

Masters of Design: Robyn Waters

Founder and president of RW Trend, LLC

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Any garden-variety cool-hunter can spot a hot trend in Milan. But it takes a sleuth with the aesthetic antennae of a Diana Vreeland and the populist heart of a Michael Moore to translate that concept into something that works for soccer moms in Cincinnati. For 10 years, Robyn Waters did just that for Target Corp., the Minneapolis-based retailer that pioneered the idea that low prices and good design weren't oxymoronic.

Until she left to form her own consulting firm, RW Trend LLC, in 2002, Waters served as the retailing giant's vice president of trend, design, and product development. She was the force behind the scenes, ensuring that Target's product mix was as current and fresh as the wares in retailing's tonier precincts. That was a startling innovation back in the early 1990s, when discount-industry executives assumed that less-affluent customers were content to wait a year for knockoffs of the products sold at high-end shops.

Target's CEO, Robert Ulrich, upended that notion by putting design at the core of the company's differentiation strategy. Rather than picking and choosing from what was available in the marketplace, as its competitors did, Target began

developing its own brands, making sure that what customers discovered on the shelves was different--more stylish, more current, and better-designed--than what they were finding at Kmart and Wal-Mart.

It was Waters's job to guarantee that the company's many brands--from clothing to housewares to paper products to gardening supplies--hewed to the same high standard in all 1,249 Target stores. Overseeing a team of 120 industrial, surface, and technical designers, she drove the look and feel that caught the media's attention and helped Target morph from dowdy Midwestern discounter to the trendy "Tar-zhay." At the core of Waters's strategy is her 3H Design Theory, a philosophy she hammered home to every designer she hired. The first "H," she says, is for head--the need that drives a purchase; the second is for handbag--the value and the price of the item; and the third is for heart--the emotional magnet created by good design. "Design became the tool that made our brands consistent and let us connect with our customers," she says.

Waters also worked with such high-profile designers as Mossimo and Philippe Starck to see that the products they created matched Target's vision of the needs of its "guests." "I've always been a believer that a trend for the sake of a trend is not what Target is about," she says. Rather, the company's genius lies in its skill at translating inspiration into execution: collaborating with its stable of design talent to deliver products that enhance the lives of customers. During her watch, the retailer became a place where both suburban families and young hipsters could find products that were functional, affordable, and beautiful, from trendy little dresses inspired by St. Tropez to a Starck-designed sippy cup. Evidently, the strategy is working. With 2004 revenue of \$48 billion, Target has blown past competitors Kmart and Sears, and is now second only to Wal-Mart among general merchandisers.

Since leaving Target, Waters has written a handbook on trend-spotting, *The Trendmaster's Guide From A to Z*, and has earned platinum air-mile status traveling the world to speak and

consult as a "hired-gun visionary" to corporate America. While she never toiled at a drafting table or sketched out a clothing line, Waters has done something equally important. By encouraging the designers she supervised to do their best work, she delivered results that prove that design can, indeed, bring beauty to the balance sheet.

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