



Marian Salzman, Contributor
CEO, Havas PR North America



The Pleasures and Pressures of a Lifetime of Trendspotting

12/12/2017 11:55 am ET

If someone back at school had told me that “trendspotting” was a career option, I would have jumped at it. My natural inclination has always been to notice what people are doing—the clothes they’re wearing, what they’re buying, what they’re talking about, how they’re interacting and what brands are doing with them and for them. Nobody told me about trendspotting back then because nobody was doing it; it wasn’t a thing. But starting from the late 1980s, I’ve had the pleasure of turning my natural inclination into a job. It has served me well. Besides turning my grasp of trends into a competitive advantage for the brands my PR agency serves, my passion for what’s next yields Havas PR’s annual trends report. We’ve just released our wide-ranging 2017 report with 20 trends for 2018. It offers a perspective on the D-days we’re now living—days of disruption, despair and raging dumpster fires.

This is the time of year when I am most often asked about what it takes to be a trendspotter and how I ended up with that as part of my job description. It’s certainly not a title that turns up in job listings very often. For that first decade or so as a trendspotter, I was one of a happy little band of oddballs and outliers who had stumbled, lucked or intuited their way into it. Picking one another’s brains, we developed the tools and techniques of the field, breaking new ground and establishing ourselves as what would eventually be called thought leaders.

There were plenty of clients—and more than a few colleagues—who regarded the work as a cute gimmick at best and a waste of time and money at worst. So it was a pleasure to see clients gradually get the idea and understand what a difference it could make to their businesses. When I transplanted to Amsterdam in the mid-1990s, I pretty much had to start from scratch in selling the value of trendspotting to my mostly European and Japanese clients and co-workers. I also found how much I had taken three of my basic attributes—being American, being female and being a fast talker—for granted, and how much they could be handicaps. Still, I had the joy of trendspotting in a whole new culture (adults eating chocolate sprinkles on bread for lunch? A company fridge stocked with beer, wine and spirits?) and of teaching trendspotting to talented young marketers.

As the ’90s wore on and I headed back to the States, trendspotting was fast becoming a trend in its own right. Marketing and advertising agencies, always keen to latch onto ideas that might give them an edge, were increasingly touting trendspotting as part of their offerings. And it was exciting to see whole swaths of life becoming more easily visible as brands and consumers rapidly embraced life online. From our hyperconnected, click-to-buy 2017 perspective, it’s fun to look back to the mid-noughties and see people talking about the trend outlook for “e-commerce.” Actually, make that “read,” not “see”—it wasn’t until 2005 that online video appeared, followed by Facebook opening to the general public in 2006.

Over the past dozen years or so, the challenge for trendspotters has been how to deal with the massive volume of information and the sheer number of people who are online and expressing themselves. No wonder hands-on, intuition-driven trendspotting is increasingly coming under pressure from fans of Big Data approaches. Equipped with the right algorithms, analytics can churn through all that information and highlight the sorts of patterns that indicate a trend at work. But it’s a common mistake to think that trendspotting is just a matter of gathering and reporting data. That’s market research. It’s also a surprisingly common mistake to think that a trend is destined to play out in a particular way, like a movie that’s already been shot and edited. Still now, as in the beginning, the value and the pleasure of trendspotting is in helping clients to understand a trend, to get ahead of it, to own it—and to try to shape it.