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CONSUMED

Earphone Identity

By [ROB WALKER](#)

Emotibuds

Remember when white earbuds had status? Jonathan Hall does. But these days, as he and his fellow rail commuters in the tristate area know, the iPod's once-cutting-edge headphones confer as much distinction as a gray-flannel suit. A couple of years ago, Hall and his wife, Kate, decided that there must be a way to capitalize on this shift. iPod add-ons, including cases and "skins," had become big business by then — but those items decorated only the main device, which was usually stuffed in a pocket, out of sight. Today, the Halls, who are both 29, have sold tens of thousands of pairs of flexible rubber charms called Emotibuds, which clip onto earbuds, almost like earrings. Each pair (they sell for \$12 for a set of three pairs) features a blocky little face that incorporates an emoticon into a cute cartoon visage. There are a variety of faces, each set against a bright color and corresponding with a mood, like "starry-eyed" or "frisky." Recently, Emotibuds were part of the online design store [FredFlare.com](#)'s Next Big Thing contest, and while they didn't win, the store has had to reorder them at least four times to meet demand.

Stories like this make designing for customization-mad consumers sound incredibly easy, but there were more than a few hurdles for the Halls. When they first dreamed up their idea, they knew nothing about making a product. They contacted a manufacturer of injection-molded plastics, but they didn't know how to make the detailed computer-aided drawings such manufacturers require. Hall bought the appropriate "For Dummies" book, and after some false starts they sent out the drawings and received price quotes only to realize they needed an investor. Not surprisingly, potential investors wanted to know if the Halls had any market research suggesting consumer interest. So the couple put the drawings of their design on a Web site and sent e-mail messages to about 10 online cool-hunter types, in the hope of gauging interest. That was February 2006. "It just sat there," Hall says of the site. They continued their day jobs (Jonathan works as an education consultant, Kate as a painter) and left Emotibuds on the back burner. "Way back there," Jonathan clarifies.

Then, eight months later, Hall received a sudden flood of e-mail from people demanding to know where they could buy Emotibuds. It turned out that an online cool-hunter — [thecoolhunter.net](#) — had belatedly posted a link to their site. The Halls, of course, had no actual product. They decided that with the help of an uncle, they would bankroll a first run themselves. By the start of this year, Emotibuds were popping up all over the cool-little-design-product ecosystem, which includes retailers like the online shop Shana Logic as well as the Daily Candy e-mail newsletter.

The design store FredFlare.com qualifies as a venerable institution in that world, having existed for nearly 10 years. Its founders, Chris Bick and Keith Carollo, created their online boutique to sell things that are, to pick representative adjectives from a conversation with the very chipper Carollo, "cute," "adorable," "sweet" and "supercute." Nominees from their previous Next Big Thing contests have been picked up by Urban Outfitters, Anthropologie and other trend-friendly stores. This year's nominees included a modular brownie pan from the kitchen-design company Baker's Edge (subsequently featured in Real Simple magazine) and apparel from Supayana, a dressmaker who has developed a fanatical following on eBay (and who won the contest).

With their bright, Hello Kitty-esque look, Emotibuds fit the relentlessly upbeat Fred Flare aesthetic. “You know how when you’re a kid and your mom takes you to the toy aisle at Kmart and you can’t believe how awesome everything is and you’re freaking out?” Carollo says. “That’s the vibe we’re going for.” It’s easy to get cynical about the compulsion to personalize inanimate objects. But it’s hard to stay cynical in the face of Carollo’s enthusiasm. He theorizes that tech toys have become must-customize items for people who shop in stores like his because cellphones and iPods are “kinda like your pets” these days.

Hall is obviously happy that Emotibuds are selling but still sees the whole thing as a learning-experience side project. Wary of more manufacturing hassles, the Halls have expanded by making the graphic faces — now under the rubric “Emotibles” — available on baby clothing, and they are experimenting with greeting cards. Carollo, needless to say, is optimistic. Emotibuds, he suggests via e-mail, are “the equivalent of adding a :) to your iPod. Personally, I think we could use more :) in the world right now.”

Rob Walker will be taking a book leave. Consumed will resume Sept. 16.

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