

Design With Heart: From Target to Tarzhay Interview with Robyn Waters

It's a good time to be a designer. In fact, never has design been so relevant in the business world. It's hard to find a large company that *isn't* considering how its products look and feel to customers. Whether producing paper plates or digital cameras, design is no longer an afterthought — it's a competitive strategy that's considered in tandem with product creation.

Robyn Waters has worked on the front lines of the design revolution. She spent 10 years at Target — until 2002 — where she was the vice president of trend, design and product development, managing a team of 120 designers. She also is the author of *The Trendmaster's Guide From A to Z*.

Waters spoke with The Creative Group about the “claustrophobia of abundance” in the market, the three “H’s” of good design, and the importance of following up on cashmere mufflers — and that's just the start.

Q: You have such an interesting career. What's your background and how did you become a trend-spotter?

RW: “I have a degree in business marketing with an emphasis in international business policy, and a second degree in textiles and fashion merchandising from Mankato State University. When I graduated from college, I wanted to be a grain buyer for the future's market for an international food company. However, 1975 was one of the worst job

markets since the depression — all of the baby boomers were flooding the market and there were no jobs. So I ended up working part-time at a local department store selling fine jewelry to make enough money to put gas in my car. Through a series of happy accidents, I found myself in the role of assistant fashion coordinator for Donaldson's, an Allied Stores division, and from then on I was hooked on the world of merchandising and product development. Back then, the lead-time for merchandise at department stores was approximately one year out. If you were going to have the right product on your floor a year down the road, it was really important to figure out not just what was 'up to the minute,' but *where that minute was going!*"

Q: How do you identify trends, and are there some tactics designers might use to do the same?

RW: "I have a very nonlinear, nonscientific approach to tracking trends. My book, *The Trendmaster's Guide from A to Z*, is a simple, visual handbook that demystifies the art of trend tracking. Most tracking is really just common sense. For instance, A is for Antennae. That's about awareness, opening your eyes, taking off your blinders and being open to what is really happening in the world around you. I like to quote Yogi Berra, who said, 'You can observe a lot, just by watching.' Trends are really just signposts and indicators pointing the way to what's important in the lives, hearts and minds of consumers. If you look for the meaning behind the indicators, you'll get to a much better place. I'm very different from a 'coolhunter' in that I'm not looking for 'the next big thing.' I believe there are *many* 'next big things' and that it's more important to try and find out *what's important*, not just what's next."

Q: Related to the question above, most designers want to identify a trend and take it one step further so it's a fresh concept. Are there some tactics designers might use to determine if something is a fad or will have a lasting impact?

RW: "I believe design is the tool that can help translate a trend into something meaningful to the consumer. If you just copy something that you've seen in the marketplace, it's more than likely going to end up being just a fad. But if you identify something that's important to your customer and then translate it (via great design) into something that matters, you can create a great product that makes a difference in their lives. I think often we try to put too many bells and whistles into a design or product to make it 'better.' In my book, K is for Keep It Simple. I believe it's more important to find the simple, inherent goodness of a product or a design, and then amplify that in a way that really resonates with your customer."

Q: It seems that our society as a whole has become more design-conscious in recent years. Is this a trend? If so, what do you think has sparked it?

RW: "There is definitely a huge trend toward a more design-conscious world. Business has woken up to the fact that design can make *the* difference. There's a great book called *The Substance of Style* by Virginia Postrel. She provides great insight as to what's brought about this democratization of design. I actually think Target played a role in helping to make this happen. The brand promise of 'Expect More/Pay Less' is a great value equation. Expect more trend, design and quality, but pay less for it than you would at a traditional department or specialty store. That was part of the magic that helped turn Target into *Tarzhay*."

Q: When you worked for Target, strong design definitely seemed to positively affect the bottom line. One challenge for designers is showing the value they add and how their work impacts the bottom line. Do you have any tips?

RW: “There are many ways design can contribute to the bottom line. At Target, my designers were scored on a 50/50 basis. Half of their review was based on sales and profit numbers in the area of business they supported. The other half of the review was based on personal growth and development, as well as general market knowledge. I believe in a whole-brained approach to design, where the more creative right side of the brain is just as important as the analytical left side. One tip I would share with designers: After you’ve completed a project, and it hits the shelves or the marketplace, go back to your customer and find out how well it performed. Look and evaluate it in its environment. Ask questions to find out what worked and what didn’t. Years ago, when I was a fashion director for Jordan Marsh in Boston, I helped a men’s accessory buyer select colors and patterns for the cashmere muffler program. About a week after the product had hit the floor, I went up to the buyer’s office and asked her how it was doing. She was shocked. She said that in all the years she had worked with the fashion office, no one had ever come back to her to ask about results. I found it remarkable that all they cared about was how it looked. It told me a lot about my profession.”

Q: In your book, when you talk about the three “H’s” of good design — head, handbag and heart — you say that heart is the emotional magnet one feels for great design. How can designers give their work “heart”? What distinguishes design that elicits that emotional response?

RW: “Designers can get into the heart and soul of a product by looking at things from the inside out. Too often we rely on the outside indicators like the market for direction. We forget to get in touch with our own desires and emotions. Design needs to be as much about feelings as it is about things. Designers need to be encouraged to listen to their instincts and their intuition. You still need the numbers and the analysis as a starting platform. But if you want to reach into the heart, you have to listen to the heart. One really good way to get there is through ethnographic research as opposed to focus groups. Ethnographic research helps you get to the emotion, the soft side of the decision process. And I think the most important direction comes from the inside — not the outside.”

Q: It’s one thing to have an excellent idea for a product and another to translate that idea to others. While you were at Target, how did you communicate your vision for a product to designers clearly so they could execute it?

RW: “Clearly translating our design vision was a constant challenge at Target. My designers could *see it* so clearly, but the merchants were looking at things from the opposite end of the spectrum. We found that constant prototyping was invaluable. The old saying ‘a picture is worth a thousand words’ is still true today. We made sketches and samples, provided style and design guides, and showed pictures from our trend research. We literally put on a show in order to help get our design vision across, but we never preached. We tried to present our work in a way that instigated enthusiasm and generated possibilities, not just provided answers.”

Q: How much leeway for artistic freedom do you give the designers you work with?

RW: “I give designers tremendous leeway for artistic freedom. I believe in hiring the best design talent possible, then letting them do their thing. I’d rather help pull them back from the edge than put them in a box. I always felt it was my job to clear obstacles and be a cheerleader rather than draw the map itself.”

Q: Do you have any tips for getting out of a creative rut? What do you do when you encounter a creative block?

RW: “The best tip for getting out of a creative rut is W in my book. W is for Walk in Other Worlds. It is so easy to fall into habits that we never question. I think you should look for ways every day to have a new experience outside of your own personal box. For instance, if you take the same route to work every day, try a new way. If you go to the same restaurant and order your favorite dish every time, try a new place and expand your taste horizons. When you buy a magazine at the airport, pick up a new one — you might learn something!”

Q: Because we are inundated with so many images and choices as consumers today, is there a particular aesthetic in product design that works (sells) best? For instance, do you prefer a minimalist vs. “more is better” approach?

RW: “I believe in keeping things simple. That’s the best way to allow the inherent goodness of a product to come through. These days, less is often more. Today we suffer from a ‘claustrophobia of abundance,’ meaning there are just too many things cluttering our space and our world. I think simplicity is the best way to cut through the clutter.”

Q: Are there any current trends you could share with us that might impact marketing, design or advertising?

RW: “There are a few current trends that I think are important. One is ‘mass customization,’ or customizing your product for a specific customer, such as the Mini Cooper, or ordering personalized M&M’s online in your fashion colors. Another is the concept of trading up to luxurious commodities. The idea is making the ‘everyday’ special, whether it’s aromatherapeutic, all-natural dishwashing detergent, or a Swaroski-crystal studded mouse for your computer.”

To order a copy of *The Trendmaster’s Guide From A to Z* visit Waters’ website at www.rwtrend.com and click on Trendmaster’s Guide.