

Tracking the Trendsetters

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Ever notice how some people seem to have “it”? They have that indefinable effortless quality that is cool. There are celebrities who, even after death, still have the allure of coolness. People like James Dean, Steve McQueen, and Kurt Cobain epitomize cool for a lot of people. Today, teenagers look to stars like Ashton Kutcher and Gwen Stefani as models of cool. But what makes these

celebrities cool? Each has his or her own unique sense of style, but wearing cool clothes doesn't always make you cool. Certainly, all live their lives according to their own rules. Does rebellion equal coolness? Are trendsetters always necessarily cool? And who says what is cool, anyway?

Marketers-- in their never-ending hunt to harness and define coolness--have turned to the source for insight. Teenagers have always been early adopters of trends, and play a pivotal role in deciding what is cool

in society. Marketers know that if teenagers see something as cool, it will likely become a trend that spreads to other sectors of the population. They also know that teenagers today have more spending



money than ever before, and that on the whole, they like to buy. Thus, since the mid 1990s, corporations have employed cool hunters to help them stay current with what is cool with young people.

What is cool hunting?

Malcolm Gladwell, in his book *The Tipping Point* and in the PBS documentary *The Merchants of Cool*, discusses the phenomenon of cool hunting. A cool hunter is a young person (usually in his or her teens or early twenties) who is hired by a corporation to report trends back to the

company. Essentially, these “culture spies” tell companies what cool kids are wearing, what they are listening to, what they like to do for fun, where they like to hang out, and what slang sayings are popular. Cool hunters are usually trendsetters themselves, and can identify potential trends before they have been adopted by the masses. The companies then translate that information into products or into



advertising.

It sounds like a win-win situation: the cool hunters are paid generously for their insights into being cool

and for doing what they already do, and the corporations gain valuable market research directly from the source. So what’s the problem? The problem, say many critics, is that marketers are simply taking trends from teenagers, repackaging them, and selling them back. It becomes a chicken and egg scenario of which came first: the trend actually being cool or the trend being cool because marketers said it was cool.

And this brings us back to the definition of

cool: coolness is elusive. If you try too hard, you will never be cool. And by the time something becomes cool to the masses, those who first recognized and adopted the trend have dismissed it as uncool and moved onto something else. Teenagers are notoriously fickle, and will discard a trend as soon as it becomes too popular or too commercial. As Douglas Rushkoff says in his article “The Pursuit of Cool”:

The minute a cool trend is discovered, repackaged, and sold to kids at the mall, it is no longer cool. So the kids turn to something else, and the whole process starts all over again. The better you get at cool hunting, the faster the cycle goes, and the harder it is for anyone to keep up.

Corporations are in an endless race to give teens products they already think are cool, rather than creating original and innovative products that could become trendy if given the chance.

Stop the cool hunt!

While teens are becoming increasingly

aware of the tricks and tools used by marketers, corporations are now savvier in their advertising ploys. Ads have become insidious, appearing as editorials and disguised as information pieces (known as "aditorials" and "adformation"). Companies sponsor sporting events, fund school lunch programs, and offer scholarships – all forms of marketing for the corporation.

There may never be an end to the "cool hunt," but we can help young people to protect themselves and their hard-earned money. Offering advertising-free schools and libraries is one option; providing media awareness training is another alternative. Most importantly, teens must have confidence in their own individual choices and in the freedom to decide what they think is cool, not what they are told is cool.

Works Cited

Gladwell, M. (17 March 1997). "The Coolhunt: Who decides what's cool?" *The New Yorker*. <http://www.looklook.com/looklook/tml/Test_Drive_Press_Yorker.html>

Rushkoff, D. "The Pursuit of Cool: Introduction to Anti-Hyper-Consumerism". *Sportswear International*. <<http://www.rushkoff.com/essay/sportswearinternational.html>> (2001)>

The paradox of "cool hunting" is that it kills what it finds
-Douglas Rushkoff

