

"How to Master the Trends" - an interview with Robyn Waters

Robyn Waters is the former Vice President of Trend, Design, and Product Development at [Target](#). She led the team that transformed Target into *Tarzhay*. Now head of consulting firm [RW Trend](#), Robyn is the author of the new book *The Trendmaster's Guide - Get a Jump On What Your Customer Wants Next*.

Here's the complete interview - a partial transcription follows:

[MP3 File](#)

What can a radio station do to get a jump on what their listeners will want next?

Radio stations can learn from the three elements which made Target so successful.

The first is to be “trend-right.” To know what’s going on out in the marketplace and know what people want or desire.

The second is to be “customer-focused,” and that means knowing what your listener wants - what’s going on in their hearts and minds.

The third is to be “design-driven,” and that’s the ultimate “secret sauce” of Target.

So the question for radio would be how you design the listening experience in a unique way to deliver your product - your story, your news, your messages - in a superior manner.

Here’s what I like about radio: I love being engaged in a story, not just being delivered the facts. When you connect the facts in an engaging way, that’s what pulls the listener in and brings them back again and again.

How did Target connect the trend dots using the three elements you mentioned?

By being “trend-right” they knew it wasn’t just about what was next, but also about what was important.

Information is ubiquitous today. Everybody can know what’s going on out in the trend universe. But what’s important is what’s going on inside the

hearts and minds of consumers. What are their lives like? What matters to them? What makes a difference? What pushes their magic buttons?

In that way, Target wasn't trendy just to be trendy. It was translated to connect with its audience.

In radio, do you really know who you're talking to? Are you talking to an individual or a demographic or mass market?

So much of our research is focused on demographics, but customization is key. Listeners will customize their listening experiences based on the stations they listen to. But how can your station deliver some kind of a customized experience? How well can you know the desires of your listeners, not just their needs.

So much of our marketplace is focused on what people *need*. But the real differentiating factor is what connects to the heart and mind, what touches their life, what goes on inside, not just outside the marketplace. Products and services that live here are the kind Seth Godin calls "remarkable."

How important is it to have a passionate drive?

Passion is absolutely critical. When I was in the corporate world, passion wasn't something people talked about. I saw more emphasis placed on quantitative measures. "Let's look at the charts, let's look at the graphs."

Passion is hard to qualify, hard to measure. But boy, when it's there people know it and they resonate with it. It makes an incredible difference.

Nowadays it's not always viewed as professional to get excited about something. But at Target, if we - the product designers - can't get excited how can we possibly expect our Target guests (customers) to get excited about it? I remember sitting in a lot of meetings presenting a lot of fabulous concepts and seeing a lot of stone-faced, glassy-eyed responses. That got to be very frustrating.

So much of the "glassy stare" has been driven by Wall Street and a focus that's so short-term - next quarter, end of year. In order to reach those goals the strategy usually requires taking something out - take out that extra detail, take out the fun stuff, take out expense. That will push you towards the same products that everybody else has, the bland and unremarkable.

Yet it's exactly the extra little delightful touch that put the *Tarzhay* into Target.

That's why I always went in search of people with soul and passion. And your listeners probably do the same. I think they recognize authentic

passion and I think it really pulls them in.

What do radio stations do that they should not do?

Some stations try so hard to shock or rattle cages. I think what people are really hungry here for is what one author calls “peace of mind,” not more “stuff.” If you can really deliver “peace of mind” and if you can do it with grace and courage, that’s the kind of leadership that will help propel the radio listening experience to another realm.

Target also seems to be an entertainment experience

There’s a “softer side” to any experience. I talk about the “heart” a lot. How do you put some “heart” into a product? Some of the products that were most successful, unusual, and remarkable at Target were silly, clever, fun things that were witty and had a little soul.

There’s a difference between the function of a product and the experience it allows the consumer - or listener - to have. Focus on the experience.

So in radio we should ask what we’re doing to create a memorable, remarkable experience for the audience?

How can you make them feel like what you’re giving them is something they personally desire? How do you customize the experience? There are lots of little ways - how you talk about something, the passion evident in your voice, etc. Listeners need to know you’re talking to them personally and understand how they’re feeling.

I don’t think this is what people will say they want from a radio station - more peace of mind, to feel better - they will say they want more news, more information, etc., but ultimately it leads to more peace of mind.

Great example: Starbucks. You know you’re going to get a great cup of coffee - you also know you’re going to pay more for it. But what you’re really buying from is a five minute vacation. They’re giving you peace of mind. They’re rewarding you with what people most crave: A moment to yourself.

Given that a radio station can only speak with one voice to all listeners, how can you customize the listening experience to each person in your audience?

You have to reframe how you think about it. You can’t give every person their favorite content, but if you can go back to the soul and the heart you’re doing something very special for that person - you’re giving them something they need. Is there some way in how you deliver the content, how you time it, the stories you tell, the content itself - is there some way to reframe it in a different way?

For example, when you give the news you could include little stories that enliven the facts and tell a tale in a way that matters directly to each listener. In other words, the facts may be the facts, but sometimes people want a story. As Margaret Mead wrote, the human race thinks in metaphors but learns through stories. It's the stories that can help personalize the experience for the listener.

One of the popular themes in the radio business now is "Less is More." Fewer commercials, more music. Is less really more?

Even though we seem to be on this quest for more stuff - more money, more toys - when we're free of this stuff we live a better life. In the book *The Paradox of Choice* the author discusses a market test for Smuckers Jam. Two supermarkets in two different but similar neighborhoods - in one grocery store they presented eight flavors of Smuckers and in the other twenty flavors.

Here's what they found: More people stopped at the table with twenty flavors, but fewer people bought because they were overwhelmed by too many options. Fewer people stopped at the table with only eight flavors but more bought - the choices were more clearly defined and they could find something they like more easily.

So sometimes more choice isn't more. It's less.

Too much "information" without editing is toxic. It makes things worse. It's what I call a "claustrophobia of abundance."

Radio is changing. HD radio is on the horizon. Will tripling the choice give people what they want or is it an illustration of the "claustrophobia of abundance?"

It's a paradox. On the one hand you get exactly what you want to listen to. On the other hand the choice can be overwhelming. As long as you know you're talking to you've got a better chance of figuring it out.