

iTrend and Other Watching

Retailers understand the importance of offering products that reflect the very latest —colors, styles, configurations, technology, etc.. The most successful retailers capture trends or fads at the very crest of the wave and get a jump start over their competitors by presenting whatever consumers want or think they must have before it even crosses their minds that they need it. If you've ever attended a gift show at, say, the Atlanta Mart, you know the wholesale items available there at any given time reflect the trends identified, (or staged) as far back as a year ago. That's because products require months of production and distribution time from conception through packaging. By the time an item reaches the store, it's nearly outdated. Back at the manufacturing facility, however, creative types are envisioning the next new thing and -- working with their marketing department -- they're devising ways to push this year's passé stock out the door. For retail manufacturers to stay "on-trend," it's a never-ending cycle of activity.

A recent "Marketing Matters" column examined the advertising trends of the 1930s including heavy use of Hollywood celebrity endorsements, use of fear tactics to dictate what was – and was *not* -- socially-acceptable, idealization of the ultra-feminine woman (the word "dainty" was used ad nauseam), and offers of mail-back premiums with purchases.

But "trend" is more impactful than its shorter-lived cousin, "fad." Trends not only influence buying habits, they reflect (and influence) lifestyle and social changes. Translating what people are thinking, doing, and being influenced by is a great clue to the ways you do business.

Here are a few trends and fads that you might recognize in contemporary American culture:

The rise of (often voyeuristic) cosmetic surgery. Cosmetic surgery rises as your body falls. Once a novelty for ageing Hollywood types and strip tease artists, cosmetic surgery is de rigueur for people of all ages who want to change or enhance their natural physical features. Even more bizarre is cosmetic surgery as TV entertainment. (Under the aesthetics category, teeth whitening and laser eye surgery are other hot trends that are here to stay; while Botox parties, mineral-based make-up and French pedicures are merely fads).

Online dating. Well-produced testimonial advertising messages have fueled this remarkable trend. (Speed dating? Consider it a fad).

Spiritual forms of exercise. Yoga (in its many forms), Tai Chi, and Qigong have long ago eclipsed the once-trendy aerobics, cardio and the antiquated, 1950s & 60s phys-ed favorite, calisthenics. ("Roll you, chicken fat, roll!")

The rise of evangelical influence. From politics to book publishing to major motion pictures, the powerful new evangelicals are transforming America. And if your church-reared child is *not* one of the thousands of American young people who have experienced a life-changing “micro-mission (1-2 weeks) trip” to some exotic, 3rd world locale, he/she will surely be tapped to go next summer.

Cooking and eating as an art form. No longer only Mom’s or Grandma’s domain, cooking has captured the imaginations of Americans who never before knew the difference between a spatula and a garlic press. The Food Network, Food Nation, iron & top chefs, competitions, cookbooks and food festivals abound. Food preparation as a pastime is a multi-million dollar business, and fresh, organic foods (once appealing only to Birkenstock-wearing love children) are available in abundance right next to the toxic, pesticidal stuff at your neighborhood WalMart.

Everything Boomer. If you’re one of the millions of Baby Boomers (powerful because of their sheer numbers), you’re at the top of the heap in terms of great deals and great designs on new services and new products developed just for you. Never before has it been so advantageous and so glamorous to be old (born between 1945-1960) and approaching retirement.

Cremation nation. The rise in cremations versus traditional interments is astounding. Cremation may be a quick, efficient, environmentally-friendly send-off, but the bottom line is this: If your life has not been one for the history books, and if you opt to cremate and scatter your ashes about after death, how will the generations to come even know you existed?

Electronic communication. MySpace, Facebook, and BlackBerries (with two capital “B”s) weren’t even a part of our language a couple of years back. Computer socialization and instant messaging are intriguing new forms of instant gratification that are absolutely essential to many.

Re-decorating in stages. You might not be able to hire a professional decorator, or fund a total home make-over, but you can buy a funky new rug at Target, slap on a new coat of paint, and revive your domestic environment. Using the furniture you already have and investing in small accessories is the thing to do these days, and homeowners have learned all the tricks of the trade by watching cable TV.

Green clean. Al Gore is fueling the awareness. Everybody’s going green, and the good news is, there’s a tiny reversal in our high ozone levels.

iThis and iThat. Apple’s iPods, iTunes, iMacs (now called “.Mac”), iWeb, iPhoto, etc. bring to mind: “i-scream, u-scream we all scream for i-scream!”