



Robyn Waters has more than thirty years experience tracking and translating trends into sales and profit. As Target's former Vice President of Trend, Design, and Product Development, she helped a small regional discount chain become a national fashion destination. Seth Godin calls her "the woman who revolutionized what Target sells, and helped the company trounce Kmart." *Fast Company* magazine featured her as one of the top twenty 'Creative Mavericks' in their June '04 Master of Design issue. She has served as a juror for numerous national design competitions, including the *BusinessWeek* IDEA Design Awards, the National Design Awards for the Cooper-Hewitt Museum, and the International Housewares Association. She has also been invited to serve as a juror for the 2007 Microsoft PC Design Competition. Waters is the author of **The Trendmaster's Guide: Get A Jump on What Your Customer Wants Next**, a simple and witty guide to tracking and translating trends into sales and profit. In her second book, **The Hummer and the Mini: Navigating the Contradictions of the New Trend Landscape**, she explores the contradictory nature of today's consumer. She is also a contributor to **The Big Moo**, a collaboration of 33 of the world's best business thinkers.

# RECOGNIZING EMERGING TRENDS IN THE MARKETPLACE

Robyn Waters

Sometimes the **relation between supply and demand** in a specific market seemed to reduce the necessity of really good outside-in thinking.

**KL@TG:** What were the most important business lessons learned during your association with Target?

**WATERS:** The most important business lessons I learned at Target were (1) the power of good design to differentiate your product and your brand, (2) the power of good trend research to help you understand your customers and connect with their desires, and (3) the value of good brand management.

**KL@TG:** Here's a related question. Why has Target prospered during a period when so many other retailers have struggled, in some instances struggled to survive?

**WATERS:** Target brilliantly positions itself as "the upscale discounter" and then over-delivers on its brand promise of "Expect More/Pay Less." It's a powerful promise that is delivered with panache by leveraging great design.

**KL@TG:** To what extent (if any) are there "early warning" signals about emerging trends which are relevant to almost any organization, whatever and wherever its competitive marketplace may be?

**WATERS:** There are always "early warning" signals...the trouble is that they are normally revealed to us in hindsight. Too often we don't see the early indicators because our attention is focused elsewhere. We spend so much time in the virtual world that we're not paying attention to what's happening



### THREE BUSINESS LESSONS ROBYN LEARNED AT TARGET WERE

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in the real world. I also think that too often we look for whatever we want to find or expect to find, and then end up missing so much that's right there under our noses.

**KL@TG:** Now please focus on *The Trendmaster's Guide*. You decided to organize your material using the alphabet to present a series of key points. Why?

**WATERS:** The alphabet is a basic learning tool that everyone is familiar with. It was a fun way to organize my thoughts in order to concisely deliver an overview of my trend philosophy.

**KL@TG:** Of all the terms which you discuss in this book, which seem to be most widely misunderstood? Why?

**WATERS:** I believe that most people misunderstand the notion of trend itself. People tend to think of trend as "the next big thing." I don't believe in frantically trying to determine what "the next big thing" is going to be.

The premise of my trend philosophy is simple, yet radical. Trends make sense for reason. I believe that trends are signposts and indicators pointing to what's going on *inside* the hearts and minds of your customers (not just what's happening *outside* in the marketplace.) These days, if you want to be "on trend," it's more important to figure out *what's important*, not just *what's next*.

**KL@TG:** In the "S" section, you quote Charles Handy to introduce your observations about "soul." Leonard Berry wrote a book entitled *The Soul of Service*. How can a product or trend have "soul"?

**WATERS:** Some things are just inherently good. A product acquires "soul" by somehow fulfilling a special desire that the customer has on a very different, almost spiritual level. Soul has more to do with how something makes you feel, versus what it is or what it does for you.

**KL@TG:** For those who have not as yet read *The Trendmaster's Guide*, please explain what you mean when referring to "the Zen of Trend."

**WATERS:** The "Zen of Trend" is a way of paraphrasing my Trend/Countertrend philosophy and helping people to realize that there is no one "next big thing." In true zen fashion, I believe that for every trend, there is a countertrend, and that polar opposites can be trendy at the very same time. What is so intriguing about this idea is that just like the yin yang symbol, the opposites actually complement each other in a powerful way.

I love the term that Michael Silverstein and Neil Fiske coin in their book *Trading Up*. They use the example of a woman who wears Prada shoes, drives a Mercedes, and goes to Costco to stock up on bulk paper goods. Is this woman budget conscious? Yes, about certain things, and maybe even only on certain days. Does she like to pamper and indulge herself? Yes

again, on certain things, at certain times. This same woman probably has a pair of shoes from Target, and on occasion, has been known to wear them with an expensive cocktail dress she purchased at Neiman Marcus.

**KL@TG:** For your next book, why did you select the Hummer and the Mini as symbols of what you refer to as "contradictions of the new trend landscape"?

**WATERS:** I'm a very visual person. I believe that a picture can tell a story better than can a lot of words. When you think about a Hummer and Mini next to each other on the road, or parked side by side in someone's garage, the Zen of Trend is visualized in an instant. Are cars getting bigger and more aggressive? Yes. Are they getting smaller and cuter? Yes. Trend/Countertrend.



The Hummer and the Mini are symbols of contradictions of the new trend landscape

**KL@TG:** In Chapter 2, you offer this quotation of Marcel Proust: "The real voyage of discovery consists of not finding new worlds, but of seeing the world with new eyes." Please cite some examples of products which illustrate that observation.

**WATERS:** Burberry reinvented itself from a tired plaid raincoat into a hip fashion brand. Sarah Susanka created the Not So Big House at a time when McMansions are all the rage. Starbucks gave us a five minute vacation when they created the notion of "the third place" and turned a cup of coffee into a luxurious commodity. Whole Foods transformed the notion of natural and organic from

Birkenstocks and granola to a trendy fashion food emporium. Mini Cooper added mileage to a classic brand by offering customers the opportunity to customize design their own car.

It even goes beyond products. Michael Bourne choreographed a new version of the classic ballet, Swan Lake. It's the same story, the same music, told from a completely different point of view. His version has been reframed into a fresh visual adaptation of a very classic work of art. His story is told from the male point of view; the corps de ballet and principal dancers are all men, dancing new life into an old story. We expect to see lovely ballerinas in delicate pink tutus and toe shoes come gliding onto the stage...and we're surprised when men in wildly feathered chaps take center stage. We are given the opportunity to view the tale from another perspective. Interestingly, it's the most successful ballet ever produced on London's West End. It's the old, made new. Bourne kept the original platform but saw new possibilities by looking at the story with new eyes.

**KL@TG:** What are "luxurious commodities" and what do they suggest is happening in "the new trend landscape"?

**WATERS:** A luxurious commodity is a product that we consider a basic item, a necessity, that is transformed through the

A *luxurious* commodity is a product that we consider a basic item, a necessity, that is transformed through the power of good design and elevated to a higher level of desire, and for which we are willing to pay a premium.



power of good design and elevated to a higher level of desire, and for which we are willing to pay a premium.

I also like the term “basic deluxe.” Today’s new trend landscape necessitates that we find a way to de-commoditize the products and services we offer in order to differentiate ourselves from the abundance of “me too” products in the marketplace.

Luxurious Commodities suggest that we need to reframe what we think of as a luxury, and re-examine what people are willing to pay for something. Kleenex Ovals are a great example. The product is ubiquitous and in constant demand; yet people are willing to pay more for the same Kleenex tissues they have always bought in the traditional cube with predictable designs because the new Oval raises the product to a greater level of appreciation through great design.

**KL@TG:** Which companies best reveal how “to make money and do good at the same time”?

**WATERS:** Many companies today have found a way to marry profit with purpose. Howard Schultz’s original business plan for Starbucks was founded with the determination to “make a profit in a benevolent manner.” Paul Dolan of Fetzer Vineyards urges all businesses to commit to the “triple bottom line,” a measure of corporate success that takes into account not just profit and loss but also social and environmental impact. He uses the E3 formula to guide his business decisions. Other companies doing a great job in this area are Timberland Shoes, Aveda, and Tom’s of Maine.

**KL@TG:** Here’s a follow-up question: Why is it in a company’s own best interests to do so?

**WATERS:** Simply put, because it makes good business sense. The theory behind marrying profit with purpose is that socially responsible companies will eventually outperform their peers by seizing new opportunities, energizing their workforces, and building a stellar reputation that will pay off with customers and investors. In other words, they’ll show the world that “doing good is good business.”

Today’s consumers are performing their own cultural audit when they have a choice between X and Y. If two products are essentially the same, they will ask serious questions, such as what does the company stand for? How do they treat the people who work for them? And do they give back to the community? These are issues that are becoming more important to all of us each day. We are learning to vote with our dollars in a way that’s positive for society.

**KL@TG:** Looking ahead to (let’s say) the next 3-5 years, what especially significant trends on the next “trend landscape” do you expect to see emerging?

**WATERS:** The macro level trends that I think are most important going forward are all paradoxes. Companies that figure out how to customize mass produced items for specific customers, or turn a basic item into a luxurious commodity, or find a socially responsible way to do business will win in the long run. Companies that find a way to deliver some version of peace of mind to their customers will also find themselves ahead of the trend curve. ❧

THE  
HUMMER  
AND  
THE MINI



NAVIGATING  
THE CONTRADICTIONS  
OF THE NEW  
TREND LANDSCAPE



ROBYN WATERS  
Author of *The Trendmaster's Guide*  
Former Vice President of Trend, Design,  
and Product Development at Target

## THE HUMMER AND THE MINI:

*Navigating the Contradictions  
of the New Trend Landscape*

Portfolio/The Penguin Group (2006)

### Robyn Waters

In her earlier work, *The Trendmaster's Guide*, Waters explains what she describes as "the how of Trend" as she provides a series of brief but stimulating discussions of 26 subjects which range from A (Antennae by which to "tune in to the little things, the trivial nuances, and the irrelevant data which everyone else misses") to Z (Zen which embraces opposites, paradoxes, contradictions, etc. while celebrating duality and embraces polarity). In *The Hummer and the Mini*, Waters shifts her attention to the "what of Trend." Throughout much of the book's narrative, she cites examples which illustrate how paradox "illustrates what's going on out there in the world while at the same time cautioning that things are always as they appear at first glance. When examined with an open mind, paradoxes will help you read between the lines and reframe your perspective."

New nomenclatures are needed to describe the newest trends (e.g. "luxurious commodities," "counterfeit authenticity," and "extreme relaxation") while responding to the emerging consumer demand for goods that are ethically produced and certain to increase in years to come.

Throughout her book, Waters identifies and discusses hundreds of examples of products which illustrate how various companies have not only learned to live with but have responded effectively to "the push and pull of opposites, to balance the contradictions and inconsistencies, and [embraced] the paradoxes - the trends and

Waters believes that many of the best new ideas are really just old ideas reinterpreted, such as:

- Customers will continue to demand a more personalized shopping environment
- Customers will continue to demand the ability to customize products to suit their individual needs
- More and more people will "trade-up" to "luxurious commodities"
- Customers will be attracted to products that "pare down to the essence" but which do not "remove the poetry"

countertrends - that exist at a macro level in our world." These products include the Hummer and Mini Cooper, of course, but also Ralph Lauren apparel, Tupperware, the iPod, M&Ms, Build-A-Bear, Whirlpool Duet, In-N-Out Burgers, 3 Vodka, "Virtual Venice" and "Fiberglass France" casinos in Las Vegas, Rainforest Café's, Dream Dinners, and Metronaps.

*The Hummer and the Mini* will be of substantial value to marketers but should also be read by all others at the senior-executive level, at least those who have direct and frequent contact with consumers. Given the fact that change is the only constant, it is obviously desirable to recognize emerging consumer trends and then respond effectively to them. It is important, Water suggests, to develop and then sustain a mindset which accommodates "the push and pull of opposites" while balancing contradictions and inconsistencies.