

The
TRENDMASTER'S
Guide

GET A JUMP ON WHAT
YOUR CUSTOMER WANTS NEXT

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Portfolio

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INTRODUCTION

Welcome to the world of trends.

It's a myth that trends can only be spotted early by überhip Bohemian types who are ever-so-much cooler than everyone else.

Trends are indicators that point to what's going on in the hearts and minds of consumers. And there's a big difference between a trend tracker and what I call a Trendmaster. A trend tracker looks at the signs to help his or her business stay *up to the minute*. A Trendmaster, however, uses the trend information to determine *where that minute is going*. Trendmasters start out by observing a trend, but then they translate that trend information into a direction that makes sense for their companies and their customers.

My goal for *The Trendmaster's Guide* is to simplify and demystify the art and science of trend. In it I share my favorite tips, examples, and tricks of the trade. Every letter from A to Z offers an insight into how to

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navigate the unknown and a practical tip to help you prepare for what's next.

So, Robyn, did you major in Trend Studies at the Sorbonne, Harvard, or Stanford?

I have spent the last thirty years studying trends and their impact on businesses—a calling that I discovered completely by accident. And take it from a girl from rural Minnesota: you don't need an Ivy League diploma, an MBA, or an all-black wardrobe to become a Trendmaster.

I used to ride my horse to one of the last one-room country schoolhouses in the state. My graduating class from Rockford High was fifty-two students, the largest ever. I went on to Mankato State University. When status-obsessed people ask me “And where did you go to college?” I politely answer “Mankato State.” They usually just look at me blankly. If they bother to ask where in the world Mankato is, I tell them it was where Pa Ingalls (from *Little House on the Prairie*) went when he hitched up the wagons to go into the big city for supplies.

I got my first job at Donaldson's Department Stores as an assistant fashion coordinator, during one of the

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worst job markets since the Depression. For a young woman fresh out of college, this was considered a fairly glamorous (though notoriously low-paying) job. As assistant fashion coordinator I produced Butte Knit and Leslie Fay fashion shows, and one year even the St. Paul Winter Carnival Queen of the Snows Fashion Show. I styled fashion photography ads and catalogs on location. The Haggar leisure suit ads were particularly fun—the male models were so handsome! I also worked closely with buyers, advising them on what to buy now to put on the selling floor a year down the road.

At the ripe old age of twenty-four I headed south for a much bigger job. I became the Director of Fashion, Special Events, and Public Relations for McRae's, a family-owned, carriage-trade department store in Jackson, Mississippi. McRae's was progressive in a lot of ways, but not when it came to women in management. Let's face it—I was a Yankee, I walked too fast, I talked too fast, and I wouldn't get coffee for the guys. I was an anomaly. But I loved the business, and I was excited by the adventure of life in retail.

In my role as public relations director I was a frequent guest on *Mississippi Morning Live* (a local TV show) to talk about upcoming events at the store. It was interesting to appear with a story about a Lord Wedg-

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wood event for fine china and be sandwiched in between a piece on catfish farming and a segment on how to make fried pickles.

In the mideighties I moved to Boston as a men's fashion director for Jordan Marsh Department Stores. High style and high fashion were all the rage, damn the cost. It was the "greed is good" era and Jordan Marsh was one of the high-class department stores of the day. I found myself sitting in the front row at designer fashion shows, rubbing shoulders with fashion icons like Gianfranco Ferré and Giorgio Armani, and having dinner at the Missoni's villa outside of Milan. At that time, trends were nearly always set by the top fashion designers—from the top down to the street, so to speak.

I was still producing fashion shows, only now they were black-tie events staged for *GQ* magazine. One year we featured a Harley-Davidson motorcycle for the bridal finale. The bride went down the aisle sidesaddle on the back of the hog, veil flying, with the groom looking gritty and gorgeous as he vroomed down the runway. All this to the soundtrack of Sonny and Cher singing "I've Got You Babe."

It was also my first experience with private label and product development. Stores began to realize that they could effectively offer exclusive designs under their

own brand names and give the customer a better value than many of the well-known national brands did. As men's fashion director I selected stripes for men's boxer shorts, colors for cashmere mufflers, and swatches for expensive suitings. Best of all, I got to style the men's silk foulard ties—a great excuse to spend a few weeks every summer in Lake Como, Italy.

Eventually, all the greed, glamour, and excess of the eighties caught up with the economy. Men who had been buying high-end designer fashions decided that they didn't really need \$1,000 tuxedo shirts or \$100 dress shirts. The designer business stumbled, and many high-end department stores went the way of the dinosaur.

In November 1992, a group of us huddled around a speakerphone were told that Jordan Marsh as we knew it would cease to exist. It was being merged into Abraham & Strauss, based in Brooklyn, New York. We had the option to compete for our jobs with our counterparts at A&S, but we'd have to be willing to move to Brooklyn. Thoroughly depressed and in shock, I drove home through the first snowstorm of the season with the realization that I no longer had a job. It was an abrupt halt to the glamour era, to say the least.

Expect More. Pay Less.

After stewing, worrying, and crying through most of the weekend, I went into the office on Monday morning. We'd all been asked to stay through the transition, so at least I still had an office to go to. I was amazed to find thirty-four voice-mail messages! I had condolences, job offers, interview opportunities, and words of encouragement from the many vendors and manufacturers with whom I'd worked over the years.

I flew all over the country, interviewing, trying to imagine myself doing something different. Although I was a department store snob at the time, I sensed that things were beginning to change. There was a value shift going on, and the emerging trend was that most Americans were no longer going to be dictated to by designers on high. Trends were beginning to be driven from the street up, not just from the elite fashion designers down.

So when Target invited me to interview for a position in their Trend Department, I was ready to listen. It was Mother's Day weekend and it seemed like a good excuse to go home to Minneapolis (where Target is based). I was thoroughly impressed with Target, and I took a job there as trend manager for Ready-to-Wear and Chil-

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dren's. I was part of a five-person team of trend managers who worked side by side with the buyers to merchandise and develop products.

We traveled to Europe and Asia on a regular basis, as well as to all the trendy hot spots in the United States. We scouted new retail concepts, shopped for design ideas, went to events like the X-games to get closer to our customers, and worked together with key manufacturers to develop next year's product.

It was a new way to approach trend tracking, and the exact opposite of "runway research." We started with the customers. We tried to get close to their lives, understand their lifestyles, and then take the fashion trends that we saw happening (on the street, in the stores, at the designer level) and translate them into fashionable, affordable products for Target.

One of the best perks of the job was traveling to Saint-Tropez every summer to shop the stores and take photos of all the fashionistas disembarking from their yachts. At the time, that was where everyone went to scout the trends for the next summer season. It was a gold mine for bathing suit manufacturers, shoe designers, T-shirt mavens, and children's wear designers.

But I soon realized that all the retailers, designers, and manufacturers were going to the same places, doing

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the same things, seeing the same trends, and buying the same samples. Was it just coincidence that around that time we began to hear retail analysts, media pundits, and consumers complaining that everything looked alike?

Target was just beginning to evolve from a small, regional discount chain to a national, \$48 billion, upscale discounter. Our management had figured out that differentiation was the name of the game if we wanted to grow and prosper. We were painfully aware that we couldn't beat Wal-Mart on price, but we knew that if we could offer our guests (that's what we called our customers) the same well-styled designs that were being sold in the Gap and Banana Republic, Pottery Barn and Crate & Barrel, but at much better prices, then we'd have a reason to exist in the marketplace.

Management laid out a clear vision as to how we were going to make that happen. We were going to be "trend right," customer focused, and design driven. We were going to help make chic cheap, design democratic, and put some real pizzazz into the world of discounting.

I was promoted to trend director and then to vice president of Trend Merchandising. My department grew quickly from eight people to more than one hundred by the end of the nineties. Renamed the Trend and

Design Department, we added more and more designers: clothing designers, technical designers, print and pattern designers, even industrial designers.

We had become a full-fledged product-development office, and our cool new stuff helped turn Target into *Tarzhay*. Designers like Michael Graves, Philippe Starck, Mossimo, and Todd Oldham lent credibility to our design philosophy. Our brand promise (“Expect More. Pay Less.”) helped make the red bull’s-eye as recognizable as the Nike Swoosh or the McDonald’s Golden Arches.

In 2002, after ten and a half years with the “bull’s-eye brigade,” I decided to strike out on my own. Today I work with many different companies as an Ambassador of Trend, a Champion of Design, a Builder of Brands, and a Cheerleader of Possibilities.

You can do it too.

I believe that anyone can use the tools in *The Trendmaster’s Guide* to become more aware of the world around them. Even if you weren’t born with a trendspotting bone in your body, you don’t have to be a follower forever. These days no one can afford to be just catching on as others are already moving on! Recognizing and react-

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ing to trends is a *learned skill*, and it can be acquired without extensive time spent in the streets of Milan or the high schools of Orange County.

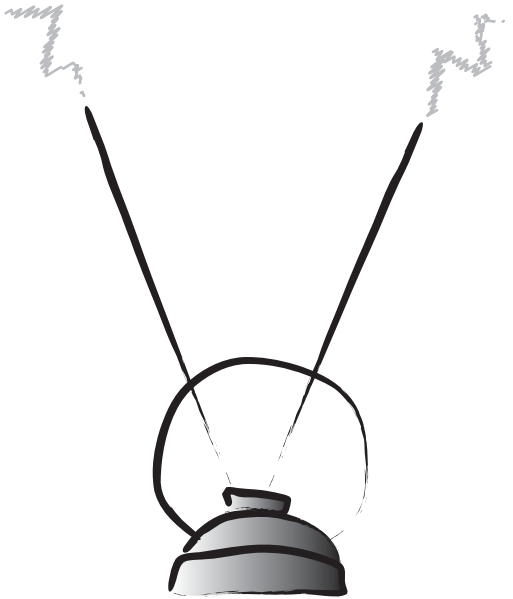
If you've ever witnessed a trend unfolding and said to yourself, "I should have seen *this* coming," there's hope. You too can become a Trendmaster and get a jump on your competition.

Welcome to a new way of looking at the world!

A

Is for

ANTENNAE



So . . . you want to spot the next big thing? Chances are you've already seen it. What you need to do is let yourself *recognize it*. Put your antennae out, your periscope up, your scanner on high, and tune in to the little things, the trivial nuances, and the irrelevant data that everyone else misses. On its own, each tidbit is meaningless; strung together, they are *ahas* waiting to be noticed.

Monica Nassif is the creator and founder of Caldrea, a line of all-natural aromatherapeutic cleaning products. She had her antennae out in the early nineties as she watched aromatherapy go from new age to mainstream in the course of a few years.

Spas were the first to feature the healing properties of aromatherapy, using ancient homeopathic recipes to calm, invigorate, rejuvenate, and relax. The cosmetic industry was next, with lines like Origins and Aveda touting the healing properties of the same scents for

over-the-counter beauty creams, hand lotions, and bath and hair products.

Then came scented candles in decorative containers. Brands such as Diptyque, Rigaud, and Crabtree and Evelyn featured aromatherapy as a key selling point to their upscale products.

Monica had the idea to incorporate the same properties that American women had come to enjoy in all of these everyday products into upscale cleaning products. She paid attention to what her antennae were picking up and asked questions like “Why couldn’t washing your dishes become a pleasurable act of self-healing?” “When did we begin to believe that things had to smell antiseptic to be considered really clean?” and “Why not incorporate bestselling scents like lavender, green tea, and patchouli into dishwashing liquid?”

She hired a chemist and began to experiment, using only the best all-natural ingredients for her products in much the same way that Horst Rechelbacher did in his Aveda spa products. She developed a line consisting of dishwashing liquid, hand soap, and hand lotion and packaged them together in an upscale manner. She devised a handsome caddy to hold the products, and it quickly became a bestselling hostess gift.

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Clearly, a \$12 bottle of dishwashing detergent needed a unique marketing strategy; traditional grocery stores weren't interested in carrying Monica's products in the cleaning aisle, next to the Dawn and Joy that retailed for \$1 a bottle. Knowing that she could never go head-to-head with the giant brands, she began selling Caldrea to upscale boutiques and gift stores. She worked with the owners and managers to ensure an appropriate presentation that highlighted the unique properties of her products.

Today, Caldrea is a full-scale line of home-cleaning products that includes laundry soap, ironing water, and even nostalgic cleaning tools. Monica has also written a book called *Spring Cleaning: The Spirit of Keeping Home*, describing how she sees housework as a simple way to have a sense of control in our not-so-simple world.

People tend to file away what doesn't immediately make sense. That's exactly the stuff we should be paying attention to! To cultivate awareness, contemplate meditation. When you learn to empty your mind, you'll be surprised how much room is in there. Once you've let down your barriers, your antennal frequency can be dialed high, your trend reception magnified, and your instinct and intuition maximized.

B

Is for

BIG PICTURE



The deluge of trend options available today can be confusing. Combine this overwhelming input with type-A personalities who obsess over details, and you have a bad retail recipe: over-designed products that spring from over-conceived strategies. We can't see the proverbial forest for the trees. **Big Pictures** can be hard to frame, but they're worth looking for. **Big Picture = Big Opportunity.**

Dutch Boy painted a different perspective with their signature line of paints when they began to look at painting through the eyes of their customers.

Most major paint companies at the time were spending millions of dollars on research and development, working to develop a better paint product. The goal was to find paints that were shinier and brighter, lasted longer, cleaned better, or were less toxic. Scientists tweaked ingredients and tinkered with manufacturing processes in an effort to find a better formula.

Yet no one ever stopped to ask why paint still came in those heavy cans with lids that were messy and hard to pry off, and handles that were uncomfortable to use. No one asked why there wasn't a spout to control the paint as it poured out into the roller pan. And why the cleanup had to be so messy and why the lid invariably had paint gunked up on it and, when dry, became very hard to open up again.

It took a designer with a different perspective to ask the unasked questions. Some clever soul figured that maybe it wasn't a better *paint* that was desired. Maybe it was a better *painting experience*.

By simply redesigning the paint can into a lightweight plastic jug with a handle, screw cap, and pour spout, Dutch Boy trounced the competition before the paint dried. Sales increased by double-digit increments, and they won prestigious design awards for their new paint "can."

Finding the big picture has everything to do with perspective. When you're lost in the forest, step back—way back—and reexamine your original principles. Ask yourself if you're asking the right questions. Test your assumptions from every angle. The most important thing is to look at the problem through the eyes and lives of the end consumer.