

Conquered By an Iconic Kitty

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In the realm of iconic characters and global brands, few hold the enduring charm and appeal of Hello Kitty. Created by the Japanese company Sanrio, Hello Kitty morphed from a simple cartoon into a full-blown cultural phenomenon, crossing borders and generations with a wink and a bow. Over half a century, she has maintained an unbroken winning streak, captivating consumers who cannot seem to get enough of her. This exploration unveils the captivating success story behind all the cuteness, taking us from its humble beginnings to its current global phenomenon. Hello Kitty's rise to global stardom is a testament to the brand's savvy blend of strategic marketing and genuine consumer connection, shaping lasting impressions and cultivating enduring fan loyalty.

To better understand how Hello Kitty became the multi-billion dollar business we see today, we must understand how this simplistic hand-drawn sketch strategically made its way to our hearts and wallets. The famous feline's history can be traced back to 1974. She was created by Yuko Shimizu, who left Sanrio a few years later to pursue her newlywed lifestyle. A second designer, Setsuko Yonekubo, briefly took over the reins after Shimizu decided to pursue her marriage, pushing the project to the side. Yonekubo contributed four years to the popular character and passed the baton to Hello Kitty's third and current well-known designer, Yuko Yamaguchi. As shared by Sijia (2016), a reporter in a Singapore news outlet, "Yamaguchi, became the leading designer for Hello Kitty since 1980" (para 2). Yamaguchi has contributed over forty-three years to keeping Kitty on trend and continuously evolving to keep fans fulfilled and wanting more.

At the foundation of creating Hello Kitty, Sanrio meticulously devised and compared various elements to formulate the desired cute aesthetic that resonated most with the market. According to Jackson (2009), a professor of Media and Communication,

With her rounded head, eyes, and nose, Hello Kitty embodied soft, cuddly features similar to those that made the Disney Company's Mickey Mouse a long-standing success in Japan, and this was no coincidence. (p. 27)

The quote underlines Sanrio's deliberate approach to Hello Kitty's design and highlights the parallels with Disney's iconic characters. As Jackson (2009) points out, "Sanrio sought to create characters that could compete with those by Disney and other American companies in the licensing market" (p. 27). This research suggests that creating this petite character was not a hasty decision but a well-thought-out strategy, showcasing Sanrio's ambition and vision to join the major leagues and compete with established household names.

Hello Kitty made her first debut in the United States during the mid-1970s. The first product to introduce Hello Kitty to American audiences was a dainty, transparent vinyl coin purse. This charming accessory showcased Hello Kitty with her trademark bow, depicted alongside a bottle of milk and a fish bowl. This initial product began Hello Kitty's cultural phenomenon in the United States, captivating hearts with its simple yet irresistibly cute design. Today, the original miniature purse is kept under tight surveillance and constantly accounted for because of its value. In an ABC News in 2014, they showed off the purse that was "on loan from [the] Sanrio Tokyo office where it is kept in a vault" (3:51). A tiny statement piece that used to cost less than a dollar, is now worth a fortune. The senior director of marketing for Sanrio, Dave Marchi, states, "I can't even fathom what it's worth. It's safe to say millions and millions, this may be the hope diamond for Kitty fans" (as cited in ABC News, 2014, 4:09). This mini bag was the beginning of all success and a foot in the door to the massive opportunity they would soon encounter.

Initially, Sanrio aimed to captivate the imaginations of teenagers and young girls, strategically going for a *kawaii* pleasing aesthetic which according to Katō (2006), a literary critic and professor at Waseda University's School, is the "one key term that epitomizes the current boom in Japanese subculture: a common English translation meaning, 'cute'" (p. 72). To reach their desired age group in America, they teamed up with a popular kid-friendly fast-food chain that's practically a go-to for every parent wanting to treat their little ones. Jackson (2009) points out that in 2000 "the company saw sales skyrocket after Hello Kitty items were tucked into McDonald's Happy Meals across the country,

continuing to win over its consumer base of children and teens" (p. 34). The meals became so popular, exceeding Sanrio's expectations, that they reached more than their general audience. New fans started to arise and acted aggressively, trying to get their hands on a package. Ko (2003), an associate professor with a Ph.D. in Communication Arts, explains,

The Hello Kitty Meal Package was so popular that people waited in line in front of McDonald's before the sale began. Within two hours, the Kitties were out of stock, and those who had waited since early morning complained, inadvertently starting a fight (p. 175)

While Sanrio collectively aspired to capture children's imaginations worldwide and reach for the stars, the phenomenon of Hello Kitty's universal popularity has surpassed even the expectations of its original designer. Sija (2016) notes, "While the designer is probably aware of Hello Kitty's popularity, she remains surprised by the large fan base Kitty enjoys in Singapore" (para 6). The allure of Hello Kitty is not limited to a specific age group or demographic, as evidenced by the sentiments expressed by an individual in an ABC News (2014) segment confessing, "Oh my god, what don't I love about her, she's iconic to us, I mean she's evolved with women and children" (2:28). This sentiment reflects the enduring and adaptable nature of Hello Kitty, ingrained in the hearts of both adults and children alike.

The profound impact of Hello Kitty is further illustrated by the dedicated fans who willingly waited in line for hours to receive a tattoo in tribute to their hero: "These people happily waited all day in this long line waiting for something that will last a lifetime." Referring to one of those people in line, the commentator goes on to say, "Kumiko Pedro's childhood obsession over Hello Kitty is still so much a part of her she's making it permanent" (ABC News, 2014, 0:23). The cultural significance of Kitty is not confined to individual enthusiasts; it has transcended into the realm of celebrity, with stars like Katy Perry proudly displaying their affection for Hello Kitty at a Los Angeles Convention. Perry showing off her Hello Kitty tattoo, is highlighted in the report stating, "It may have been Katy Perry's 'Teenage Dream' to have her very own Hello Kitty tattoo, and she was happy to show it off here at the

very first Hello Kitty convention celebrating this iconic character" (ABC News, 2014, 0:55). This is demonstrative of the character's influence, reaching even the upper well-known stars of popular culture. The global reach of Hello Kitty is undeniable, reaching not only pop singers but also celebrities in a range of different categories and genres. Tsukamoto (2015), who pursued her studies at Kyoto University of Foreign Studies in Japan, notes, "Many international celebrities such as Cameron Diaz, Mariah Carey, Lady Gaga, and Britney Spears have purchased Kitty products and displayed them openly." (p. 383). Hello Kitty's cultural impact is far-reaching and enduring, transcending age, borders, and societal boundaries, cementing its status as a truly iconic and beloved character.

The petite feline is not just universally adored for her cuteness; Sanrio has also masterfully orchestrated a method to the madness. As a marketing mastermind, Sanrio developed multiple unique, tactful ways to create an urgency to purchase their products and generate obsessive loyalty in their consumers. Their crucial strategy involves transforming everyday, essential items into Hello Kitty masterpieces, turning dull necessities into coveted, bedazzled essentials. Ko (2003) points out,

It caters to the fans' daily needs: the Kitty figure haunts the stationery, clothes, accessories, toilet paper, instant noodles, shampoo, utensils, stereos, toasters, and even hi-tech products.

Even some tampons and condoms are printed with the Kitty 'asexual' face (p. 179).

What sets Sanrio apart is its deliberate decision to make each item a limited edition, creating a sense of urgency that often results in rapid sell-outs. Jackson (2009) breaks it down: "Sanrio's production and marketing strategies contribute to the collecting frenzy. The company consistently introduces new items, limiting each line's quantity, distribution, and shelf life" (p. 36). Yamaguchi's role is pivotal to keeping this well-oiled machine in motion—she ensures Hello Kitty stays perpetually cute, fresh, and modern. Tsukamoto (2015) writes, "Yuko Yamaguchi, reveals that she intentionally changes its styles every five years so that consumers will never get tired of Kitty's appearance" (p. 383). This continuous evolution, coupled with limited releases, establishes a revolving door of novelty and desire that has been a hallmark of Sanrio's successful money flow for decades.

Sanrio's strategic efforts in cultivating the market and a dedicated fan base have played a substantial role in the company's financial triumphs. Their business was so immense and successful that even a prominent entrepreneur sought to acquire their company. The character's allure captured the attention of tech magnate and former CEO of Microsoft, Bill Gates. Gates offered a very generous amount in trying to take over the large enterprise. Katō (2006) states, "Bill Gates offered \$5.6 billion for the rights to Hello Kitty" (p.79). Characterizing the company as exceptionally skilled in marketing and highly accomplished in business—a recognition acknowledged by many, ABC News (2014) points out:

She may just be the embodiment of cute, but behind those sweet eyes is a very big business: the Sanrio company, who owns and licenses Hello Kitty and a host of other characters, reportedly earned eight billion dollars in 2013 (1:22)

Even in today's stagnant economy, Sanrio dominates the market with an astonishing ten-figure market value. Ycharts (2023) notes, "Sanrio has managed to generate an enterprise value of 3.116 billion dollars" (para 1). These financial figures underscore the substantial market presence and economic value that Hello Kitty commands, making it not just a cultural icon but a lucrative business asset in the global market.

This mogul represents far more than a mere brand but a global cultural phenomenon with her enduring charm. Hello Kitty is, in fact, a masterclass in marketing, embodying strategies and elements that reach beyond the ordinary realms of product promotion. Sanrio's success is not just about selling products but creating an everlasting effect for present and oncoming generations. This character's ability to evoke emotions, generate nostalgia, and foster a sense of belonging among its audience is a testament to the power of emotional marketing, making Hello Kitty more than just a character – she is a symbol that binds people together across borders and generations.

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