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Fun and Function: "Empowering Different"

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Aviva Weiss, CEO and creative director of Fun and Function



By Andrea K. Hammer

According to the "Women in Leadership Report" by The Forum of Executive Women, a female CEO headed only five of the Philadelphia region's top 100 companies last year. In addition, 15 percent of C-suite leaders were women, an increase from 11 percent since 2011.

"Our tagline is 'empowering different,'" says **Aviva Weiss**, CEO and creative director of **Fun and Function**, which offers special-needs toys and tools. "It's not just about kids but empowering people to utilize their differences to their benefit. What makes us unique and different is, to some degree, our competitive advantage."

As one of the fastest-growing private companies in the Philadelphia area, **Fun and Function** experienced 123% growth from 2014 to 2016. Aviva's husband and chief operating officer Haskel Weiss says last year's revenue was just over \$8.2 million. Overseeing financial, import and legal operations as well as business strategy, technology and work-flow operations, he anticipates the company will surpass \$10 million in revenue this year.

Now based in Narberth, the company has also developed The Active Mind School Partnership. This learning program strives to create an environment in nationwide schools where all children can thrive and have their needs met.

Company Launch Based on Personal Needs and Expertise

Twelve years ago, one of the Weiss's children was delayed reaching motor milestones and had additional sensory needs. As a mother getting services to help her own children and an occupational therapist who previously worked at Children's Hospital of Philadelphia and St. Christopher's Hospital, Aviva recognized a lack of engaging therapeutic tools. Founded in 2006, Fun and Function assembled a collaborative team of therapists, educators and artists, which currently includes four full-time employees, four part-time workers and contractors.

"I look at things through the lens of a therapist. For children, their primary occupation is play," Aviva says. "How do we create something that will help them meet their developmental goals while engaging in play, so it does not feel like therapy but feels fun?"

Although the company's primary market is children with autism and sensory processing disorder, Fun and Function also serves teens and adults with special needs. They include people with physical disabilities who use a wheelchair and others with learning disabilities impeding their ability to function. A wide range of products include weighted blankets and chew toys to increase a sense of calm as well as Discovery Putty to strengthen hands and fine motor skills.

Long Product Development Process Requiring Patience

Product development at Fun and Function can take up to 2 or 3 years. The process involves hatching an idea, creating the drawing, testing different materials and making and assessing a sample. Then, the sample is sent out to children, family members and friends.

If a material is not working or the children or adults don't like a toy or tool, the team returns to the drawing board. Some products die along the way.

"It took us many years to get where we are today. The fact that I'm making a difference in the world was something that kept me going," **Aviva Weiss** says. "It was a very difficult process trying to figure this all out and having the patience just waiting for it to work."

She adds that challenges crop up all the time. Some involve identifying what will speak to the market, dealing with inventory issues and learning legal regulations about safety testing and the requirements.

Other points to address include building a team as well as customer support and training.

Business Lessons to Help Companies Thrive

Here are some of Aviva's insights about her experiences as a CEO:

Engage in meaningful work: "I like to do things that speak to me and make me feel happy to wake up and go to work in the morning and to contribute. To be successful is to be engaged in something that is meaningful to you and doesn't feel like a job but a calling. When you're doing that, it obviously needs to make sense."

Be patient, and look at the long-term picture: We wouldn't have kept going if we didn't see there was a demand for it... That is what enables me to keep being patient and look at the long-term picture and say, 'I'm in this for the long term because it's so meaningful.'"

Figure out how to juggle roles for greater empowerment: "It's hard to set your goals and ambitions high while trying to do something like raising kids, which is incredibly involved and time consuming. To figure out how to do both empowers me to do the other. The fact that I feel fulfilled at work and make a difference enables me to be a better mother. It certainly took time to get there."

Build your confidence, and believe in your capabilities: "As females—I can't speak for everyone—we question ourselves a lot: 'Am I doing a good or good enough job?' We want to please. We need to get up and say: 'I am capable. I am confident. I can do this.'"

Encourage different viewpoints in a collaborative process: "I love differences. At work, people may not tell me their opinions. I prefer people who yell at me and tell me why I'm wrong. They are the ones I turn to all the time. It's poking the holes and listening to other perspectives that creates something better off in the long run."

Andrea K. Hammer, a Philadelphia-based freelance writer, is the founder and director of Artsphoria: Arts, Business and Technology Center and [Artsphoria International Magazine](#).



AVIVA WEISS

FUN AND FUNCTION