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The Quest for Cool

Predicting the future is hard work. Ask any professional trend spotter: it takes insight, dedication—and secret armies of super hip teenagers

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Many of us are not cool. I am not cool. Chances are fairly good, statistically speaking, that you are not cool either. Don't feel bad about it. Cool is an elusive thing. If it weren't, well, we'd all be cool, wouldn't we? And then who would get snubbed in the hallways and made fun of in gym class?

Cool may be our country's most precious natural resource: an invisible, impalpable substance that can make a particular brand of an otherwise interchangeable product? A sneaker, a pair of jeans, an action movie? Fantastically valuable. And cool can be used to predict the future. The theory goes as follows: when cool people? A group known to marketers as alpha consumers? Start talking or eating or dressing or shopping a certain way, noncool people (a group that most marketers belong to, by the way) will follow them. Watch the cool kids, the alpha consumers, today, and you can see what everybody else will be doing a year from now. As you can imagine, that kind of information is worth a lot of money to a lot of people, and there is a small but vigorous industry entirely devoted to harvesting it: trend watchers, who figure out what is and isn't cool and sell the information. Most of the people in the small, selective cool industry aren't cool. They just pay cool people to figure it out for them. And you thought your job was tough. Irma Zandl wakes up at 5:30 every morning and watches

MTV. She reads five newspapers a day. She carries a video camera wherever she goes, and she goes everywhere? Bars, raves, concerts, trade shows. "Car shows are great!" she gushes. "Young people come on Saturday with their dates, and you see what cars they want to have their pictures taken in." She travels four months out of the year. She talks to strangers. Zandl invented the term alpha consumer, and she's the closest thing the trend business has to a founder. She's been doing it since 1986, back when we thought leg warmers were cool. She has streaky blond hair, oblong glasses and a sunny, irresistible smile. She looks like the fun, cool mom you never had. Zandl doesn't give out her exact age (forty something is the most she'll cop to), but she is almost certainly the oldest person in America who regularly uses "holla back" at the end of her e-mails. Zandl is president of the Zandl Group, a small, boutique trend-analysis shop based in Manhattan's beyond-hip Soho. She speaks with an elusive, unplaceable accent. She was born in Germany and raised in Australia, the world's least and most cool countries, respectively. After Zandl's family moved to Australia, she learned English before her parents did, and she grew up having to interpret for them, teaching them how to fit in, underlining articles in the newspaper for them to read so they could stay au courant. It was good preparation for her unconventional career. "There's that sense of being an outsider and having to be incredibly observant," she muses. "I feel like in some respects I was destined to do this." Destiny arrived in 1986. After stints

at L'Oreal and Revlon, Zandl was working as vice president of marketing for a cosmetics company called Andrea Products. She'd had good luck with some teen-oriented initiatives? In 1983, way before almost anybody south of 125th Street in New York City knew what hip-hop was, she commissioned a rap-themed commercial for Walgreens (which refused to air it).

Soon some of the senior sales guys noticed her sharp eye for cool, and they had Zandl do the rounds with them, helping them sell teen-oriented products to retail buyers. Then the buyers noticed, and they started calling Zandl with their questions about youth culture.

"They just sort of saw me as a person who knew what was going on," she says. Finally Zandl noticed. She quit her job and set up her own business as a Person Who Knows What's Going On. It wasn't an easy transition. When she made a good call at her old job, it was pure instinct. "We did no research," she says. "I just had a golden gut." That was fine when she was making bets with other people's money, but now that she had her own company, she needed more concrete information. Why did campaigns with long-haired models outperform those featuring short-haired models? Zandl knew they did, but she didn't know how she knew. To find out, she invented a new way to analyze trends and in the process created a whole new industry. There's a certain myth floating around about trend watchers: the myth of the cool hunter. In 1997 a lengthy article appeared in the New Yorker magazine about trend researchers who could stroll through a hip neighbourhood, watch the way the kids were dressing, listen to how they talked and, based on that, pick out the next season's hot products and hip trends. They were mystical dowsers of cool. Chief among them was a woman named DeeDee Gordon, whom we'll meet later on. Cool hunters didn't do much research, but their intuition was so good? Their guts were so golden? That they didn't have to. They just knew. In the late 1990s sneaker companies and jeans companies paid cool hunters a lot of money to tell them what was coming next. Cool hunters themselves became, briefly, cool. The trouble was it

turned out that cool hunting didn't work. "As hip as it was, as exciting as it was, very few people were able to monetize anything that came out of that," Zandl explains. "People were fed this line that if the cool hunter found it, then six months from now you would have a rip-roaring business. And I think a lot of people got burned by that." Either the cool hunters got it wrong? There were some infamous misses, like aprons for men? Or they were right, but by the time the company rushed out a product to capitalize on the trend, it was already over. Predicting the future, it turns out, is hard work. Zandl is an informational omnivore, taking in data wherever she goes, in whatever form it appears. But she can't be everywhere at once, so each year for the past 15 years, the Zandl Group has recruited 3,000 young people between the ages of 8 and 24 to find out what is and isn't cool. The group is ethnically and geographically diverse and gender-balanced. The kids are mostly found in malls, where they fill out lengthy questionnaires? Favorite band, favourite activity, favourite brand? And have a Polaroid taken that goes in their file. Zandl reads every one. They're oddly revealing. A survey with a snapshot of a skinny black teen clipped to it reveals his occupation as "security guard" and his ambition "to own my own reality." The last rebellious thing he did? Sex on top of a parked car. A pale, long-haired Costco clerk writes about his devotion to hair-metal band Pantera and his plans to market a music-production software package he's writing. Zandl maintains an ever expanding library of "crib chats"; she follows kids back to their houses and videotapes them talking about whatever they're interested in? Usually sex, cars or electronics, sometimes all three. On a typical tape, three black teenagers squashed together on a beat-up living-room couch discuss the merits of in-car entertainment systems with the rigor and intensity of a Talmudic summit. "If you've got four TVs, a DVD player and a PlayStation 2 all in there," says one kid, summing up, "you're going to have girls who want to give you some. In your truck!" ("Aren't you glad you don't go to high school anymore?" Zandl asks me. Yes, I

am.) Zandl and her staff archive collate and cross-reference all this information, then cross-breed it with data from other sources (she is an avid consumer of census data and opinion reports) and distill it into a bimonthly publication called the Hot Sheet. Subscribers include General Motors, Coca-Cola and Disney. A subscription costs \$15,000 a year. So what does Zandl see in the future? For starters, strippers. "They're really setting the trends right now," she says, fast-forwarding her way through a videotaped ad for a home-use stripper pole. "I think strippers have become hugely important. I think we'll see pole dancing on ESPN in five years." Zandl loves everything cholo, a Hispanic street subculture that's heavily into tattoos and low-riders. She has been watching the steady growth of the Hispanic population in the U.S. over the past two decades and thinks it's long overdue to make a significant impact on the mainstream scene. "I feel about this the way I felt about hip-hop," she says. She's high on anything mobile and portable, especially things that fit in your car? She loves audio books and those blue melt-in-your-mouth Listerine strips. She tells a story about a bank in Virginia that has been converted into a church, with a drive-through prayer centre. "There are going to be a million things you can do in your car," she says in her Austral-Germanic English. The god of the trend spotter is the 14-year-old hipster, and it is a cruel and fickle god with many prophets. Claire Brooks is executive strategic-planning director of the Lambesis Agency, a firm in Carlsbad, Calif., that publishes a trend bible called the L Style Report. Like Zandl, Brooks depends on information from a network of youthful informants, but Brooks runs her data-gathering operation more like a domestic espionage ring. "We have this network of people around the country," she explains. "They are trendsetters? People establishing careers in fashion and music, in film, in marketing, in advertising." She calls them the Urban Pioneers. They're the Navy Seals of cool, and Brooks is casually ruthless about who makes the cut. "After a while, you just get to know when you're talking to a trendsetter," she explains. "There are a lot of

early-mainstream people who really think that they're trendsetters? The people who say, 'I really love Gap.' And you just think, Yeah, you really don't know about that, do you? Whereas the true trendsetter will be making her own clothing. Or her friend will just have started a boutique or a fashion line or whatever." If you find that this kind of talk brings back half-buried memories of being picked last at kickball, you're not alone. It's impossible to talk to Brooks without inwardly measuring yourself against the golden yardstick of cool and coming up short. Once you look for them, you'll see that America is crawling with these sleeper agents of cool. Dozens of companies? Radar Communications, Teenage Research Unlimited, even Teen People magazine (which, like TIME, is published by Time Inc.)? Keep stables of tens of thousands of teenage correspondents, paying them in either cash or product samples or other freebies. Interestingly, the people running these networks are almost exclusively women. The cool industry is a matriarchal one. "Women are the networkers, the chatterers," says Brooks. "I think that what you need in this industry is an ability to get beneath what people are saying and doing and look at what it really means, and I think that those are skills that we are good at." Jane Rinzler Buckingham is president of a New York City-based trend-spotting company called Youth Intelligence, which was acquired by the powerhouse talent agency CAA earlier this year. Blond and photogenic, she is given to saying mind-altering things like, "If blue is the new black, what's the new blue?" (Trend spotters love to talk about how X is the new Y.) Three times a year, Buckingham and her staff handpick 300 trendsetters via a screening exam that covers music, magazines, brands, activities and TV shows. They recruit in coffee shops, video stores, "cool bookstores" and high schools in four or five different cities. "We're trying to go to places where you'll find some trendsetters, but sometimes we have to split it. We want to go to Kansas City, because sometimes you'll get cool music coming out of Kansas City. But it's hard to find 100 trendsetters in Kansas City. "Of

course, even with the help of Kansas City's coolest, the trend watchers sometimes get it wrong. Youth Intelligence picked the WB action series *Birds of Prey* as a winner last year. (*Birds of whom?*) Exactly. It was cancelled after a few episodes.) And the game is getting tougher. "Some of the companies we've worked with that used to get hair accessories made in China discovered that they couldn't do it anymore," says Brooks. "By the time a celebrity had worn it, it had appeared in *InStyle*, and then everybody wanted it right now, and then it was over in a few weeks. There's this dissemination going on, visually and through the Internet, that is killing brands." For most people, the decline of the national attention span is just another cliché; for trend watchers, it raises serious manufacturing and inventory-control problems. "It makes our job harder," Buckingham laments, "because the minute we spot a trend, we've got about four seconds to tell our clients. A mall clothing store can take down designer fashion within the next season. You see it in September on the runways. Then you've got it at Rampage and PacSun and all those places the same time you've got it in the Gucci stores, which means that it's going to be over much more quickly. "But if the Internet is making things tougher for most trend watchers, at least one trend spotter is turning its raging information flow to her advantage, Using it to power the turbines of cool. Her name is DeeDee Gordon, and she's a co-founder, with partner Sharon Lee, of a new trend-spotting firm called Look-Look. Gordon has certain notoriety in the trend-spotting industry: she was the original cool hunter, the subject of the famous 1997 *New Yorker* profile. Gordon and Lee both used to work for Lambesis, but by 1999 they got impatient with the way things were done. They were going out and giving kids pen-and-paper surveys when the kids were using instant messaging and two-way pagers. "We could have kept doing this the same way," says Gordon, who dresses in black and wears her plain brown hair pushed back over her ears, Galadriel-style, "but we knew better." Gordon and Lee left Lambesis and founded Look-Look. Instead of canvassing their sources by

hand, in person, they built up an army of teenagers that constantly feeds them information online. They estimate that they have 20,000 contacts, with the number expanding 500 to 1,000 a month. "It was all grown organically," says Gordon proudly, as if she were surveying a vast hemp farm. "We spent a great deal of money and up-front time handpicking these people based on peer-to-peer recruitment. It's a very different methodology from the way that most people gather bodies. We kind of modelled it after an MLM (multilevel marketing plan)? Like a Herbalife or a Mary Kay or an Avon." The Look-Look kids? They're known as "field correspondents"? Wander the cultural landscape with digital cameras (provided by Look-Look), uploading images from parties and concerts and sporting events for the Look-Look employees? Sorry, "youth-information specialists"? To pore over. (Look-Look defines kids as ages 14 to 30. "Thirty is different now," says Lee. "Thirty is really 35 now.") Because these kids are permanently wired to the mother ship, Gordon and Lee can ping them at will with specific requests from clients. When Calvin Klein came to them with a list of possible names for a new fragrance targeted at young men, Look-Look could quickly run the list past 10,000 or so teenage eyeballs. (The eventual winner? "Crave.") "Before, you would have to just kind of guess, or you'd have to wait," says Lee, "but because we've built this huge network, we have the capability to test the hypothesis with any kind of sample size that we want and get an immediate response. Yes, this is happening, or no, it isn't." It's an instantaneous, infallible coolometer. You have to respect the sheer efficiency, not to mention the mass-scalability, of the feedback loop Gordon and Lee have created. They're extracting coolness from those who know and getting it to those who don't with unmatched speed and in unprecedented quantities. But it all raises some heavy sociological questions. In the old days, trends would percolate through the population slowly via the "and-they-told-two-friends" network. Now trends spread virally, via e-mail and instant messaging, with professional trend spotters

snapping at their heels, hurrying them onward ever faster. In an age of universal information access, isn't everybody, by definition, in the know? What would it mean if the line between the cool kids and the uncool kids collapsed under the awesome pressure of information technology? If the trend spotters keep doing their job, an ever growing fraction of Americans will be well informed as to the proper cocktail to order. (Uh, it is still Campari, right? Right?) Will cool still be cool when everybody knows about it? When you can buy it at the Gap? And read about it in popular newsweekly magazines? Maybe it will. Maybe the rules are changing. Zandl thinks the days of the alpha consumer may be numbered. "I'm working on a theory right now that I haven't really fully fleshed out," she says cautiously. "I'm calling it 'The Centre Is the New Edge.' One of the things we've been seeing is that the edge has gotten incredibly predictable? I don't think it's very fresh anymore, because it's so focused on itself." She mentions a couple of the sturdy warhorses of cool: indie actress Chloë Sevigny and edgy fashion label Imitation of Christ. "When you really look at it, what trends are they really setting? Whereas if you go to Wal-Mart and you've got the Olsen twins with a billion-dollar business, you know there's something clearly going on. "In other words, maybe cool people aren't setting the trends anymore. Maybe what's going on is that America is finally weaning itself off an addiction to cool. If the centre is the new edge, maybe mainstream will be the new radical, square will be the new hip, and? Stay with me here? Uncool will be the new cool. In other words, maybe there's hope for us all.