

# How to avoid the most interesting trends of 2010



**Robert Passikoff** says following the latest fashions isn't enough to boost your brand, you need to understand what the consumer really wants

There is little doubt that marketers tend to be trend conscious. It's even fair to say they tend to be trend driven. But the question remains, what role should trends play in the creation of a brand or marketing strategy? How do they support, or interfere with branding efforts?

Let's examine a few trends recently predicted:

- more companies will be moving with the culture
- consumer identities will be tied more closely to technology
- luxury and what it stands for will remain in flux
- winning brands will innovate and differentiate
- age cohorts (prime timers, baby boomers, generation X and generation Y/millennials) will play different roles in redefining traditional concepts about work
- with the internet, more people will never leave their homes.

In the spirit of full disclosure, I made up that last one. But by the time you got to it you were probably already wondering, 'How exactly am I expected to react to those particular pronouncements?' and 'How do they help me position, or strategically plan, for, my brand?'

How, indeed? The first five statements deal with actual marketing and social trends, researched and published shortly before the end of last year.

There are many more pronouncements like these. But this crop seems emblematic of the trends that traditionally bombard marketers and advertisers at the start of each year. They are regularly positioned as 'consumer insights' useful for moving brand marketing and advertising forward. The problem is that they may be interesting – but are they leveragable?

While fodder for cocktail party rumination, these trends provide little insight into how consumers will behave within the category where your brand competes. Nor do they offer guidance for innovating and differentiating.

To that add the need to profitably engage consumers with your brand. Even the best demographically segmented social trends do not supply such insights.

John Locke, regarded as one of the most influential of Enlightenment thinkers, said, 'No man's knowledge can go beyond his experience', and within that declaration lies the secret of how

'trend' material can be best applied. The right kind of knowledge isn't a single trend but how those trends influence consumer perceptions, behaviour and expectations.

Consumers shop for what they consider the product or service that best meets – or exceeds – their expectations. Unless marketers understand what truly matters most to consumers they are doomed to a brand-centric world view in which trends are interesting, but not constructive.

Understanding how shoppers approach a category is the only platform upon which effective brand strategy can be built and trends usefully incorporated. Only the consumer-centric view lets a brand see what is driving loyalty in a category – allowing it to act strategically.

## Willing to trade product specificity

People don't buy colas the same way they buy cell phones; nor wireless services or airline tickets the way they buy bottled water. But still many agencies, research houses and marketers seem willing to trade product and category specificity for the comfort of cross-category, generalised trend observations. Doing that may be helpful for creating averages or 'norms', but has nothing to do with how people really behave.

We recommend viewing trends within the context of the 'category ideal'. Creating an ideal is a natural process based on experience, desire, knowledge and expectations. Factoring in the emotional side of the category-specific decision process is essential to understanding if a trend actually has any role for your brand. Properly configured, a category ideal will describe the drivers that consumers use to view, compare and buy in your category, and the levels of expectations they hold.

A category ideal should also identify the relative contributions that attributes, benefits, values, image and trends bring to your category.

There is a long list of very interesting trends that have come and gone, because they have not addressed consumer expectations. If you aren't able to meaningfully leverage a given trend in your brand's category, you should probably ignore it – no matter how interesting it seems. ☹

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