

By Forrest Elizabeth Folsom

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Forrest Elizabeth Folsom is Herbst LaZar Bell's marketing communications manager and a creative writer. A 10-year veteran of new product innovation, Folsom has helped develop new business for HLB with Motorola, General Mills and Wrigley.

Market Research Today

HOW TO **STAY** ON



Robyn Waters is founder and president of RW Trend, LLC, a trend consulting company based in Minneapolis, MN. She has more than 25 years experience tracking and translating trends into sales and profits for high-profile companies.

Throughout the retail world, Robyn Waters is referred to as an ambassador of trend, a champion of design, a builder of brands, a purveyor of passion and a cheerleader of possibilities. *Fast Company* featured her as one of the top 20 creative mavericks in its June 2004 Masters of Design issue. We asked Waters to talk with us about trends in market research based on her experience with one of the most important retailers of our time, Target, where she served as vice president of trend, design and product development. Under her direction, the trend and design team traveled the world tracking and translating trends into unique product designs that enhanced Target's upscale brand image, Expect More, Pay Less.

TARGET

What kind of research do you do?

There are three main research approaches I use: primary, secondary and ethnographic research. Primary research at Target involved traveling—anything from tradeshow to fashion capitals of the world, from shopping to walking the streets, taking photos and reporting my insights back to the merchants. Secondary research was backed by the company's global network, substantial research tools and an extensive budget. We also had above-par access to existing market research. However, my favorite approach, and one that I brought into the mix at Target, is ethnographic research: working directly with people. I am a huge believer in the benefits and the results gained from this method.

Does your research change based on the product category?

Research must be appropriate to the type of solution required. For a technical solution, technical research will be needed. A more emotional problem will require ethnography. Ethnographic interviews create an awareness of what's going on with our customers' product lines. In reality, we are so often multi-tasking that we miss the little things, the details that could point us to better solutions. Yogi Berra once said, "You can observe a lot just by watching." This is what good ethnographic research is: paying attention to the details.

However, the research principals are always the same, no matter what the category: observation, intuition and analysis—a three-legged stool. The philosophy of what you are doing with the research is the same, but what changes is the level of each in the combination.

How do you communicate the research results to the design team?

There is a fatal flaw with this question. It shouldn't just be about communicating research results to the design team. They should be a part of the research. The people who understand how important design is, the design team,

should help lead the research. At Target, the protocol was to work directly with the merchants. We never went out and did a bunch of research and then came back and said "ta da." The merchants had to be part of the process. Excluding them is not a strategy that produces partners. And we wanted the merchants to be partners from the very beginning. I believe in the power of total team involvement. The greatest success validating cross-functional teamwork is in the auto industry where marketing, technical, merchants and even customers come together to bring about a design.

With the team involved in the research process, we could present it in a more meaningful way. I am a huge believer in storytelling as a tool. My approach was to set up a vignette to define who the customer really was. In every vignette I would also pick a hero to inspire and motivate the team, even if it wasn't related to the category. We looked at how heroes arrived at a state of innovation beyond their competitors.

For example, Howard Schultz has made Starbucks the best-selling coffee in America. If he had done a lot of traditional research, the data never would have supported his vision. No one would ever have believed that people would actually pay three dollars for a cup of coffee every morning of the week. Nor would focus groups have supported this outcome because they never would have seen or felt the experience. Instead, Schultz checked out Milan, Italy, where the consumer experience was quite different from getting a 50-cent cup of coffee in a diner. So you bring the hero into the vignette and say if he can do it with coffee, we can do it with lamps.

Do you quantify your results or are they subjective?

In market research that is analytically driven there is so much data. You can't make the best judgment looking at numbers alone. W.C. Fields said, "Statistics are like bikinis. What they reveal is important, but what they hide is vital." The numbers are there, and they are important indicators—but not important



The Michael Graves Design™ collection for Target represents the shared belief that people instinctively appreciate great design and that it should be affordable and accessible to all. From a whimsical teakettle to a high-design dog house, Michael Graves Design products can be found throughout Target.



The classic design of Smith & Hawken is now growing at Target. Standout items from the collection include backyard and deck furniture, copper décor, wreaths and planters.

answers. You're trying to figure out where the trend is going, but the numbers only tell you what has already happened.

The numbers give you the baseline, but the closest connection to the customer I have experienced is through ethnography. For the fashion retailers, I shopped with the customers, walked through their closets and discussed their emotions about what they felt when they bought clothing, what motivated them, what stopped them and what pushed buttons. When I work with ethnographic researchers in the field, we take video clips of the research process. We use direct quotes and other information revealed in the footage to highlight our findings and conclusions. I want companies to be able to hear and see firsthand what justifies making a change, whether it is small or large. If I were only to quantify the results, I would never be able to stand up in front of a group and support change.

How does a major retailer like Target forecast based on research?

I don't like the word *forecast* because you really can't predict anything. So how did Target do it? On a continuous basis using the three-legged stool. Part of their success is great trend research, being very guest-focused and leveraging that in design: never trying to be trendy just to be trendy. The

key is to translate the experience to the guest's life. You've got an idea and some trend data, and the magic wand is to leverage great design. It doesn't mean copying what someone else has done. Target never copies others. It's about realizing what is possible.

How much of what you do depends on observational research or ethnographies?

Most of it. When I was at Target they were not a huge supporter of focus groups. The vendors and suppliers might have done such research. But the general feeling at Target was that people want to give the "right" answers in a focus group. Target really relied alternately on the three-legged stool. They were and are employing more and more of the design strategy piece.

How far ahead is your future vision window?

In terms of tracking where your brand and strategy are going, you can be as far as three to five, even ten years out. These are the macro trends, indicators that are developing slowly when you look at customer trends. You can follow the bell curve and figure out when it's going to peak. In fashion, you want to have as short of a timeline as possible. It used to be that most everyone had one-year-out product development cycles. But now, retailers like Zara and H&M (Hennes & Mauritz) are leading the way, having shortened their delivery cycles to one to three months out. Everyone is looking to shrink timelines as close in as possible.

That's why I am a huge believer in setting trends, not just following them. If you strive to make people's lives better, you can create a trend. I'm not talking about making one up and shoving it down people's throats. You can actually spot a need or an opportunity, a desire that no one is doing anything about. The pet industry is a great example. You can see that pets are part of the family base, but what about when you look at the way pets are taken care of? What will that mean to the travel industry, food, daycare, etc.? Look at what has emerged as a result: premium organic dog and cat food. Who would have ever thought we would feed them this stuff? And the airlines now offer frequent flier miles for pets, which is amazing. You don't take your dog to a kennel anymore: it's a spa. These are trends that can be leveraged to shorten the cycle.

What does the trend in using ethnographic research mean for new product development now and in the future?

There was a time when you couldn't bring forward an idea unless it was documented by numbers and research. But this is changing and for the better. I believe in looking at the soft side. What comes from the inside needs to be counted as well—and the people who get this are going to succeed. ■