

PRIMARY & SECONDARY SOURCES Reading 4

HOW THE FURBY FLIES

Several factors determine how much demand there is for a particular product in the marketplace. Among these factors are consumers' willingness and ability to purchase an item. At no time is the law of demand more evident than at the holiday season, when shoppers scour the stores in anxious pursuit of the hot new toy. As you read the excerpt below about a holiday frenzy involving a toy called the Furby, consider the many reasons demand for this product increased. Then answer the questions that follow.



Your kid won't stop begging for a Furby, right? She says they squawk in kiddie gibberish and make gurgling noises and sing songs. And you've driven to every mall in the state and still can't find it. Your next-door neighbor traded his car for a dozen on a black-market website, but he's hoarding them until just before Christmas, prime time for scalping. You're stuck with a K Mart waiting list and cheerful lies from salespeople. . . . So who's to blame? How did a little fuzzy doll become crucial to your eight-year-old's survival?

As with most major problems of the late 20th century, it's the media's fault. Each February, a cabal of toy hawkers and toy reporters huddle at Toy Fair in . . . New York City. The hawkers try to coax the reporters into naming their toy the "hottest." Virtually every newspaper and TV station runs some version of this hot-new-toy story. . . . This has happened before, . . . but the creation of the Furby—more important, the invention of a Furby craze—has set a new standard for an absurd game. Unlike even Tickle Me Elmo, the Furby became a must-have item this Christmas before almost any kid had made it say "kah a-tay."

. . . After ToyFair '98, *TIME* ran a Techwatch item mentioning them. *USA Today* also noticed, and after an electronics fair in May, *CBS This Morning* did a segment. That ginned up interest last summer, even though Furby's complicated innards meant it wouldn't be ready for stores until fall.

Eager shoppers began hunting for Furbies over the summer and were further inspired when *Wired* magazine ran a huge Furby feature in September, breeding even more TV stories. "It was incredible, all these reporters calling up and saying 'Why is this so hot? You can't find this thing anywhere,'" says Jim Silver, publisher of *Toy Book*, a trade publication. "But the company hadn't even shipped any—of course they couldn't find it. It became a self-fulfilling prophecy."

When Tiger [the manufacturer] finished the Furby—on schedule, in October—many more parents than usual

knew about the new toy. Initial shipments sold out almost immediately.

. . . Though some toymakers have reportedly tightened initial supplies to heighten interest (think Beanie Babies), Tiger had no such conspiratorial plans. . . . Before September, retailers had ordered 1 million, and a confident Tiger produced 1.3 million. But after all the publicity, perhaps 5 million could sell. . . .

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[Likewise,] Tickle Me Elmo tested fairly well in the slew of kid-judged contests held every year. . . . But Tyco, the Mattel-owned manufacturer, didn't expect it to become a giant seller. Then Rosie O'Donnell tickled Elmo on her show, and demand exploded. Once again, scarcity inspired collectors, reporters discovered a "hot" story, and your kid bawled his eyes out . . . because Santa couldn't find Elmo before Christmas morn.

. . . But it remains to be seen whether kids will like all the Furbies their parents are trying so hard to find. . . .

Cloud, John. "How the Furby Flies." *Time*, November 30, 1998.

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PRIMARY & SECONDARY SOURCES (continued) **Reading 4**

ANALYZING THE READING

1. What major factor contributed to the demand for Furbies, according to the author?

2. What happened to shipments of Furbies as soon as they arrived at stores?

3. How was the success of the Furby “a self-fulfilling prophecy” (when the act of believing something will happen actually causes it to happen)?

4. What other factors might result in an increased demand for a certain product? Give examples.

5. Do you think every holiday season will feature a toy or other item in high demand by consumers? Explain your answer.
