buy a whole load of Lego Star Wars sets. I have more than 300. So I started thinking about why you need two different parts to connect something. Lego makes use of tubes and studs. Magnets require a north and a south pole to connect to each other. The solution to this problem led to the birth of Smartek Toys. And I hope that my company will also expand into other categories, like board games and puzzles.

SMARTEK TOYS

Bartek Gedrojc founded [Smartek Toys \(https://www.smartektoys.com/\)](https://www.smartektoys.com/) in 2018. First, he patented his magnetic play system and production started in 2020. The Smartek magnetic building blocks were launched onto the market in 2024.



Less is more: an expressive packaging concept

Where and how do you sell Smartek Toys?

Bartek Gedrojc: I – still – am a one-man show; I run Smartek Toys alongside my family and full-time job. That's why I don't sell direct but mainly via shops and distributors. Since I run everything from my home in the Netherlands, my main market

is the Netherlands and then the rest of Europe. I use social media to keep in touch with shops all around the world that I do business with occasionally. There's a shop (/en/search/) in Guatemala City, for example, that sells Smartek Toys. That's really cool.

Would you like to become more active globally?

Bartek Gedrojc: I believe in globalisation and I'd like to sell Smartek Toys around the world. At present, I'm investigating opportunities. But looking at it from a realistic time and effort perspective, I'm initially going to have to limit myself to the Netherlands and Europe. I can manage that.

What obstacles did you have to overcome?

Bartek Gedrojc: Oh, a whole load of them. Above all the fact that I had no experience of anything. But that was also a good thing, because I learned so much. I learned about 3D-printing, CAD modelling, programming, injection moulding, packaging design, patents, how to protect intellectual property, accounting, customs, taxes, how to make decisions, selling and a whole lot more.

What was your biggest challenge?

Bartek Gedrojc: That was the fact that my first application was a small, 12-millimetre Smartek cube with a magnet inside. After many months of discussions and tests, I discovered that you can't certify such a small cube as a toy. Not even for children aged 8 and above! And that was after I'd invested money in patents, moulds and production. So I switched to a larger brick. This was an obstacle that hurt me financially and proved to be a real lesson.

Would you start a company up again?

Bartek Gedrojc: Oh, absolutely. Running your own company, being independent, expressing your creative streak alongside your day job – it's fantastic.

What would you do differently now?

Bartek Gedrojc: When I look back, I don't think I'd change a thing. I made my decisions, and even if they didn't work out straightaway, they did teach me some valuable lessons. I was lucky in that I could financially afford to make mistakes, too.

What advice would you give to other start-up founders?

Bartek Gedrojc: Don't be afraid of making mistakes. You will learn. Listen and speak to a lot of people, but go your own way. Follow your gut instinct, and when your work makes you happy, keep going. Stop talking to negative people. Surround yourself with people who energise you.

There's nothing more to add to that. Good luck with Smartek Toys, Bartek!

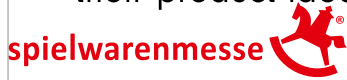
StartupArea at the Spielwarenmesse

The success story of a lot of young start-ups actually started at the Spielwarenmesse. The world's leading trade fair for toys is both a source of inspiration and a trendsetter for the entire industry and has long been responsible for fostering new young talent – initially via the Young Innovators (<https://www.spielwarenmesse.de/de/ausstellen/young-innovators/>) funding programme of the Federal Ministry for Economic Affairs and Energy. Launched in 2022, the StartupArea (<https://www.spielwarenmesse.de/de/startup-aussteller/>) now also targets international enterprises. This is where the most promising talents of tomorrow meet.

START-UPS AT THE SPIELWARENMESSE

The StartupArea (<https://www.spielwarenmesse.de/de/startup-aussteller/>) at the Spielwarenmesse enables young companies to network with new business contacts. Start-ups can use this special area in Hall 3A to present

their product ideas to the toy industry.



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[\(/en/\)](#) **StartupArea** (<https://www.spielwarenmesse.de/en/startup-exhibitors/>)

package for international companies

Prerequisite: Founded no more than five years ago.

Offer includes 6 m² of booth space with equipment.

Young Innovators (<https://www.spielwarenmesse.de/de/ausstellen/young-innovators/>) **funding programme for German companies**

Support from the Ministry of Economic Affairs.

Offer includes up to 15 m² of stand space.

About the Author

Sibylle Dorndorf has been covering the toy industry for almost 30 years. The journalist last worked as the editor-in-chief at the TOYS family of magazines of the Göller Verlag publishing house from Baden-Baden, Germany. Her passion: Companies that reinvent themselves; brands that credibly position themselves; people who have something to say; and products with a future.

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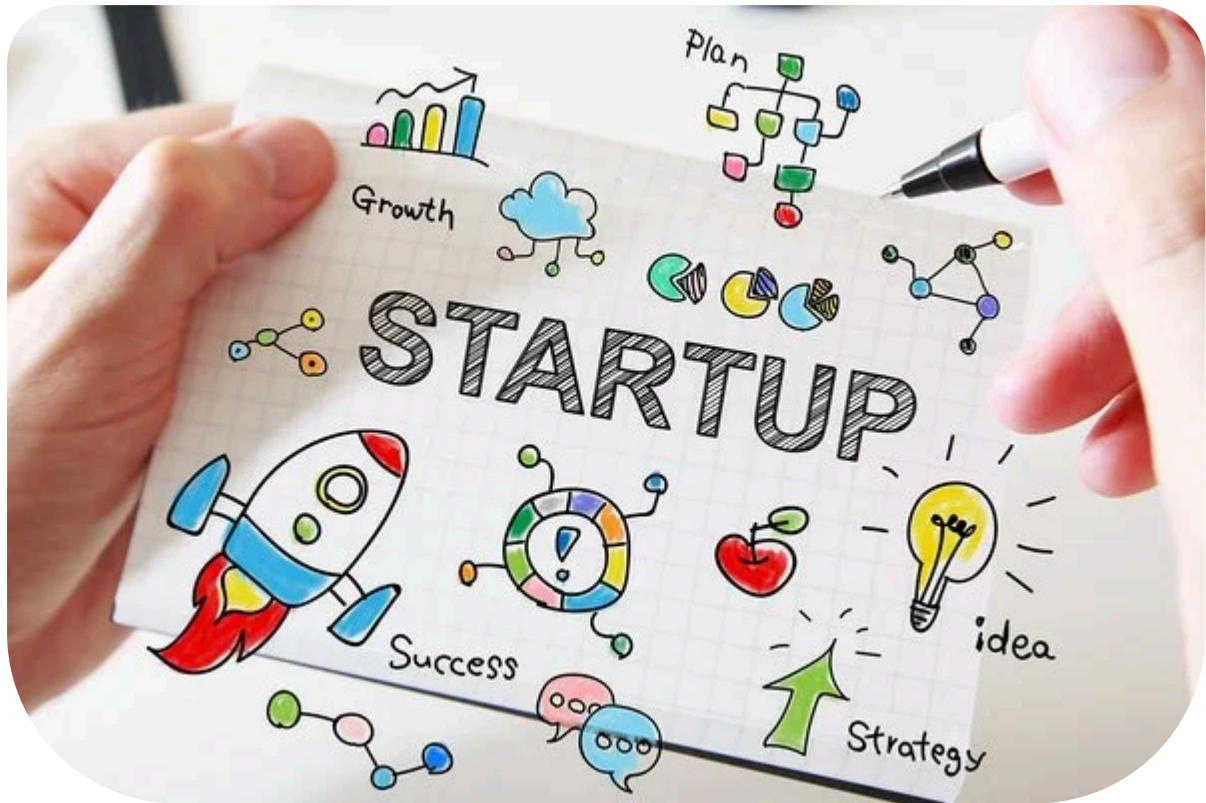


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