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Staying ahead of the cool curve

By **Gina Piccalo**

Los Angeles Times

There was a time, way back in the late 1990s, when coolhunting was still cool, when nearly every Madison Avenue ad agency wanted a resident hipster to interpret the spending habits of those inscrutable Gen-Xers. Then the Internet exploded, connecting everyone to everything in an instant, and suddenly the art of predicting the next big trend got way more complicated.

Today, fads ping across continents and disappear so quickly that the coolhunter, even the whole notion of "cool," has become passe. Every big-city scenester or bored teenager on the planet has a blog or mass e-mail anointing the moment's hot restaurants, hobbies and handbags.

Add to this, mass obsession with celebrity style and global corporatization and you can get nearly the same chai latte or straight-off-the-runway skirt in Columbus, Ohio, that's available in Manhattan or Milan.

Trend-spotting has, in essence, become just another trend. Consequently, the most successful trend forecasters are repositioning themselves as something more than mere arbiters of taste.

They're now social scientists with a hipster edge. That's because it's no longer enough to be aware of "sex messaging" or video blogs or the drive-in movie revival. The real money and prestige are now bestowed on those who can translate the cultural hieroglyphics and the "whys" behind these blips.

For this reason, they no longer answer to the name "coolhunter." Some even bristle at the term "trend forecaster." Instead, they prefer "planner," "researcher" or "futurist."

They often compare their work to cultural anthropology, though few, if any, have formal training in that field. They're quick to differentiate the short-lived fads from decades-long trends. They usually stress that their predictions are rooted in hard data.

A competitive field

They travel the world; watch people shop, eat and frolic; videotape and photograph them; monitor blogs; study census data; chat online with tens of thousands of consumers (most under age 35); and devour every shred of pop culture they can find.

They believe their research not only keeps marketing executives at Coca-Cola, Procter & Gamble, Nike and Microsoft, among others, attuned to our cravings, but it maps the origins of choice and cultivates that most precious commodity of all: consumer insight.

It's an increasingly competitive field and even the most successful work hard to stand out. DeeDee Gordon and Sharon Lee of L.A.-based Look-Look Inc. specialize in youth culture and product development and brag that their 35,000-member database of trendsetters is among the largest of the competing firms.

Jane Buckingham, president and founder of the Intelligence Group, is among the more visible of the top forecasters, with a show on the Style Network and a regular gig on "Good Morning America."

New York-based Irma Zandl of the Zandl Group is known for her bimonthly Hot Sheet, a trend-spotting guide that sells for \$18,000 a year, and for predicting about 25 years ago the takeover of hip-hop culture.

And Faith Popcorn, a best-selling author, has been in the business the longest, having started New York-based BrainReserve in 1974. Yet in each of the past two years, she says, her annual client billings have doubled.

All agree that their specialty lies in interpreting the broad societal movements that transcend our flash fancies and reveal new marketing opportunities. In the future, some insiders say, it's likely every ad exec will be a futurist.

"The world's moving faster, so clients don't have the luxury of waiting to see what's going to happen," says Ken Freeman, president of the North American division of TNS, a global market-research firm. "They have to plan for it."

Still, some see trend forecasters as nothing more than expensive soothsayers, bringing the illusion of control to a \$250 billion ad industry wracked by uncertainty, a fragmented audience and anti-advertising technology.

"Marketing people, in general, are always engaged in producing this fiction whereby they claim that all they're doing is responding to stuff that's already out there," says William Mazarella, a University of Chicago assistant professor of anthropology and social sciences, whose expertise includes mass media. "The critical response is marketing and advertising create trends or steer us, rather than responding to us."

Naturally, these forecasters believe the opposite. These days, they tell us, we want anchoring, parenting and spiritual healing. We're flocking to life coaches, preachers and yoga instructors to find it. We're acting locally, living "consciously" and buying organic because the world's a fragile, stressful place, say Gordon and Lee. We've cultivated a "curatorial mind-set," says Zandl, creating, sampling, editing and customizing life to suit our needs with blogs, TiVo, iPods and Netflix, because if we don't, we're overwhelmed by information.

The "coolhunt" article

Cultural anthropology has played a role in successful advertising for decades. But its importance has steadily increased since the 1970s, when marketers first faced the relatively daunting task of selling to the anti-establishment, have-it-their-way baby boomers. Still, it took more than 20 years before the ad industry took more than a passing interest in this shift.

By the 1990s, the baby boomers were the decision makers. Like their predecessors, they were confounded by a new brand of youth. The so-called Generation X, over saturated by 1980s consumerism, proved too savvy for traditional marketing. At the same time, their tastes were often contradictory. Ad executives needed cultural translators to reach this group.

Fueling this impulse was the now-famous "coolhunt" article by Malcolm Gladwell in a March 1997 issue of The New Yorker that followed Gordon and then-Reebok general merchandise manager Baysie Wightman as they mined hipster enclaves for trends.

At the time, Gordon's L Report, a quarterly tipsheet on what cool kids across the nation considered cool, was selling for \$20,000 a year. "What they have is what everybody seems to want these days," wrote Gladwell, "which is a window on the world of the street."

The article inspired swarms of hipster consultants who for a short time were considered the silver bullet for any faltering campaign. But as trend forecasters look back, they realize this, in itself, was a fad.

"I think 'coolhunting' was a sexy word that the media loved to use," says Gordon. "Our culture loves creating new nomenclature. It's very faddish. It doesn't accurately describe the study of trends and analysis and what goes into it."

Hipster hierachy

From the ashes of those '90s coolhunters emerged not only a new breed, but a sort of hierarchy of people-in-the-know. Somewhere near the bottom are the fad followers, some of whom, such as Gili Rashal, founder of TheTipJar.com, and Dany Levy of DailyCandy.com, connect with the masses via free e-mails, offering tidbits on new books, music, nightlife, fashion, food, even hobbies and getaways.

Somewhere in the middle are the in-house ad-agency planners and the legions of independent consultants who may have been in marketing for years but now present themselves as trend experts.

At the top of this heap are a handful of industry rock stars who compete for the accounts of Fortune 500 companies and who, as media darlings, have helped publicize the field in the past few years.

Their methods, client lists, trend criteria and observations are similar. They maintain vast databases of trendsetters and regular folks who keep them up to date via online chat rooms, focus groups and ethnographies, which involve immersion in a subject's life. They travel constantly on lecture tours and trend-hunting expeditions.

When asked about today's obsession with cool, even Popcorn, nee Faith Beryl Plotkin, sounds peeved. She says: "It's like everybody's hip now. It's exhausting. There's no discovery. It's not original."