



COVER
STORY

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Soft sell

Only time will tell if Squishmallows make it to infinity and beyond. But as toy stories go, the marshmallow-like plush toy's meteoric rise to the top of the \$100 billion global toy market is one for the ages.

by **Mark Cardwell**

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Part of Squishmallows' appeal is the variety of personalities and sizes.



COSTCO CONNECTION

A variety of Squishmallows items are available in Costco warehouses and at Costco.com.

Toys mean the world to Herb Mitschele. A father of four young daughters and a toy industry expert who has worked for such iconic companies as Mattel and Playmates Toys, he's spent the past two decades helping make and market objects that educate and entertain kids of all ages.

As executive vice president with Jazwares, the Florida-based company that makes Squishmallows, Mitschele now leads a team that is tasked with expanding the global reach of the world's best-selling toy. "I've never been involved with anything like this, it's a once-in-a-career thing," he says. "Toy brands come and go. But Squishmallows are here to stay."

Toys with personality

Launched in 2017 by Kellytoy, an American toymaker acquired by Jazwares, Squishmallows are plush toys that range from 2 to 24 inches.

Made with super-soft fabrics and stuffed with squishy proprietary materials, the colorful plush toys sport cartoon faces of whimsical styles like Cam the Cat, or licensed movie favorites such as Dumbo and Buzz Lightyear.

There are now more than 2,000 styles, each with a unique personality and design. More than 100 million Squishmallows have been sold in more than 55 countries, earning the plush toy a variety of international industry awards, including Top Selling Toy of the Year.

"The next stage is 200 million—and we will cross that mark very soon," says Mitschele, who leads Jazwares' global sales and planning division. "And we still have lots of opportunity to grow and expand in existing and new markets."



He credits the brand's lovable styles and personalities—each of them designed and created in a collaborative process that includes illustrators, designers and production and brand team members working both remotely and at 20 offices worldwide, including Jazwares' headquarters in Sunrise, Florida—for driving its popularity as a toy and collectible item across all age groups.

"It's rare to see a toy with such multi-generational appeal," says Mitschele. "Finding, buying and sharing Squishmallows has become a way for friends and family members to connect. It's a huge social phenomenon."

Squishy success

If their squishy softness and cute personalities have helped make Squishmallows a runaway success, social media has helped to fuel its rocket ride to the top of the toy world.

According to Mitschele, Squishmallows videos have been viewed more than 11 billion



ALL SQUISHMALLOWS IMAGES COURTESY OF © JAZWARES

There's at least one Squishmallows character for everyone.

times on TikTok and fans have posted more than 1 million times on Instagram.

In addition to announcing new character releases, the company uses that online reach to promote live Squishmallows events like the five-stop 2022 U.S. East Coast Squish Tour and the arcade-like "human claw machine" at the annual 2022 VidCon convention in Anaheim, California, where people waited up to four hours for a 20-second chance to grab all the Squishmallows they could while suspended from a crane.

"We have many rabid fans who absolutely love the brand," says Mitschele. "It's amazing to see people's reactions online and at events."

The brand received a huge boost on social media in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, when celebrities such as Lady Gaga and Kim Kardashian published messages and photos of their Squishmallows collections that went viral on TikTok.

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From left: Gideon the Guacamole, Adila the Antelope, Yara the Rainbow Yeti

CUDDLY COLLECTIBLES

Of the 2,000 Squishmallows that have been created since 2017, Cam the Cat is one of the oldest personalities. But in terms of collectability, Jack

the Black Cat—the 500th Squishmallows character to be created—is the brand's meow.

Only 500 copies of the 16-inch toy were made when it was released in 2020. It is one of the rarest and most sought-after Squishmallows,

fetching thousands on online auction sites.

Other rare Squishmallows—like ones with holographic, golden and silver tags—are also being resold for astronomical prices.—MC



Super fan Melanie Schroeder at VidCon in Anaheim, California.

Squishmallows mania

With stories like Schroeder's, it's easy to see why toy industry analyst and consultant Chris Byrne—aka The Toy Guy—says the Squishmallows craze has taken the normally staid plush or stuffed toy category by storm.

"They have been the hottest thing in the industry for the past couple of years," says Byrne, who compares "Squish" mania to the frenzy over Care Bears and Beanie Babies. "Like them, Squishmallows are affordable and their selling point is sweetness. They're very tactile and comforting for both kids and adults coming out of the pandemic."

Unlike faddy toys that come and go, Byrne thinks Squishmallows has legs. "They're very trendy now and that cycle will pass," he says. "But like Care Bears or even Barbie, I think they'll remain a classic toy

Fandom fun

Melanie Schroeder, a Squishmallows super fan, didn't think many people would watch the amateur 10-second video she made and posted on TikTok about her hunt for Squishmallows at a local store in 2021.

"But right away things went crazy," recalls Schroeder, a doctoral student in audiology at Pacific University in Oregon. "It ended up getting 11 million views."

Since then, she has become a social media influencer with a Squishmallows-loving audience of almost 200,000 followers on TikTok, another 15,000 on Instagram, and is now an official brand ambassador.

"It's a real honor for me because I absolutely love Squishmallows," says Schroeder, who has collected 800 of the plush toys since she bought her first one—a peach named Phyllis.

"I started out with the fruits, but now I like the animals like cows and frogs—oh, and mushrooms," she says. "I also like the newer [styles] like Pokémon and SpongeBob."

Schroeder keeps her collection on a bunk bed in her off-campus apartment and posts photos and videos of them online. She also shares other people's posts about squish hunting or squish meets, when people get together in parks or parking lots to display or trade their toys.

"Squishmallows are just so cute," says Schroeder. "I love the vibrant colors and them all looking at me. They're like my own personal rainbow."





that Jazwares will be able to renew each year thanks to the [styles].”

Mitschele says Jazwares’ roughly 1,000 employees—who playfully refer to themselves as “Jazmanians”—are working hard to keep Squishmallows on top. “Our team has done a fantastic job laying out licensed partnerships and creating collaborative consumer programs with more than 60 best-in-class partners around the world,” he says.

In addition to developing new video games and products for people and pets, Jazwares teamed with McDonald’s and Universal Music Group to launch McDonald’s Happy Meal Squishmallows in June 2023.

“We’re continuing to innovate to enhance and evolve the Squishmallows fan experience. The sky’s the limit,” says Mitschele. ■

Mark Cardwell is a writer and kid at heart in Saint-Ferréol-Les-Neiges, Quebec.



Jazwares owners, Judd and Laura Zebersky

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A dream fulfilled

In 1997, Florida lawyer Judd Zebersky decided to leave the law office where he worked with his wife, Laura, to found a toy company that would make safe, high quality products for kids young and old.

Fast-forward 25 years and Judd and Laura, who joined her husband in 2005, are hands-on owners of Jazwares (the “Jaz” being Judd’s initials), a \$1 billion business (40% from sales of Squishmallows).

“I have loved pop culture since I was a kid (and) I was into comic books and toys,” Zebersky told Reuters recently. “I looked at my wife, and said, ‘I want to make toys.’ She said, ‘Follow your dreams,’ and that’s what I did.”—MC



A variety of Squishmallows sizes and styles are available.