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Series casts spell on partners

By Gail Schiller

NEW YORK -- With an unusual head start, "WordWorld," a new PBS preschool show funded in large part by a multimillion-dollar grant from the Department of Education, lined up several licensing partners and an exclusive retail deal with Target even before it bowed this week.

It is rare for licensees to sign onto a TV property before determining ratings or the success of a show. Even most producers and networks prefer to wait and see how a new series goes before lining up merchandising partners.

The concept of the show, which depicts the letters that spell a word morphing into the animals or objects they spell (i.e. the letters D-O-G turn into an animated dog), was appealing enough to Target and licensees including Mega Bloks, Spin Master, Sababa Toys and Rose Art to sign deals with WordWorld.

"The whole idea behind the license is a great idea on its own," said Harold Chizick, spokesman for Mega Brands, makers of Mega Bloks. "I think the show is going to give our products even greater exposure, but in terms of play value and educational value, the benefit kids are getting out of the product is a big plus. We bought into the whole concept of word building and wordplay. We saw a natural fit for our company and what we do in the construction aisle based on the innate play pattern of letters becoming words becoming things."

"It speaks to the uniqueness of the property," added Don Moody, founder and CEO of parent company Word World Llc. and executive producer of the series, which premiered Monday. "Most people wouldn't have the number of licensees we have nor would they have the retail exclusives we have. It is because the content itself was developed as multiplatform content that the property lives as a toy even if there is no show. We're launching a brand, and part of our brand is a television show."

In fall 2005, when the show was in development, retailer FAO Schwarz featured WordWorld product in a boutique area when its New York store reopened after a brief closure. "I thought it was really innovative and interesting and felt it could stand on its own as a product even without having the show

on TV yet," said David Niggli, president and chief merchandising officer for FAO Schwarz.

Licensed products will hit Target shelves in January. Moody said as part of its exclusive retail partnership, all Target stores in America will feature a seven-foot space in the toy department with all of WordWorld's branded products in one area. There also will be a boutique area featuring WordWorld products on Target.com, he said.

Alex Kay, executive vp of Word World and a producer of the show, said WordWorld was able to garner interest from licensees and retailers at such an early stage by manufacturing some of the products themselves.

Word World Llc. is part of the Ready to Learn Partnership, a public-private consortium awarded a five-year, \$47 million grant from the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Innovation and Improvement. Additional members of the consortium include Chicago PBS member station WTTW and the Michael Cohen Group, an international research firm responsible for formative and summative testing of the show. The grant will be used by the consortium to produce three other TV shows.

WordWorld was created by Moody and his cousin Jacqueline Moody, with children's television veteran Tina Peel serving as executive vp production, education and research. The show is directed by Emmy-winning children's TV director Olexa Hewryk.

Moody, an artist who previously founded a clothing company and a Manhattan-based ad agency, came up with the idea for WordWorld following two years of research into the field of literacy prompted by his decision to change careers when his wife became pregnant. "I realized I was getting ready to be a father and that meant being a citizen," he said. "I changed my life. As I set out on this new career, I had in my mind aside from putting dollars in my pocket, I had to add some other kind of value to the universe and humanity."

WordWorld's curriculum is based on scientifically based reading research including research from the National Reading Panel, which was assembled by Congress and is comprised of leading scientists in reading research, representatives from colleges of education, teachers, educational administrators and parents.

Moody said Word World Llc. is projecting \$36 million in revenue in 2008 based on the sale of licensed product.