

Imagine the Possibilities

How Barbie went from 11.5 inches of perfection to a global symbol of potential



Client: Mattel

Agency: BBDO New York / San Francisco

Brand: Barbie

**Summary**

This is the story of an icon, fallen from grace, and her herculean journey back to the top of the mountain.

It's also the story of how smart strategic thinking reclaimed a brand's lost DNA for a new generation of fans.

It's the story of how a woman can reignite her power, her fierceness, her purpose, all by returning to who she is, deep down inside.

This is the story of how we turned around a decline of eight consecutive quarters in three months, and ignited a global cultural conversation in the process.

This is the return of Barbie.

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Summary Word Count: 99

Total: 2,098

**“Unrealistic.” “Too blonde.” “Vain.”**

For 58 years, Barbie was an unmissable icon with over a billion dolls sold.

But the brand had been in steady decline for three years and something had to be done.<sup>1</sup>

By 2014, sales were down 16% and for the first time ever Barbie fell from the number one spot as the hottest toy for girls for the holidays, losing her crown to the Disney's "Frozen."<sup>2</sup>

We were asked to pitch the business at the end of 2015 with a simple plea:

"Bring Barbie back."

To be successful, we would need to dig below the surface-level negative commentary on Barbie's waistline to understand what women were truly missing from the brand.

### Where have all the moms gone?

Our target audience, Millennial moms, were also our greatest challenge. 98% of them had grown up with Barbie in their hands, playing out their earliest visions for their futures with Barbie every step of the way. But they had stopped buying the doll for their own daughters and now we were faced with the first generation since 1959 raised without Barbie.

To better reach this audience, we needed to understand the trends that shape their daily lives and the media they consume.

### A new wave of feminism

Fact: It's not 1959 anymore.

This is exciting for women, even if it's not exciting for Barbie. Gone are the expectations that a woman's place is in the home, or that beauty is her only value.

As Hillary Clinton said in 2015, "there's never been a better time to be a woman."<sup>3</sup> Not since the 1970s have we seen a women's movement quite like this; beginning with Malala Yousafzai taking to the world stage in 2013, and moving through the latest women's march in January 2017, with an estimated 2.6 million people taking part.<sup>4</sup>



And with women like Elizabeth Warren, Shonda Rhimes and Lena Dunham demonstrating the potential available to all women, it's not surprising that Millennial moms were looking for an alternative role model for their young girls.

### **Why Barbie?**

So what possible role model could Barbie be in this cultural setting?

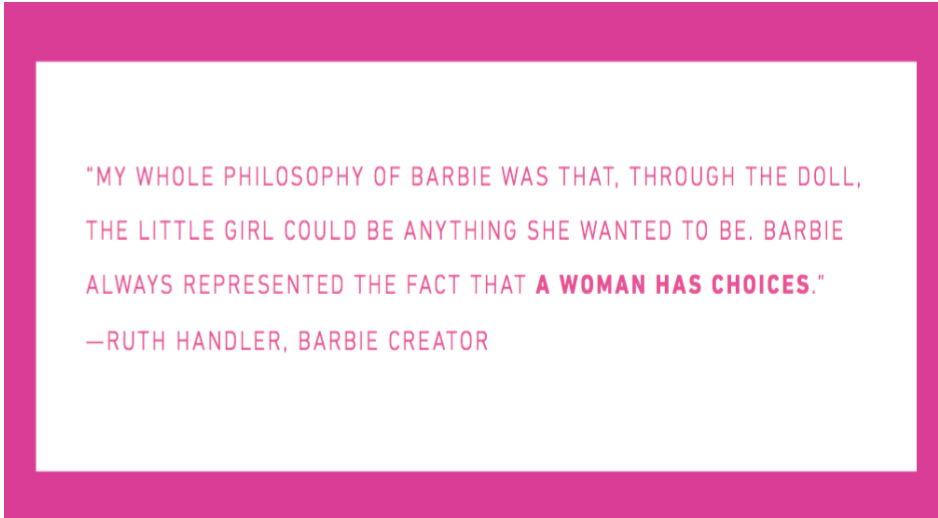
As the ad agency, we had to ask ourselves some tough questions.

"What value did Barbie provide to today's progressive mother, and the progressive young daughter she was raising?"

"Why do we need Barbie?"

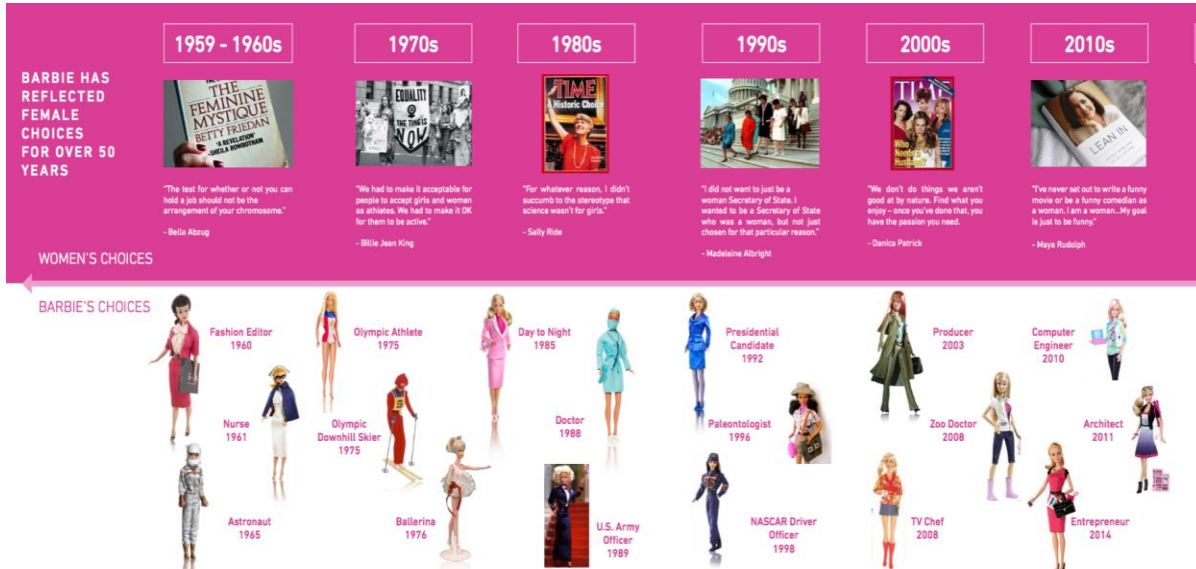
And (perhaps more quietly)... "should we just get rid of her?"

And then a lost piece of brand DNA fell in our laps during a late night of desk research. A quote from Barbie's creator, Ruth Handler, in 1959:



"MY WHOLE PHILOSOPHY OF BARBIE WAS THAT, THROUGH THE DOLL, THE LITTLE GIRL COULD BE ANYTHING SHE WANTED TO BE. BARBIE ALWAYS REPRESENTED THE FACT THAT **A WOMAN HAS CHOICES.**"  
—RUTH HANDLER, BARBIE CREATOR

For decades, Barbie always held up a mirror to society and mirrored (or sometimes predated) women's career choices of that time.



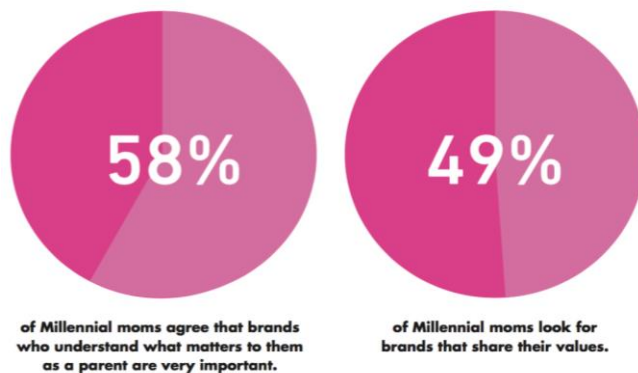
There was a clear relationship between Barbie's substance and style - a sweet spot where the doll mirrored women's wins, in a way that retained the fun and glitz that girls expected from her.

But Barbie got distracted in the early 2000s and those choices became watered down; and in a world where women's rights were at the political forefront, Barbie's original female empowerment message had been lost. Who she had become was not what she was meant to be.

How do we come back to the magic blend of substance and style?

### A solution for a new generation

While Millennial moms were looking for more from their role models, they were also looking for more from their brand choices as well.



Source: Babycenter State of Motherhood report, February 2015

Millennial moms were rejecting brands without substance - and a brand like Barbie, with no discernible purpose behind the plastic, was not on their shopping list.

To project purpose, it was tempting to convince Mattel to release a plus-size brunette leftist Barbie with a protest sign and a “This is what a feminist looks like” T-shirt.

But our deep-dive into child psychology and play exposed a different side of Barbie’s role - one that provided a true developmental benefit for a child. Free play, it turned out, develops the prefrontal cortex - the part of the brain that helps people regulate emotions, solve problems and make plans.<sup>5</sup>

Simply put, it prepares children for adulthood.

To connect this play experience with moms, we would need to remind them of their own play with Barbie – on the floor, letting their imaginations run wild, where their dreams to become a scientist or a teacher at 20 came from pretending to be one with Barbie at 4.

We needed to show them that Barbie was not a pointless plastic plaything, but a blank canvas for a young girl to play, have fun, and try on all of the possibilities ahead of her.

We had our insight in hand:

*Millennial moms had forgotten that playing with Barbie is so much more than just make-believe; it’s the time when a little girl tries on all of the possibilities of who she can become.*

### **The movement for potential and possibilities**

We had a target looking for greater substance from brands.

And a brand with strong role model qualities in her DNA.

It was time to get to work.

Recent movements like Black Lives Matter, Occupy Wall Street and the latest feminist movement were percolating around us. Rather than turn a deaf ear, why not mine it for inspiration for our own movement around a brand with purpose?

We observed that all movements have three elements at their core:

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<sup>5</sup> Sergio Pellis, neuroscientist and professor specialising in peer-play and social competence



In order to shift perceptions around Barbie and turn around a sales decline, we would need to start our own movement.

**I. MOTIVATION - disseminating our noble purpose.**

To begin our movement, we would need to define Barbie's noble purpose. This was not a positioning, but a statement on what the brand believes for young girls.

*Barbie inspires and nurtures the limitless potential inside every girl.*

To set the stage for our noble purpose and our first awareness-driving film, we first deployed an efficient warm up act. A series of simple, sharable social posts that leveraged #ThrowbackThursday to remind our audience of Barbie's long forgotten female leadership history.



Our film, "Imagine the Possibilities", launched in October 2015, right before the crucial holiday season. It featured five young girls playing out the most popular careers based on internal Barbie research, in real-life settings in front of adult bystanders, as if they were grown-ups too. Using hidden-cameras we captured the reactions of the adults as they were charmed by the young girls pretending to be vets, college professors, soccer coaches and museum guides.



At the end of the film we revealed a girl playing out the college professor scenario with Barbie in her room – reminding Millennial moms that it was Barbie who had inspired the little girl to “try on” who she could become in the future.

The film was launched online on YouTube and Facebook and with less than half of our distribution dollars invested, we hit our goal of 10M views. The film went on to garner over 50M views from all over the world, spreading like wildfire in its first 4 months and being named a YouTube ‘Ad of the Year.’<sup>6</sup>

But talk value wasn’t all - we turned the business around too: Barbie reclaimed the number one spot on the National Retail Federation’s Top Toys list for the 2015 holiday season.<sup>7</sup>

After seeing success in the US, “Imagine the Possibilities” received paid support in the UK, Germany, Spain, Portugal, and Canada. The extension of the work globally only further demonstrates that we discovered a universal insight that appeals to any mom that played with Barbie in her childhood.

## II. AGITATION - taking a big, bold step.

After the success of “Imagine the Possibilities,” we knew we needed to pay off our purpose in a bold way - and quickly - in order to put our money where our mouth was. We couldn’t just put out a film and hope that moms believed us - we had to prove it to them.

Mattel had a revolutionary product evolution up its sleeve. But it hadn’t launched yet due to the firestorm that surrounded Barbie – what if we stoked the fire, instead of putting it out?

But the first three month analysis showed us something different. That our initial perception change campaign had already moved the needle enough to merit an incredible shift by the brand.

Simply put, for Barbie to ride the rising tide, then she herself would have to rise to meet it, with a product innovation that made her noble purpose real.

In January 2016, Barbie introduced three new body shapes - Tall, Curvy and Petite - to sit alongside the original shape. Launching with a cover story on Time Magazine, the brand proclaimed to the world that it was ready make good on the noble purpose it had promised a few months’ prior.

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<sup>6</sup> Google Ad Leaderboard, October 2015

<sup>7</sup> National Retail Federation, “After losing out to Disney’s Frozen last year, Barbie back on top of girls’ toy lists,” 24 November 2015





Our mini-documentary gave additional context, featuring young girls playing with the new dolls with emotional commentary from Mattel employees who were so moved by this big step from the brand.

In the first day, the launch generated nearly 1 billion earned impressions, with 97% of the commentary being positive or neutral.<sup>8</sup> This went a long way to demonstrating how the reframing of Barbie's noble purpose, paired with a real product innovation, had moved the needle on moms' perceptions of the brand.

### III. EXPLOSION - reaching the rest of the population.

Once the new dolls had been released, Barbie's noble purpose took off with the help of a TV media buy. This enabled sales to continue their upward trend throughout the first half of 2016.



But we weren't done yet. We needed to ensure our message was received by more than just our initial Millennial mom target. And that meant turning to the other 50% of the population who care for their children - dads.

With a purpose steeped in potential and possibilities, we needed to show dads their own unique

<sup>8</sup> Mattel PR reporting

role that they played in inspiring their daughters.

## FATHERS HAVE A POWERFUL IMPACT ON THEIR DAUGHTERS' FUTURES

Studies have shown that girls with strong relationships with their fathers are better prepared for the challenges of adulthood:

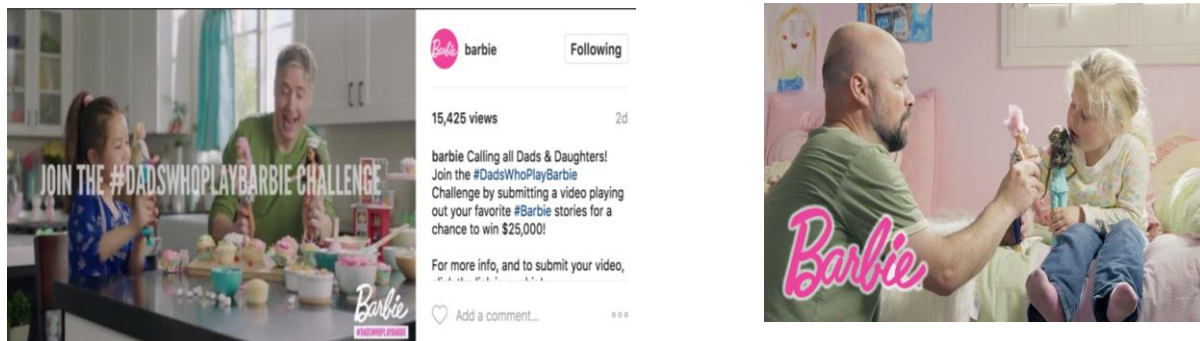
- More likely to graduate from college and enter the workforce in a higher position
- More emotionally stable relationships, particularly with men
- Higher self-esteem and self-image
- Higher cortisol levels, leading to reduced stress

"Well-fathered daughters are less likely to become clinically depressed or develop eating disorders."

Source: Institute of Family Studies, 2014

In short, when a dad invests in spending time with his daughter, it pays back tenfold.

To retain the attention of moms, and capture the attention of dads, we launched a socially-driven campaign, #DadsWhoPlayBarbie, featuring the real-life stories of dads who take time out of their days to spend it with their daughters. Given that viewing of American football games is enjoyed by families and not just dads, we launched during a major Sunday night NFL game and invited dads to share their own stories of playing with Barbie with their little girls.



By the end of the first two weeks, the campaign had garnered nearly 600M earned impressions, with 99% positive or neutral sentiment from moms, dads, and people in general, demonstrating yet again the power of a universal insight around the potential of girls.<sup>9</sup>

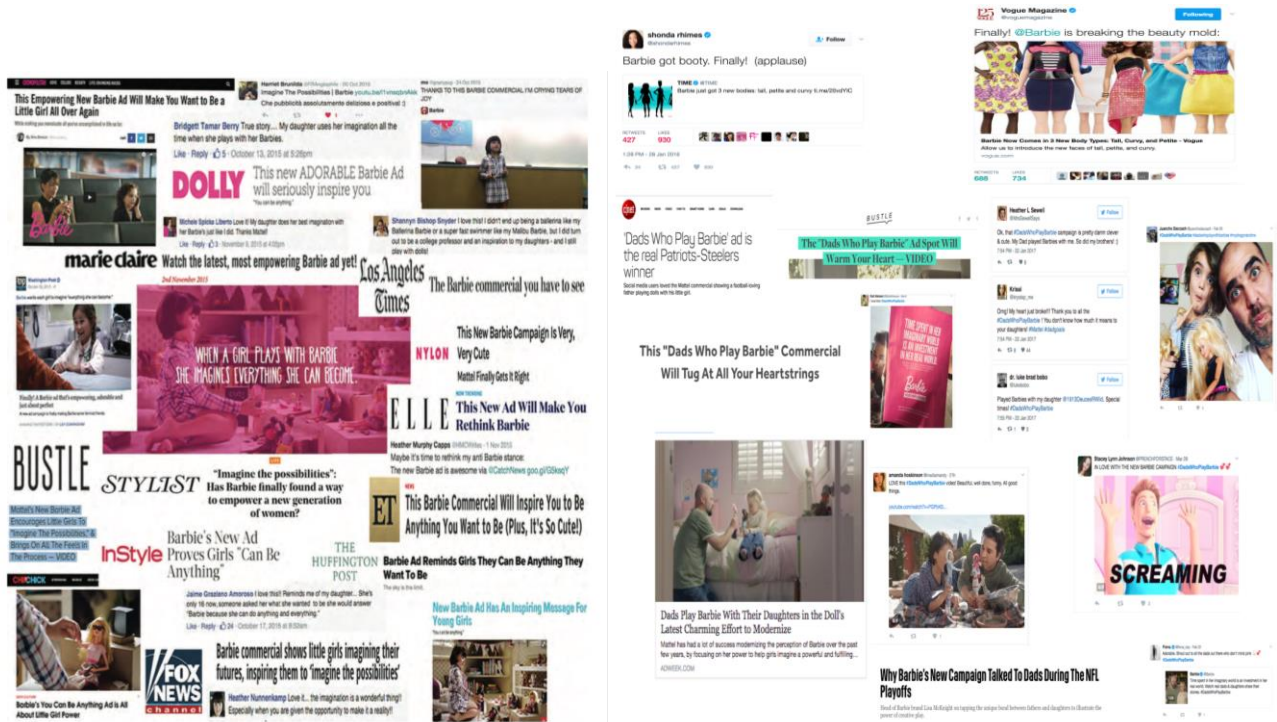
**“Inspiring.” “Empowering.” “I’m crying tears of joy.”**

<sup>9</sup> Mattel PR reporting

By remaining true to Barbie's brand DNA and modernizing it for today's cultural conversation, we were able to change perceptions of a 58-year-old brand and return Barbie to growth.

What's more, we continued to build on that narrative with a landmark product innovation and an explosive mass campaign, ensuring that Barbie's noble purpose wouldn't be easily dismissed, forgotten, or papered over.

And the public noticed:



In less than two years, we reversed a two-year sales decline, improved Mattel's share price by 36%<sup>10</sup> and returned Barbie to the top of the Christmas chart, all by reminding moms exactly what they loved about Barbie in the first place.

Not bad for 11.5 inches of plastic.

<sup>10</sup> Google Finance: Stock Market Mattel 5 year Google