HONORING THE NEW... and IMPROVED
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TOM SCHLEGEL | Vice president of product development, Radio Flyer

RADIO FLYER | Innovating on a classic: the little red wagon

BY CHERYL V. JACKSON
cjackson@suntimes.com

It’s carried the company for 90 years, Radio Flyer Inc.’s little red wagon.

And the newest version of the vehicle — the Ultimate Family Wagon — not only reinvents an American icon, it creates a whole new mode of transport for kiddies and gear, thanks to a patented five-way flip-and-fold seat and a removable UV protection canopy.

The reinvention of the little red wagon is so remarkable, Radio Flyer earned a 2007 Chicago Innovation Award.

“This is more like the minivan of wagons — cupholders, seats, seat belts, storage compartment—a lot of the things today’s on-the-go moms are looking for,” said Tom Schlegel, vice president of product development. “There’s more functionality and features and versatility.”

Since its fall launch, the plastic Ultimate Family Wagon has become the second best seller for the Chicago-based, family-owned company that was founded with the creation of the original metal wagon in 1917.

Radio Flyer’s top mover is the Pathfinder, a popular vehicle for families transporting children and gear to outdoor events.

Company staffers noted those wagons provided no storage and no sun protection for the passengers.

Families improvised storage and protection solutions by bringing cooler bags and clipping umbrellas onto the wagons.

“We wanted to provide customers with a plastic wagon option that provided the features we felt they wanted,” Schlegel said. “As designers, that’s the key thing we do — we pull out the latent needs of consumers, the things consumers want but they’re not necessarily telling us.”

Product development manager Mark Johnson hit upon the idea of seats being able to be flipped into different configurations, to make for different storage compartment sizes.

The design is so innovative it earned patent protection from the U.S. Patent Office.

The Ultimate Family Wagon is the latest plastic wagon from the company, which up until 2002, had made only metal wagons.

The metal wagons are made in China, while the plastic vehicles are manufactured in Chicago.

The leader in the toy wagon market, Radio Flyer introduces 10 to 15 new products a year.

“We’re looking at what’s the next key innovation we can bring to the wagon market,” Schlegel said.

The designers have plenty of inspiration for new products at their homes.

Schlegel is the father of 2-, 5-, 7- and 9-year-old boys. Johnson has three kids, ages 2, 3 and 5.

Said Schlegel, “We’ve got a bunch of test subjects here.”

At Radio Flyer’s headquarters, Tom Schlegel (rear left), vice president of design, and Mark Johnson, product development manager, get some help from their team: Jack Schlegel (from left), 9; Max Schlegel, 2; Sam Schlegel, 5; Ben Schlegel, 7; Ruby Johnson, 4; Lewis Johnson, 2; and Will Johnson, 5.

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On the Radio Flyer families