

## Do Fashion Trends Still Exist?



**LONDON, United Kingdom** — In 1937, the English author, critic, curator and fashion historian James Laver drew up a rudimentary timeline of how trends evolve. According to Laver's Law, when a trend is in fashion, it is 'smart.' One year before this it is 'daring.' And 20 years later, it becomes 'ridiculous.' 50 years, Laver said, was how long it took for a trend to begin to creep back into style.

For years, Laver's Law made sense. And though the pace of the fashion industry picked up rapidly throughout the twentieth century with the growing mass production of clothing, trends maintained their relatively long and predictable life cycles. Each season, fashion forecasting houses released hefty books containing their predictions on which styles and fabrics would come 'in' in future seasons. Designers and brands worked with these bibles and brought their contents to life for consumers when the clothes hit stores a few years — literally, years — later. In this business of books, assessing trends so far in advance and publishing them in hard copy kept the turnover of new styles to a steady, seasonal pace.

How things have changed.

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“Today, the idea of a bunch 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 a complete nonsense," said Marc Worth. In 1997, Worth and his brother Julian founded Worth Global Style Network (WGSN), the trend-forecasting service whose clients today include [Coach](#), Kate Spade, [H&M](#) and Victoria's Secret.

While some of the traditional fashion forecasting houses, such as Paris-based Peclers, still issue their seasonal tomes, Worth believes today's fashion cycle requires a different approach to understanding trends. "As things have evolved, we've moved into the four-season approach, then into drops and the whole nature of forecasting, I think, has gone out of the window."

In 2005, Worth sold WGSN to British media company eMap for £140 million and, last year, launched the fashion division of Stylus, a service which offers creative research and advice to businesses, but does not, he insists, forecast trends. "We don't forecast, we don't predict. We provide inspirations for creatives to create trends; we track trends as they evolve, but we're not forecasters in the traditional sense," he said. "Social media dictates trends today. The trend emerges overnight and disappears almost as quickly."

Indeed, James Laver could not have predicted that the fashion industry would break loose from its traditional, stately bi-annual cycle, moving towards something that, at some retailers, has begun to more closely resemble a feed of constant product drops. Driven by the Internet, media, too, has dramatically sped up, serving up a stream of new fashion trends all day, every day.

Today, trends are born and die within an infinitely faster and more turbulent environment, in which brands, celebrities, magazines, bloggers and end consumers on social media all jostle for influence over what's 'in' and 'out' of fashion.

"Social media has absolutely, totally changed the trends landscape," said Ruth Chapple, head of content at Stylus Fashion. "It's making some trends stick, while long ago we would have been over them more quickly. The Valentino rock stud, which everyone expected to be a one-season wonder, has been going strong for eight seasons," she said. "The death of the stud was forecast long ago, but that was very much a social media trend, where the bloggers made that trend stick." On the other hand, digital media can quickly overexpose a trend, and kill its 'edge'. "The Kenzo tiger sweatshirt," Chapple recalled. "Over and done with in a month."

"The word 'trend' is a little bit like the word 'luxury' — nobody really knows what it is anymore, where it starts, where it ends," said Pierre-François Le Louët, president of Paris-based trend forecasting agency NellyRodi.

Like Marc Worth, Le Louët claims his trend forecasting firm is not in the business of predicting trends, which, he says, are plain to see on social media and often prove to be very short-lived. Rather, NellyRodi uses its network of representatives in 18 countries to track the trends happening on the ground in different markets, and then help clients pluck out of the vast array of things ‘trending’ at any one time the specific trends that will work for their brand, in their chosen markets.

“You don’t sell the product of the season that well anymore,” he said. “The most important thing is to work on your brand identity, who you are, how you differentiate from your competitors. Trends are tools that might help you convince your clients how you and your brand understand how the world changes.”

Anne Lise Kjaer, founder of trend management consultancy Kjaer Global, which counts Gap, [Swarovski](#) and La Perla amongst its clients, also takes a holistic approach to trends. “A trend is a tipping point, from when a few people are doing it to when many people are doing it. ‘Trendy’ trends, as such, are unsustainable and short-lived. We don’t even look at those,” she said. “More than going to a shop and having a look, you find someone you follow on Instagram or a blog. It becomes a *lifestyle* rather than a trend. We’re moving from being trend-focused to lifestyle-focused... Some trends turn out to be short-lived, whereas others continue to evolve as they are more about lifestyle choices and style, rather than conspicuous consumption.”

In a sense, the role of today’s trend analysts is comparable to panning for gold. The abundance of ‘trending’ content and the loss of a single, authoritative source that predicts and starts trends have created a serious need for a filter. Brands turn to trend analysts to trawl through this overload of information and find the real treasure; that is, the trends that will work for their brand, the trends that have staying power, and the trends that can be leveraged in specific markets and with specific consumer demographics.

“Brands and retailers have just had to get savvier in how they process information about trends in order to understand which are the macro-trends and identify micro-trends in time to react,” said Katie Smith, a senior retail analyst at Editd, a data-driven fashion analytics platform. “Our customers use trend analysis at every stage of a product life cycle. From designers who are analysing which colours have performed best in retail, or which sleeve shapes continually see discounting, through to buying and merchandising, where trend analysis forms a critical part of every decision around pricing, depth of buy, timing within a season and replenishment.”

“It’s about helping people decide what they should be purchasing and buying at the same time. You need a lot of information at your fingertips,” reasoned Catriona Macnab, chief creative officer at WGSN, which, like NellyRodi and Stylus, uses intelligence from local teams around the world to give clients advice on what’s trending — and what is likely to trend — in specific markets.

On the high street, some of the biggest and most successful brands have built their business models around the ever-increasing speed and volatility of trends coupled to consumer demand for constant newness: it’s less about forecasting and more about responsiveness.

[Zara](#)’s highly responsive, vertically-integrated, data-driven business model has made it one of the most agile fashion brands in the world, taking just two weeks to take a product from design studio to its stores, which feature over 10,000 new designs per year. Topshop drops new items every day.

“They have to be able to react faster, they have to be able to keep up with trends and there aren’t many that are able to do so,” said Marc Worth. “People like Topshop can, people like Inditex (which owns Zara) are able to, but the behemoths like Marks & Spencer still struggle to because of the manufacturing and supply chain process.”

Ruth Chapple concurs: “It boils down to speed to market.”

“I think the biggest change has come in high end fashion,” said Alice Fisher, a commissioning editor and style correspondent for The Guardian newspaper’s Observer Magazine. “It’s something I always ask designers about when I meet them because I’m fascinated by how their workload must have changed with the promotion of pre-collection, resort, [capsule collections](#), special collaborations, etcetera.”

Luxury brands, largely still bound to the anachronistic cycle of seasonal runway shows, are forced into a balancing act when it comes to trends, releasing major new styles at the pace of the traditional fashion calendar, while keeping their brand looking fresh between seasons with additional lines, products and digital content.

“Some — like [Raf Simons](#) — love it because they always have new ideas and relish the pace,” said Fisher. “Others say it’s really relentless.”