

# THE CONTRADICTIONARY CONSUMER

by Robyn Waters

Consumers no longer march in lockstep to trend dictates. Nor do they rush lemming-like to wherever advertisers point them. It used to be that if a company could offer the next big thing to their customers just a few steps ahead of the competition, they were assured of market supremacy and brand loyalty. Not so any more.

In order to thrive and not just survive in today's schizophrenic marketplace, businesses have to do more than think outside of the box. They have to think about paradox. Today's consumer is a complicated entity that thrives on contradiction.

Contradictions are everywhere. Women wear couture Chanel with vintage Levi jeans. Michael Graves teakettles from Target are at home on Viking stoves in McMansion kitchens with cabinets from Ikea. Hummers and Mini Coopers rule the road, and sometimes even share a driveway. Women who insist on eating only the most pure natural organic sprouts and micro-greens

think nothing of getting a Botox injection.

## EMBRACING PARADOX

We all have contradictory tendencies in our DNA. Psychologists tell us that paradox is at the core of every human being. We all have two most basic of human desires. We want to fit in and stand out. We want to belong to a group, but we want to be recognized as individuals. No wonder pundits refer to us as "the Ecstasy and Echinacea generation."

Whether you're developing a new beverage or creating a new financial product, it's critical to understand the contradictory nature of the consumer. Marketing and product development solutions are no longer black-and-white. If you're trying to please the masses by looking for the lowest common denominator, it's time to reframe your strategy.

The masses are changing, and the only way to keep up with them is to stop trying to figure out what the marketplace says the next big

thing is going to be. Instead, you must reframe your objective and look inward into the hearts and minds of your customers. This will let you discover what's important, not simply what's next.

This requires empathy, introspection and an emotional connection. The old-fashioned focus group has given way to ethnographic research. The goal is no longer just to determine what your customer needs. Instead, the objective is to create products and services that touch their hearts and create desire.

## HEAD, HANDBAG, HEART

As Vice President of Trend, Design and Product Development at Target in the mid-nineties, I developed my 3H Design Theory, which became the cornerstone of my design philosophy. I created it as a way of explaining the three main reasons why a customer would come in to Target to buy something. The 3 Hs stand for head, handbag, and heart.



*Earning loyalty today requires careful consideration of the customer's paradoxical nature.*



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*Waters is the author of The Trendmaster's Guide: Get A Jump on What Your Customer Wants Next, a guide to translating trends into profit. Her latest book, The Hummer and the Mini: Navigating the Contradictions of the New Trend Landscape, examines the contradictory nature of today's consumer.*

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**The head is about need:** "I'm out of toothpaste, time to buy."

**The handbag is about value and price:** "It's on sale, so I better stock up."

**The heart describes desire:** "I love that and have to have it!"

Have you've ever gone into Target with three things on your list, planning to spend only \$10, but arrive at checkout with a cartful of items totaling \$100? Your heart is responsible for that extra \$90.

Target effectively reframed the rules of retailing by positioning itself as "the upscale discounter" (another paradox). Its brand promise, "Expect More/Pay Less" is a contradictory statement that delivers delight in many ways. By embracing paradox and appealing to the heart, Target affectionately came to be known as Tarzhay.

That concept works as well for service businesses as it does for retailers. Consider the 3Hs in the context of financial services:

**Head** — "I need to be prepared for the future."

**Handbag** — "I have to be able to pay my bills without worrying about money."

**Heart** — "I want peace of mind and fulfillment, not just a retirement portfolio."

How might you reframe this idea around paradox? How about this: "Happiness is a place between too little and too much. We'll help you find that in-between place." That's a far cry from. "Here's how you'll be able to afford everything you think you'll ever need."

Enormous opportunity exists to those who use paradox as a tool for reframing their offering landscape. F. Scott Fitzgerald once said, "The test of a first-class mind is the ability to hold two opposing ideas in your head at the same time, and still be able to function." That's exactly what you need to do to effectively engage your contradictory consumer — and achieve the highest levels of profitability.