

Children's publisher Alligator has been a leading mass market supplier of licensed and non-licensed colouring and activity books and creative play stationery, both in the UK and internationally, since 2000. Co-founders Neil Rodol and Andrew Rabin tell LSB how super-fast, hassle-free fulfilment has become the company's USP.

# Make it snappy

Alligator works with some of the biggest licences in children's entertainment, from Barbie and Paw Patrol to The Gruffalo and The Very Hungry Caterpillar, designing and producing high-quality great value products that retail at supermarkets, department stores, garden centres, toy shops, stationers and more. "We've got about 100+ active customers nationally and abroad, from independent book chains to Sainsbury's, WH Smith and Morrisons," says Alligator co-founder Neil Rodol. "So, when a licensor works with us, they know they're getting a very wide footprint at retail."

Neil, who oversees licensing, operations and finance, and co-founder Andrew Rabin, who manages sales, product development, design and creative, worked for the same publishing house for a decade before deciding to go into business together, setting up Alligator from a small rented office, armed with just a fax machine and two Nokia mobiles, purchased from The Orange Shop in Hampstead. "We still

use those same phone numbers today," says Neil.

Now based in Finchley, Alligator operates with a team of 15, many of whom started as youngsters and are now thirtysomethings with young children – useful for helping Alligator to keep abreast of kids' entertainment trends. Unlike many other suppliers, the company holds enough stock to meet immediate demand of every item it has for

sale in its Midlands warehouse facility, and has made hassle-free, fast fulfilment the USP of the business.

"We act almost like a restaurant with a huge à la carte menu," says Neil. "If, say, you want a Barbie colouring book, with a traditional publisher you might have to wait months for the next print run, whereas we have that item readily available; Sainsbury's can phone up and say, 'We want 5,000 by tomorrow,' and we'll deliver. Everything is in stock, all the time, because we invest our money heavily in inventory."



**Inset:** Co-founders Neil Rodol (left) and Andrew Rabin.



**Inset:** Alligator's branded products are now all made from FSC-certified paper.

Although Alligator also produces generic titles, 70% of its offering is licensed. Classic IP such as Thomas the Tank Engine does steady business, while relative newcomers like CoComelon and Gabby's Dollhouse – brands that, in Neil's words, “exploded onto the scene” – initially entail large risk and creative investment, but offer much bigger returns. The way streaming services have fragmented the children's IP market makes it “difficult to jump on everything,” Neil acknowledges. “But we do take a chance on new brands, and when we do sign a brand, we support it. If we tell the licensor we're going to make 10 or 12 products based on that IP, we make them.”

With Alligator's products all designed in-house, the company is quick to respond to customer and retail demand. For each licence, the company aims to produce multiple formats, from classic colouring and sticker books to scratch art and painting sets, play packs and aqua magic sets.

“We produce EDLP [everyday low price] products, which is really resonating with consumers in the current economic climate,” says Neil, “but that doesn't mean we make an inferior product. At the end of the year we could put 1% more profit on our bottom line by cutting corners, but we don't do that.”

Alligator colouring books are printed on “beautiful, white, 100gsm wood-free paper,” points out Andrew. As part of the company's sustainability efforts, all of the paper the company uses is FSC certified. In addition, the plastic trays that used to feature on certain products have been phased out or made recyclable, while items that used to come in plastic envelopes now come in card-only packaging. “The products actually look better for it, and our customers and end users now demand more eco-friendly practices,” Andrew says.

Alligator has experienced its fair share of ups and downs over its 20-year history. “We navigated through a sale, an MBO, the so-called demise of the high street and Covid, but more recently the company is in a sweet spot,” says Neil. Exports are growing and the company is increasingly signing multi-territory licences. Both Neil and Andrew remain just as

passionate about children's publishing as they were two decades ago. “We absolutely love the zero-to-seven category we operate in,” says Neil. “We live and breathe it. We currently have around 20 licences and if we want

to sign four more for next year because four hot new IPs come along, we can do that without having to sacrifice any of our existing ones, because we're using our own working capital in the business to support this strategy.”

This year will see Trolls Band Together, Sonic Prime, Paddington and Piñata Smashlings join the Alligator lineup, while the company will be expanding its product offering with more gift collections, and novelty items such as finger-

paint art. And of course, in September, Alligator will be at BLE, on the hunt for fresh inspiration. “Andrew and I always spend the full three days there,” says Neil. “For us, it's like Glastonbury.”

**Right:** Aqua Magic is just one of many formats Alligator produces under its Barbie licence.  
**Below:** Gabby's Dollhouse, one of Alligator's more recent licences, has seen a huge return on investment.

