

Target's Trendmaster Keeps Moving

Robyn Waters may have left the discount chain, but she's perpetually on the lookout for what the next waves of fashion will bring.

Trend guru Robyn Waters is perhaps best known as the mastermind behind Target's high-profile, high-revenue "design-for-all" marketing strategy. Since she left her post as vice-president of design, trend, and product development at "Tar-zhay," as fashionistas lovingly refer to the hip discount chain, Waters has gone on to form her own consulting firm, RW Trend, and write a book, *The Trendmaster's Guide from A to Z*. On her company's home page, she's billed as "Champion of Design" and "Cheerleader of Possibilities" -- and she brings a peppy, bright approach to the practice of marketing that recalls the cheery ads that her former employer is known for.

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BusinessWeek Online has quizzed Waters on Target's ([TGT](#)) brand and design strategies in the past (see *BW* Online, 10/3/06, "[How Target Found Its Grooviness](#)"). Recently, in the midst of finishing up her new book, *The Hummer & The Mini: Navigating the Contradiction of the New Trend Landscape*, Waters engaged in a series of phone calls and e-mails with *BusinessWeek* Online's [Reena Jana](#), covering practical advice for businesses large and small. (After all, Target was a regional department store before Waters spearheaded its makeover.) Following are edited excerpts from their exchange.

Do you have any new guiding principles along the lines of the 3H design theory -- head (as in perceived need), handbag (value and cost), heart (emotional pull) -- of effective products you introduced in *The Trendmaster's Guide*?

The 3H design theory is an innovation tool that helps inspire product development and determine what matters to the customer. I use another mantra as a framework for implementation of 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. At Target, our products

needed to relate to the real world of customers and make sense for their lives. In today's business lingo, we'd call that being authentic. Keep it Simple so that a product's inherent goodness can be easily discovered. Don't complicate things just to add more bells and whistles. Unfortunately, simplicity isn't a word we hear too much about these days, but we should. Jack Trout has a great book by that title. *Make it Happen* -- because there are too many meetings in Corporate America, too much dialogue and analysis. When you know something's right, just do it. Great ideas can fail to get to market because there were just too many objectives and priorities. Little fires got put out and created a giant smoke screen obscuring the fact that the big idea wasn't really getting off the ground.

Do you have any favorite blogs, Web sites, or chat rooms to gauge what people are talking about, wearing, and buying?

I'm not a frequent blog reader and I don't use chat rooms. They're valid, and valuable, but I'm overwhelmed with the trend and news services that I do read regularly. Some of my favorite sources are Trendwatching.com, MorningNewsBeat, Agenda, IG Trend Central, NRF Smartbrief, *Retail News Today*, Sense Worldwide Bulletin, *Innovation Weekly*, and WGSN (WorthGlobal Style Network). The key is diversity -- of topics, products, markets, and points of view. We have access to so much information today, and so many tools to analyze that information, but often we don't know what those numbers are saying. I love the quote: "Statistics are like bikinis. What they reveal is important, but what they hide is vital." Whenever you're plowing through piles of data, stop and ask yourself, what's behind the numbers? That's where the magic resides. I talk frequently about what psychologists call *analexia*, the belief that if it can't be measured, it isn't important. On the contrary, 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. There are many services and trend tools that give indications about what's next. But use your instinct to figure out what those observations are pointing too. Then translate that knowledge into products and ideas that resonate with your customers. If you do that right, you'll determine what's important, not just what's next. And that's when real innovation happens.

Are social-networking sites like MySpace a good forum in which to explore some of the principles in your book?

These sites are a way to find out what pushes people's magic buttons. If they care enough about something to exhibit it and share their passion, and enough other people take the time to visit, that thing probably has some cultural relevance. The social-networking sites are particularly popular with today's youth, and as such, are indeed useful indicators pointing to what's going on in their world.

What tools have you used for communication and collaboration -- either at Target or as a consultant? Wikis? Or *Halo* to bring remote teams together?

I tend to keep things simple. My personal philosophy is borrowed from Tom Peters in the *This I Believe* series: I have found stories, heroes, and demos to be the most effective communication tools for new ideas, and the most inspiring as well.

Stories are examples or allegories from other industries that represent possibilities. Heroes show us what can be accomplished. Many of our biggest and best companies are led by modern-day heroes who succeeded against the advice of successful sages. Demos are perhaps the most effective way to convince people of the possibilities. They help satisfy our seeing-is-believing affliction. "Show me" is still a way to overcome objections and jump-start possibilities.

When practicing your "walk in other worlds" concept, what intriguing resources do you turn to -- and return to?

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 highly recommend WGSN, the Worth Global Style Network. It's the world's largest online trend service, and the diversity of markets and the observation and analysis that it offers are amazing. What I really like is that it inspires and encourages you to draw your own conclusions, based on your customer, your brand, and your mission. It provides an extensive and impartial view of what's going on out there in the world.

Essentially, WSGN lets you walk in other worlds virtually. You can walk down King's Road in London, see what's happening at the Paris flea markets, take a virtual tour of practically any trade show, and see what everyone else is looking at, all with a click of the mouse. However, it's important to get out there in the real world

and experience new things. We spend too much of our time these days in front of a screen.

While you were at Target, designers were "scored" on a 50/50 performance-review system. Can you elaborate on the system? Was it an effective management tool?

At Target, I looked for an effective way to reward what I call whole-brain thinking -- using the left and right sides of the brain in a way that delivered stellar results. In the review-scoring system I instituted for the trend and design team, 50% of the review points for managers were based on the same numbers that the merchants used to evaluate performance. If you were the ready-to-wear trend manager, half of your score was based on how well that division scored financially according to its plan. That fact alone sent a signal to the merchants that we weren't here just to design pretty things. We were their 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 and development, leadership skills -- all the soft stuff. I determined that number based on feedback from the manager and the merchant partners. I do think that it's a valuable scoring system for anyone in a creative department living in the real world of bottom-line accountability. It was my way of showing that we weren't just going to be trendy. We were going to track and translate trends into sales and profit.

Any trade shows that you never miss?

When I was at Target, three of my favorite trade shows were PV (Premiere Vision) in Paris for the textile industry; Maison et Objet, also in Paris, for the home decorative world; and the Chelsea Garden Show in London for gardening and outdoor living.

How do you find out about new designers? Through trade shows? Gallery exhibitions? Design schools?

Trade shows, magazines, and the trend services that I mentioned earlier are all good resources. But I think hanging out with cool friends that inspire and challenge me -- and who are a whole lot smarter than I am -- is the best way to discover new resources. Eventually the conversation gets round to have you seen this or do

you know about that? When I see someone else's magic button being pushed, my antennae go up.

What inspiration tools do you recommend or do you and your colleagues use? Do you keep a joint scrapbook?

Travel, and a Moleskin notebook, are my best inspirational tools. Going new places, seeing new things, learning about ancient cultures, discovering the secrets of the past -- these things inspire me immensely. The Moleskin notebook is a handy and old-fashioned tool for jotting down an idea, a quote, an address, a contact, a thought, anything I want to remember. And the handy pocket in the back is great for storing all the little slips of paper or articles I tear out of everything that I read. I also keep an "I-file." I is for Interesting. Whenever I came across something inspiring or something that fascinated me or something I just felt intuitively was important, but I didn't know at the time why it was important or what I was ever going to do with it, I would just tuck it away in that I-file. Over the years, I would periodically raid my file for an idea or for inspiration, and I was seldom disappointed. There was always something in there I could draw an analogy from, use as leverage to get a point across, share with others to inspire them to think outside of their little boxes. Basically, I collected stories, anecdotes about heroes, and demos and samples that I discovered in my travels.

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