

The Author of *The Hummer and the Mini* on How to Spot What's New and What's Next

Trend guru and consultant Robyn Waters, former vice-president of Trend, Design, and Product Development at Target, is best known as the mastermind behind the retail chain's high-profile, high-revenue "design-for-all" marketing strategy. Her book, *The Hummer and the Mini: Navigating the Contradictions of the New Trend Landscape* (Portfolio), just came out. Water's first, *The Trendmaster's Guide: Get a Jump on What Your Customer Wants Next*, focused on how trends are launched. *The Hummer and the Mini* tells managers, designers, and marketers what trends they should pay attention to now.

To Waters, today's marketplace is defined by contradiction. Think of such trends as "masstige," or prestige for the masses (teapots, lights, and clothing designed by Michael Graves, Philippe Starck, and Isaac Mizrahi sold at Target), and "counterfeit authenticity" (BMW's M-School where amateurs can pay to pretend they're NASCAR stars by racing real, high-performance Bimmers). In *The Hummer and the Mini*, Waters, who runs her own consulting firm, rw Trend (rwtrend.com), uses aphorisms from Lao-tzu and lines from Marcel Proust, among other eclectic references, to offer practical business advice. IN's Reena Jana talked with Waters about her sources for tracking what's new and what's next.

Q: What are the guiding principles running through your new book?

A: I have a mantra that I use for implementing great ideas: Make it real. Keep it simple. Make it happen.

"Make it real" means don't try to be trendy for the sake of trend. Products need to relate to the real world of customers and make sense for their lives. We call that being authentic.

"Keep it simple," so a product's inherent goodness can be easily discovered. Unfortunately, simplicity is not a word we hear much about these days...

"Make it happen" because there are too many meetings in Corporate America, too much dialogue and analysis. When you know something is right, just do it. Too many great ideas fall by the wayside for lack of execution.

Q: How do you gauge what people are talking about, wearing, and buying?

A: I'm overwhelmed with trend and news services that I read. Some of my favorites: Trendwatching.com, MorningNewsBeat.com, Agenda [agendainc.com], IG Trend Central [trendcentral.com], the National Retail Federation's Smartbrief [smartbrief.com/nrf], Retail Forward's Retail News Today [retailforward.com], Sense Worldwide [senseworldwide.com], Innovation Weekly from NewsScan [www.newsscan.com], and WorthGlobal Style Network [www.wgsn.com].

I think there's a point where TMI [too much information] is a distraction. I talk about anorexia, which refers to the belief that if it can't be measured, it isn't important. I think the information

that's most important is the soft stuff, the information that can't be measured because it has to do with heart and soul and how something feels.

Q: Do you believe social networking sites like MySpace are a good forum to explore trends among teenagers and young adults?

A: These sites strike me as a way to find out what pushes people's magic buttons. The social networking sites are particularly popular with today's youth and are useful indicators pointing to what's going on in their world.

Q: What's the value of YouTube and vlogs (or video blogs) for scoping out trends?

A: One of the paradoxes is that precisely because there is so much available on

these sites, and because it varies so incredibly, the sheer volume of options makes it difficult to track the meaningful indicators. Then again, precisely because there is so much content, when something does catch the attention of the larger viewing audience, it's exponentially more powerful compared to much of the other content that's offered that goes virtually unnoticed.

Q: What tools do you use for communication and collaboration?

A: I keep things pretty simple. My own personal philosophy is borrowed from Tom Peters in his *This I Believe* series. I find stories, heroes, and demos to be the most effective communication tools for new ideas, and the most inspiring.

Stories are examples or allegories from other industries that represent possibilities. Heroes are inspiring examples of what can be accomplished against all odds and reason. Demos are perhaps the most effective way to convince others of the possibilities. Show me is still a way to overcome objections and jump-start possibilities.

Q: Do you have any general tools for figuring out when a trend has reached its apex and is about to die?

A: I believe strongly in the trend curve as a tool. It's a simple bell-shaped curve. Incoming, pre-peak, peaking, post-peak, outgoing. At the top of the bell curve is when everyone has figured out what the trend is and more people want it. The product is in demand and available everywhere. Full price is still valid, but the second after it slips off the curve on the downside, the quantities sold diminishes rapidly, the price drops quickly and it is promoted aggressively. The best place to be on the trend curve is incoming and pre-peak....up to peaking.

Q: You practice what you call "walk in other worlds" to get outside your regular frame of reference. How and why do you do that?

A: Walking in another world is a good way to shake up the senses, revitalize

your observational skills, and reframe the way you think about things. I recommend WGSN [Worth Global Style Network], the world's largest online trend service. In WGSN, you can take a virtual walk down King's Road in London, see what's happening at the Paris flea markets, take a tour of any trade show, all with a click of the mouse. It encourages you to draw your own conclusions based on your customer, brand, and mission.

I do believe it's important to get out in the real world and experience new things, try new products, go new places, discover new restaurants, go to new events. We spend too much of our time in front of a screen.

Q: When you were at Target, designers were rated on a 50/50 system. Can you explain this and tell us why it is an effective tool for managers?

A: I looked for a way to reward whole-brain thinking, using the left side and the right side of the brain to deliver stellar results. In the scoring system, 50% of the review points were based on the same numbers that the merchants used to evaluate their performance—financial results according to plan. That sent a signal that we weren't here just to design pretty things. We were partners in driving financial results.

The other 50% of the review score was allocated on more qualitative things such as teamwork, creative problem solving, personal growth, leadership skills...all the soft stuff that's really hard to measure. I determined that number based on feedback from the manager and merchant partners. I do think that it is a valuable scoring system for anyone in a creative department living in the real world of bottom-line accountability.

Q: Are there ethnography tools that you can recommend for managers?

A: I've been a part of shop-alongs, in-depth one-on-one interviews, and attended events as an observer and a

participant. IDEO and Jump Associates use these tools with highly effective results. My trend hero is Yogi Berra, who's credited with saying: "You can observe a lot just by watching."

There are many different services and trend tools that will give you indications about what's next. But you have to use your instinct, intuition, and your heart in order to figure out what those observations are pointing to. Then you have to translate that knowledge into products and ideas that resonate with your customers' values. If you do that right, you'll be able to determine what's important, not just what's next. And that's when real innovation happens.

Q: Which companies do you recommend watching that are great at customized services to consumers?

A: Mass customization refers to products for a mass market that are designed so customers can personalize them to their exact needs or desires.

Companies doing a wonderful job of mass customization are: The U.S. Postal Service and the www.mystamps.com site. You can design your own postage stamps...upload a photo, chose a color, a border, a denomination, pay by credit card. Jones Soda uses digital technology to customize labels. The customer uploads a photo, writes a label, selects the flavor of soda, and a case of custom-labeled soda is shipped to their door. Starbucks allows you to customize your cup. There are purported to be over 19,000 ways to order your coffee drink at Starbucks. M&Ms allows you to select special fashion colors, and 95% of Mini Coopers are customized. Cold Stone Creamery customizes your cone with mix-ins. My Twinn is a doll that is customized to look exactly like your child. TiVo turns you into your own TV programmer. iPod gives you all the controls for your music when you want it.

I prefer the term "customer-made" to "custom-made." These examples turn a customer into a designer.