

THE FUTURE IS HER FIELD



The Enquirer/Sam Greene

Valerie Jacobs helps design and branding agency LPK forecast trends that could affect clients.

Fashion maven now predicts trends

By Laura Baverman

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Valerie Jacobs, a self-proclaimed fashionista, always wanted to be a trendsetter, too.

Although she earned a master's degree in fashion design from the University of Cincinnati, she's now helping the global design and branding agency LPK forecast trends that could affect client brands like Pantene, Oral B, Pampers, Bounty and Hershey.

Jacobs joined the company in 2005 to help it start LPK Trends. She's also spent a decade teaching courses at UC's College of Design Architecture Art and Planning.

The lively Alabama native shares these insights at design conferences around the world. Last week, she presented to a crowd of marketers and advertising professionals at downtown's Digital Non-Conference.

CAN YOU SUMMARIZE the future of branding and marketing in

three sentences or less?

Our role as marketers and designers will be to create brands that co-evolve along with the people that choose to engage with them. Brand building will be less restricted and will be more about creating an interactive, storytelling and meaning-making platform that is generative, emotional and open-ended. The challenge will be to enable and empower "citizen brand

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Jacobs: Predicts trends for clients

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managers” by giving people the tools to create and draw their own conclusions for our brands.

HOW DID THESE changes come about?

With the recent downturn of our economy, our view of the world feels vastly more complex and chaotic, and people are far less interested in consumption for consumption's sake. ... More than ever before, the digital revolution has put creative tools in the hands of the people, giving them channels to broadcast and dialogue on their own.

DESCRIBE A typical day for you.

A typical day is spent working with our clients and brand teams to understand their challenges and figure out how to reframe them as opportunities. We might be thinking about the future of a category, the future of a brand. ... Much of our day is spent consuming information from everywhere – magazines, photos, websites, books, etc. The trick is not so much being able to think in a futuristic way, but really knowing how to help other people use the information.

HOW DO YOU become a trend forecaster?

Being a forecaster means that you have the stamina and passion to take in an enormous amount of information. You have to have an intensely curious nature ... and the ability to intuitively know what's new and relevant. What we really want to do is take people on a journey into the future. The chief creative officer at LPK, Nathan Hendricks, likes to point out that a great forecast is like a rollercoaster ride. You're very excited, but you are a little scared: "Fear minus death equals fun."

WHAT GETS YOU most excited in your job?

I love it when I have an "aha" or learn something totally new, something that is honestly a new and provocative idea. Something that I know will alter the trajectory of our lives (big or small) is really inspiring.

WHICH COMPANIES ARE on or ahead of these trends? Which ones do you admire most?

Fiat recently used an online platform to gather input into a new car for its Fiat Mio brand in Brazil. In the fash-

ion world, Polyvore is a great example of an online community of stylists and trendsetters that enables users to create style books using their photos and the photos of other community members. I think Toms Shoes does a great job of engaging people in its brand story, and has even reinvented a new standard for what corporate altruism should look like. Wordpress empowers consumers to create and evolve with its brand.

WHAT SPECIFIC THINGS do you do to train the staff or your stu-

dents to think differently?

When I teach trends class at UC, the first thing I ask is to commit to doing three new things every day. It can be as simple as listening to a new genre of music or eating a brand new cuisine. We need to break out of routines and our comfort zones. Being a trend forecaster is about reporting the "news" from the edges of society. If you think you already know it all, you're doomed.

ARE YOU SEEING it pay off?

Our trends practice is one of the fastest growing capa-

bilities at LPK and is a new way to draw people to our company. But, this is a hard question for me to answer objectively, so I asked a few colleagues. On the whole they felt that before, they relied on designers' intuition. Depending on which designer you were using you might get more or less of that. Having a dedicated trends group gives everyone at LPK access to people whose sole purpose in life is to think about the future and to do so in a rigorous and thorough way, giving LPK's work more credibility.



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