



Show Your Colour


'**TODAY**, the idea of a bunch of people sitting in a room and deciding what the colours are going to be in two years' time, or what materials are going to be used in three years' time, is complete nonsense,' says Marc Worth. In 1997 Worth and his brother Julian founded Worth Global Style Network (WGSN), a trend-forecasting service whose current clients include Coach, Kate Spade, H&M and Victoria's Secret. The quote is from 'Do Fashion Trends Still Exist?', an article by Kate Abnett that appeared in a January issue of *The Business of Fashion*. If Worth is right, then how *does* colour forecasting work? Who decides what colour will be popular next year, and why?

Some of you may know very little about colour forecasters – neither did I before taking this assignment – so join me in a crash course. A survey of five reputable agencies reveals that they operate along similar lines, driven by a desire to know and report what's going on. No surprise there.

People with a strong network of connections gather information on shifts in attitude, mind-sets, political convictions and social developments worldwide. Those with fewer contacts – local investigators and field-specific infiltrators – rely on third-party sources. In other words, they buy their information. One such source is The Future

Laboratory, an international organization that issues frequent trend reports via subscription-based service LS:N Global. According to art director Joanna Tulej of The Future Laboratory, her company's colour and design reports show 'what is driving the trend, which sectors it is influencing, and which consumer groups will be embracing it in the coming years'. Jane Kellock, founder and creative director of Unique Style Platform (USP), plies a 1-2-3 rule: 1 is interesting, 2 a coincidence and 3 a trend.

But *why* do we see what we see? And what does it mean to us? 'Gather, filter and translate' is the credo, and everyone involved translates in a different way. Interesting detail:



Can colour forecasting be seen as a self-fulfilling prophecy? It's a question that prompts Alexandra Onderwater to pick the brains of leaders in the field, hoping to find their true colours.

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forecasters all say intuition (or something similar, like experience or gut feeling) is important to their analyses. Facts alone will get you nowhere, says Caroline Till, who runs London-based FranklinTill Studio together with Kate Franklin. Except for a generic, themed biannual trend publication, they offer only bespoke forecasting. Facts need to be correlated with everything that's happening 'before tomorrow' fresh in the mind. Knowledge gives you an advantage. What's more, FranklinTill goes outside the customary disciplines for information – think scientists, academics, visionaries. 'It's a common fallacy to think of us checking out Pinterest all day long,' says Till.

'Trend-watching has a bit of a bad name these days, because there's such a proliferation of information on the web and in publications. People think that anyone can do it. But it's hardcore research. We analyse data, look for correlations and patterns, and translate what we find into reports that give rise to design directions.'

Most forecasting services offer only 'bespoke reports'; more generalized predictions allegedly leave clients unable to see the wood for the trees. Seen as such, a customized colour chart that maps your future looks like a tantalizing dish prepared by your private chef, who knows your tastes and dietary proclivities.

So who makes use of trend reports and colour forecasts? You'd think brands would rely on their own sense of style, but they don't. 'Almost all industries rely on forecasting,' says Kellock. 'Everyone from carmakers to manufacturers of paper napkins comes to us for colour advice.'

'Colour is more important now than it was ten years ago. Today's consumer has a better understanding of what colour can do. It's more than decorative: it's an intrinsic part of a product. Put simply, there's a need for curation in a world with so much information.' Speaking is Cecile Poignant of Trend Tablet, an online spin-off of Li Edelkoort's forecasting ↪



agency Trend Union. Lidewij Edelkoort is colour forecasting incarnate: seemingly at odds with other opinions, she has been churning out colour bibles twice yearly from time immemorial. Generic reports? Yes. And immensely popular.

Together, Edelkoort and Poignant have been in the colour-consultation business for over 25 years. Poignant says we know a lot more about colour now than we did in the 1980s. She mentions Benetton, once a powerhouse that helped put colour on the map. 'You know which brand currently has one of the best colour ranges? Fiat. The 500 comes in amazing shades.' She says that 'colours come and go in cycles: periods of popularity alternate with periods of dormancy. Take orange. Often paired with brown, it was super successful in the 1970s. After a long period of hibernation, orange was back in bloom for a time, but again it's past its peak, having given way to yellow.'

Jo Tulej agrees. 'Trends and patterns often occur in cyclical ways. Yesterday we published an article about the resurgence of 1970s-style "soft psychedelic" colours in fashion, advertising and graphics. What is important to consider, though, is why the resurgence happened and who is adopting it – a particular demographic or nationality? You can use that information to work out how it will grow and develop in the future.'

Poignant is quick to confirm that cycles are not the only factor that determines the revival of a colour. She points to the increasing popularity of khaki among Asian women as an example. Strange? 'Not really. We saw that one coming,' she says. 'Western women associate khaki with masculinity, the military, and so forth. But khaki also

stands for "well done, efficient, confident". The colour is part of a larger family that also includes navy blue, for that matter.'

My head is spinning. There are so many factors to consider. And doesn't colour forecasting involve some sort of hocus-pocus? Where does the crystal ball come in? 'We have our heads in the clouds, and our feet firmly on the ground,' says Poignant. Just as I'm about to file that away under fuzzy 'hippie talk', she

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says something quite concrete: 'Our work is like social life. We do lots of research on the personality of a brand, conduct interviews, and talk to people inside and outside the brand. We create a so-called social landscape that serves as a foundation for our predictions. In the end, though, the whole thing is based on intuition.'

In London, I discuss the matter with Caroline Till, who calls forecasting 'part reportage and part prophecy. Research and analysis are always grounded in a sociocultural context,' she says. 'Moreover, colour is often

one of the last elements we define in our analyses. We like to understand what drives a design movement first, before selecting a colour that goes with our findings.'

'Colour is no longer just a matter of flat, shaded material and pattern,' says Anne Marie Commandeur of Het Stijlinstituut in Amsterdam. Her colour predictions are also invariably part of a bigger package. 'More than ever before, certain shades are linked to specific types of materials.' Poignant emphasizes the importance of materials. 'Whether a certain colour is suitable depends for a great deal on supporting factors. Are we talking fabrics? Ceramics? Steel? What kind of light is available?'

If it's up to Pantone, 2015 belongs to Marsala, a deep burgundy hue. 'Marsala is a subtly seductive shade, one that draws us into its embracing warmth,' says Leatrice Eiseman, executive director of the Pantone Color Institute. 'Much like the fortified wine that gives Marsala its name, this tasteful hue embodies the satisfying richness of a fulfilling meal, while its grounding red-brown roots emanate a sophisticated, natural earthiness.'

Marsala is a smart choice, says Till, who envisions the colour being used with success in numerous areas. Yet proclaiming a 'colour of the year' is first and foremost a clever marketing ploy, she adds, as Marsala is available only through the American colour-coding company that's touting its popularity. But she has to admit it's a particularly beautiful colour – and one that goes well with other colours. Pantone's 'hearty yet stylish tone' is the outcome of discussions with numerous experts in the field, says Commandeur. Brushing Marsala aside as a mere marketing ploy is too easy; the colour reflects the spirit of the times.

USP's Jane Kellock is equally enthusiastic. 'Sometimes the Pantone colour of the year can be a bit random, but this year they are spot on. The pre-autumn catwalk shows were full of Marsala.' Poignant is another who sees the overall potential of Marsala. 'Colour is huge business,' she stresses, referring to Pantone's role in guiding our decisions and allaying the fear of picking the wrong colour. It's not easy to 'nail one's colours to the mast', so to speak. Poignant is not surprised by the choice of Marsala. In fact, Trend Tablet called attention to a similar shade of burgundy a couple of years ago – a bit too early, she says. 'Our predictions are often premature.'

Forecasting reports are expensive, partly because it takes a huge amount of time, money and effort to stay well informed on all relevant topics. *Colours Book* by Trend Union costs a cool €2000. For that money, you get fabric samples ('better than prints on paper: more depth, easier to see') in tomorrow's top 56 colours. You can mix, match and play until you end up with the colour that's most relevant to your brand, industry or purpose. Is it too expensive? I share my thoughts with Tulej who says: 'We future-proof organizations. We give brands the confidence to make the right decisions and investments, so they can survive and thrive.'

It's all about confidence, says Kellock. Purchasing a seasonal colour forecast that includes four directional colour stories helps businesses to make the right colour choices

for a particular season and 'enables them to build their own palettes with confidence'. You pay to stay ahead of the curve. USP's colour book costs £950. 'A global collective view on colour is invaluable. Making colour mistakes can be very expensive for brands, so they want to be sure they have an expert view on their colour choices.'

'There's a need for curation in a world with so much information'

How do we know whether a colour forecast was correct? Who verifies such forecasts; in other words, is there more to them than mimicry? Enough people singing the praises of Marsala means that, sooner or later, the colour will worm its way into our collective consciousness, and even I will look for it the next time I go shopping.

'If you've got it right, popular culture will reflect your predictions,' says Till. So, are forecasters running the show? Not exactly,

says Commandeur. 'What ends up in the high street is often a watered-down version of what we've forecast. Industry buyers rarely go for the entire range of colours. A brand may back our recommendations, but if a retailer has had a bad year and buys conservatively, there's nothing we can do about it. In that sense, forecasting cannot be validated by reviewing what the consumer has done and basing our success on the results.' After all, shoppers can't like or dislike what they don't find in the stores.

What's next? What's getting colour forecasters all hot and bothered as we slide into the next season? After all they've told me, I'm afraid to push the envelope any further, but I do. Amazingly, I get an instant reply from Kellock, who reveals that 'red will be all the fashion'. She mentions lilac and brown as well, adding that 'they will be slower to catch on'. Commandeur thinks the landscape is far too diverse to say any colour is passé, but she's watching the development of responsive colours used for materials that react to their surroundings. When pressed, she admits that fluorescence in fashion is over, though it may still play a part in other areas. Till has expectations for new combinations and compositions of two or more colours.

If colour is always part of a much bigger picture, what does that picture look like? And what does it mean for the business of colour forecasting? Questions these experts don't seem eager to answer – at least not free of charge. X

