

ON THE ORIGINS OF BRANDS AND THE PEOPLE WHO BUILD THEM

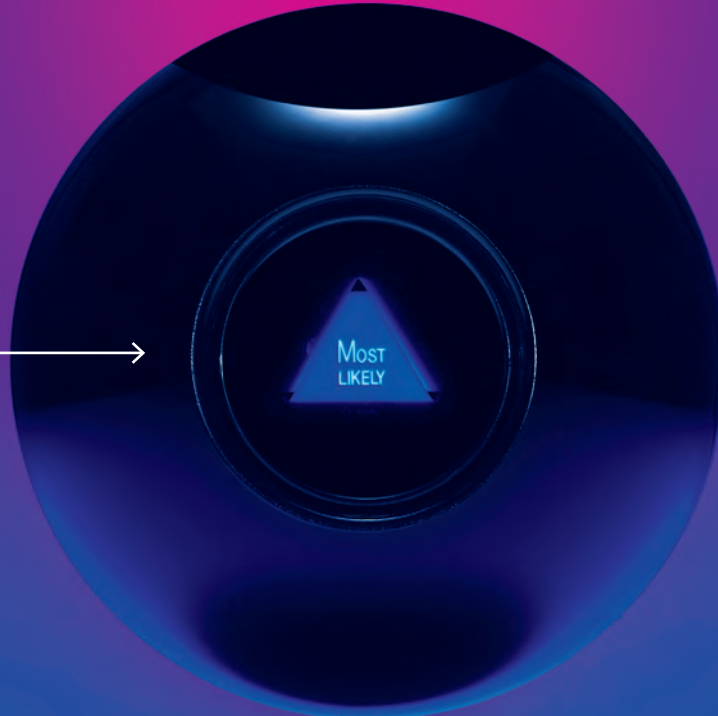
Perspective

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THE SHELL

Originally a cylinder, then a crystal ball, the toy became the Magic 8 Ball in 1950 after the Brunswick Billiards company wanted to use it as a promotional item.



YOUR FUTURE!

Floating inside a cylindrical tube filled with alcohol and blue dye, the icosahedron floats to the window with one of 20 answers. Believing it is up to you.

BRAND NAME

Magic 8 Ball

FOR 65 YEARS, PEOPLE HAVE LOOKED AT THIS BILLIARD BALL TO SEE THE FUTURE. CAN YOU BELIEVE IT? SIGNS POINT TO YES.

BY ROBERT KLARA



PHOTO: NICK FERRARI

BRAND NAME



The Magic 8 Ball's "advice" is generated at random, courtesy of an icosahedron (a 20-sided die) that floats inside the cylinder of blue liquid. It takes about 72 throws for each of the ball's 20 answers to turn up once in the window. Given the fact that a toy's job is not to make people miserable, half of the ball's answers are positive. Of the remaining 10, five are negative and five are vague. Below, all possible fates.

Positive responses:

- Yes
- Yes, definitely
- Signs point to yes
- You may rely on it
- As I see it, yes
- It is certain
- It is decidedly so
- Most likely
- Without a doubt
- Outlook good

Vague responses:

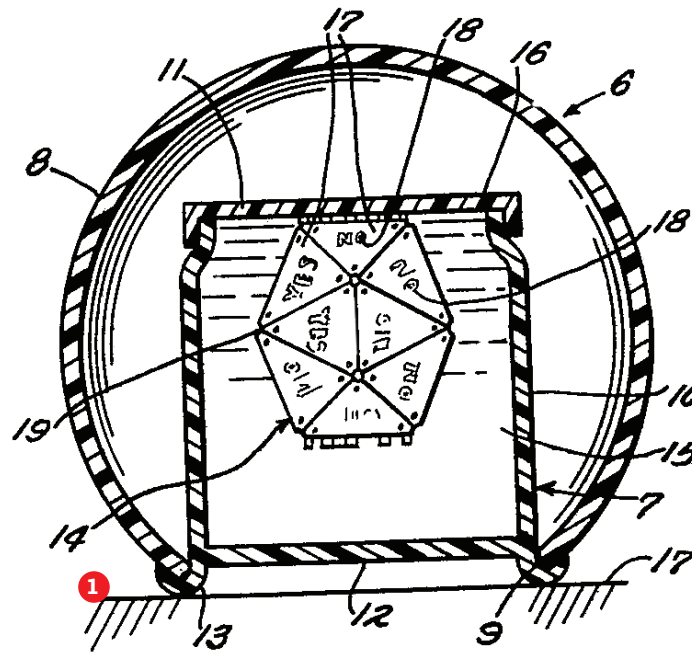
- Cannot predict now
- Better not tell you now
- Ask again later
- Reply hazy, try again
- Concentrate and ask again

Negative responses:

- My reply is no
- Outlook not so good
- Don't count on it
- My sources say no
- Very doubtful



Have a ball The original 1950 packaging



INVENTOR.
Abe C. Bookman

Fig. 1

1. Bookman's revised patent, showing the 20-sided die and the ball that would make it famous **2.** First sold as the **Syco-Seer**, the toy failed. **3.** The **Syco-Slate**, a pocket version, did no better.




Abe Bookman's toy was a flop. He should have seen it coming. After all, the toy was a fortune-telling device.

It was 1950, and for the previous four years, Bookman's company Alabe Crafts had tried to market the Syco-Seer. Sold as a "miracle home fortune teller," the toy was a cylinder filled with dark liquid containing a pair of floating dice, their surfaces scribed with fateful predictions. Users would ask a question, shake up the Syco-Seer and then wait for the device to give them the answer. Only there weren't many users, and Alabe's nesting the cylinder inside a crystal ball in 1948 hadn't helped.

Then Brunswick Billiards called in search of a promotional toy. Would Alabe consider putting its fortune teller inside of a big eight ball? Alabe said sure. And the rest is toy history.

Today, 68 years after it was invented, and despite high-tech competition from toys like drones and video games, the old Magic 8 Ball has held its own. It ranks among Time magazine's 100 greatest toys of all time and still sells around 1 million units a year.

And why? "It's a simple, self-contained, self-explanatory item that plays into something we're all curious about—the future," said Mike Drake, special projects director for Mezco Toyz and a noted toy expert. But the true magic in the Magic 8 Ball lay in the branding that Brunswick



Fast Facts
1944 Albert Carter invents Syco-Seer
1950 Alabe Crafts debuts the Magic 8 Ball
1987 Mattel acquires the toy
1 million Number of units sold yearly as of 2012

inadvertently added. By turning the toy from a crystal ball into a billiard ball, Drake explained, "You take away the occult element of it being a fortune teller's ball, and now it's just a fun thing."

Today owned by toy giant Mattel, the Magic 8 Ball is still a fun thing—even if its roots really are in the occult. Its inventor was Abe Bookman's brother-in-law Albert Carter, whose mother was a clairvoyant who claimed to communicate with, among other ghosts, Arthur Conan Doyle. But keeping things on the fun side has been key to the toy's appeal. Alabe Crafts consulted with a psychologist to determine the responses that would appear on the icosahedron (the floating polygon that replaced the original dice in the toy's liquid interior). Of the 20 answers, 10 are positive, five of them are neutral, and only five are negative. "And even the negative ones aren't that negative," Drake said.

There's another good reason for that. Anecdotal evidence suggests that the Magic 8 Ball has always been more popular with adults than kids, and adults tend to ask weightier questions. "As we grow older, the future takes on a whole different meaning," Drake said, "and the questions are deeper."

How deep? When Philadelphia Phillies pitcher Cliff Lee faced a grilling about his losing team's prospects at a press conference last month, he read off his optimistic responses from a Magic 8 Ball.

"It takes a lot of pressure off me," he said.