

## Playaway: Grab-and-Go Audio

by Mary Burkey

**T**he Playaway preloaded digital audio player has become a circulation hit in libraries. Each unit (one half the size of a deck of

cards) holds one audiobook title in a durable housing and comes with a battery, lanyard, and earbuds. The controls are easy to use (especially important for seniors and the visually impaired), and the content cannot be erased or duplicated. Playaways complement existing cassette, CD, and download formats in audio collections.

On a recent visit to Findaway World (the parent company of Playaway) in suburban Cleveland, I spoke with chief strategy officer Blake Squires, one of Findaway's three founders. Squires told how the initial spark for Playaway came from a previous business venture to provide digital downloads. Once the preloaded player concept was developed, the company shifted its focus from music to the booming audiobook market.

After the product enjoyed a successful launch in late 2005, librarians began contacting Findaway. Squires admitted, "We had on blinders until libraries started coming to us." Librarians were asking for MARC records, library packaging, and a catalog of content. Findaway turned to the Chicago and New York Public Libraries for advice on library needs. The explosive growth of the library market, coupled with school and military orders, necessitated a move to a larger facility to meet production needs. Squires said that in 2007, "We marketed to 1,200 retail locations, and in the 2008 holiday season, we maintained only 40 retail markets—all in airports. Our business is now 99.8 percent institution-based: military, schools, and public libraries."

Touring the production floor, Gene LaMarca, director of operations, described the manufacturing process. The plastic housing, memory cards, lanyards, and earbuds are manufactured in China and all other fabrication takes place in Ohio. The first assembly step is loading the digital content on each player with a proprietary gadget that holds 16 units at a time. Then the units are labeled, and batteries are installed. Titles are packaged in a variety of styles, from lockable library clamshells to disposable paper for military shipment. Playaways bound for distributors are shipped directly, while more than 30,000 titles are stored at Findaway for individual sales. The hands-on assembly line currently produces about 60,000 titles a month, with a daily record—6,645 units—broken during my recent visit. The focus on high-quality manufacturing results in units that can withstand more than 1,000 plays. Yet, LaMarca keeps his eye on the company mission, "The player itself isn't what we're selling, it's the content."

Marketing Director Caroline Barni and Content Strategy Manager David Perrotta discussed distribution with me. Findaway distributes to more than 15,000 libraries and schools across the country and has a variety of initiatives with the military, in which

large orders of Playaways are distributed to 80 bases throughout the world. Public and school library sales take place through multiple channels. Findaway licenses audiobook content from more than 80 publishing partners for the Playaway format, which is then sold through the company Web site or distributors, including Follett, BWI, Baker & Taylor, Ingram, and Brodart. Findaway also manufactures titles in the Playaway format for audiobook publisher Recorded Books; sole marketing and distribution rights of these titles are retained by Recorded Books.

What do librarians say about Playaways? Evelyn Janoch, Adult Services manager at Rocky River (OH) Public Library, shares her views. "We have about 300 Playaways in our collection, and circulation averages about 250 per month, so obviously not too many are on the shelf at any one time. We do not supply batteries, but we offer first-time users a free set of earbuds. We've found a steadily increasing patron base. Many like them for their portability and ease of use while walking, exercising, or other activities. Some patrons also connect the headphone jack directly to the audio system in their car. Playaways have a simplified keypad that is easily memorized by those with vision problems. I see Playaways becoming a mainstay of the library's audio collection because of their convenient design, in conjunction with other audiobook formats." *Booklist* media reviewer Candace Smith, who is head of Readers' Advisory at Villa Park (IL) Public Library, says that their collection began small, with 18 units purchased through Friends of

the Library donations. "Initially patrons were a bit confused because the outside packaging that holds the Playaway resembles a video case so they thought we went back to buying videos. But once they tried the units, they were thrilled with their portability and ease of use." Smith's library does not supply batteries or earphones, but both are available

for purchase at checkout. Although some patrons say the sound quality is not as sharp as that of CDs, "the convenience definitely outweighs that drawback." Smith also reports that circulation has been building steadily, and "We intend to do more promotion and add to our collection."

**W**hat's on the horizon for the Playaway? Squires predicts that Playaways will meet the needs of a large portion of patrons for years to come. The success of the Playaway format has resulted in competitors such as TitlePlay and black-market counterfeits. Squires says that competition is a good thing. But he also says their product is more than just a physical box. Their ability to load publisher content securely in Ohio, supply high-quality labeling, ship in a timely fashion, provide value-added services, and offer great content is what sets them apart. "All of these attributes combine to make Playaway a brand product," says Squires, who also tells how Playaway is designed to mimic a book (a glossy cover, a spine, and a keypad on the back). "We evangelize the format, share why it's good, get in relationships with libraries, and make sure the content is of great quality. Playaway is not a piece of consumer electronics, Playaway is a platform for delivering content."

Mary Burkey is a librarian at Olentangy Local Schools, Columbus, Ohio, and a frequent contributor to *Booklist*.

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