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Kaboose's Zeeks Goes Underground

The Toronto-based firm's 'tween site gets a facelift – and a new content focus.

Toronto-based kids and family website operator Kaboose Inc. is in the process of giving a facelift to some of its properties, including a planned foray into user-generated media.

The company has been working with a UK-based firm to revamp Zeeks, its website targeting nine- to 14-year-olds, and is now putting the final touches on the project internally. "We're finishing it up here, and we expect to relaunch Zeeks in October," says Jonathan Graff, director and president of Kaboose.

Another of the firm's properties, Funschool, received a soft relaunch in August. While Zeeks' core audience is the 'tween market, Funschool is aimed at three- to 12-year-olds. Kaboose also operates sites catering to mothers and covering such areas as scrapbooking, pregnancy advice, and more.

Both kids' sites were last redesigned approximately five years ago, when Kaboose acquired them. But in addition to updating Zeeks' look, feel and usability, the firm is going beyond its own internal resources and those of sponsors and advertisers in the search for new content. Zeeks Underground, as this new facet of Zeeks has been dubbed, is somewhat of a break from the site's previous focus on developing in-house content and distributing content from large media companies such as The Walt Disney Co. and Viacom International Inc. "Zeeks Underground has nothing to do with the existing site," Graff says.

Through Zeeks Underground, the company hopes to draw on outside content running the gamut from the first-time amateur to professional producers looking to break into the 'tween market. "Generally there's not an established distribution mechanism for people who want to reach this audience with their content," notes Graff. "If the major players haven't picked up on you – and granted, everybody wants to get their content to the major players – how do you get grassroots [exposure] to the 'tween audience?"

Zeeks Underground is also somewhat of a recognition of the massive popularity of video-sharing services such as Youtube and social networking sites such as Myspace. Indeed, Zeeks users will be able to post their own homemade video, games, comics and more. "We think [the way for] Zeeks Underground to play a little bit on the Myspace community side [and] a little bit on the Youtube side...is to have an area where all the independent content producers, be it games, video, comics, other animations, [can showcase their work]," Graff says.

But while Youtube and Myspace also feature content aimed at mature audiences, Zeeks Underground plans to attract more family-friendly material by screening all submissions before they're posted. Kaboose's kids properties already feature chat and message boards moderated and monitored by adults, creating what Graff calls a "filtered community."

"At the end of the day, nobody can just post a video to Zeeks Underground," Graff says. "You have to send us your content, we have to make sure it's appropriate for our user base, we need to make sure it's something that's not going to offend our clients, and then it's got an opportunity to be on the site."

And like Youtube and other sites, Graff says Zeeks Underground will serve more as an aggregator than a tastemaker, letting user feedback decide the relative ranking and placement of pieces of content. "We'll only make a decision on what we think is appropriate, not what we think is good or bad," he says. "The community can decide that."

Given their heavy reliance on advertising, Kaboose's kids' properties have to remain mindful of rules and codes of conduct dictating how youngsters can and cannot be marketed to. As such, while advergaming and other ad-driven content will undoubtedly make their way onto the Zeeks Underground site, they will be labelled differently from other types of content. However, Graff says, "clients generally don't lose out by that. Whether a...game is listed as an ad or not, the reality is if it's a good game and fun and entertaining, the client is going to get engagement out of it."

Neither of Kaboose's kid-centric sites charge users a fee for accessing content; rather, they're supported by advertising from an array of corporations eager to reach kids and their families, from Kellogg Co. to Mega Bloks Inc. While many of Kaboose's content partners are using a fee-for-download model for some content, Graff says Zeeks won't move into that space "at the expense of our existing free games. We're not looking to bring people into Zeeks Underground or work with content providers to actually sell their content – that's not part of the model."

More than anything else, however, Zeeks Underground is an experiment of sorts at present, and not necessarily indicative of the future of the site, Graff says. "Zeeks Underground today is nothing but a compilation of some content that is not even live on our sites yet," he says. "It's hard to say where it'll go, [but] it's not something that we're hedging all our bets on Zeeks on."

Nevertheless, Graff is confident it's a move that will build on the momentum Zeeks has created thus far and broaden the site's appeal. "We're at the stage where we're putting the word out there, we're getting some good feedback, and whether we start with 10 or 20 or 50 video clips, and 10 games, it doesn't matter," he says. "It'll propel itself from there if there's traction on it."