



# Right on Target

*Waters bringing her fire for creative marketing to SSA Conference & Trade Show.*

By John Dunlap

You no doubt are familiar with Target, the department store that also happens to be hip. Early on in the company's existence its owners realized that it couldn't keep up with the likes of Wal-Mart and K-Mart by looking or acting like those competitors. So, Target set out to separate itself from the competition by creating a look and feel all its own. The result? Gigantic success.

One of the key individuals who helped make it so, Robyn Waters, is a marketing and design expert who will bring her expertise to Colorado Springs at the SSA's Spring Conference and Trade Show. Those attending her April 18 presentation will get an inside look at how Target built its public image through creative design and how self storage professionals can do the same. But they'll also get much more—notably Waters' own recipe for success in marketing and design, one that can apply as well to self storage. (Also, check out Waters' own column on page 33 in this issue of the *SSA Globe*.)

"I was in the right place at the right time," Waters admits. "We had the best designers, the best bosses and the best creative attitude that you could ever imagine. Our goal was to establish an emotional connection with our customers. We set up wide, clean aisles and good service, but we also concentrated on design. People can love a brand and we set it up that they would love the design of our products and our logo.

"The most important thing for any business today is to be able to look inside the hearts and minds of their customers and understand what's really important to them," Waters adds. "Of course, you have to know and understand your business, and be aware of the competition, but I consider those things a given. It's important to be able to reframe your mission around what the customer needs and wants as opposed to what it is you do.

"It's also critical to differentiate yourself from the competition. Great design—and I mean design of a service, a facility, a marketing message, even of a social or corporate mission—can go a long way in helping a company stand out in customers' minds."

## Making It Happen

Waters graduated from a small state college in 1973, in the midst of a recession. She had two degrees, one in textiles and clothing/fashion merchandising and one in business administration/marketing. She loved fashion and travel. Her goal was to be a food buyer for the future's market, for an international grain company, like Cargill or Pillsbury.

She took a part-time job selling fine jewelry and ended up falling in love with retail. Her talents were recognized and she soon became a fashion coordinator at a competitor.

When she was hired by Target in 1992, it was a small regional discounter with \$3 billion in sales. Wal-Mart was 10 times bigger than Target at the time. Target's merchandise was basic and undifferentiated from all of the other discounters. The trend team at that time consisted of five trend coordinators that traveled domestically and internationally, tracking trends and bringing back samples and ideas to the merchants.

"Top management, led by CEO Bob Ulrich, looked at the market and the competition and quickly realized that trying to compete on price alone was a losing battle, a downward spiral," Waters adds. "Wal-Mart's size allowed it incredible economies of scale that Target could never reach, so our cost structure was always going to be at a disadvantage. That's when top management decided on a unique, differentiated approach. They wanted to position Target as a 'lovemark' brand, to differentiate the product offerings from their competition while keeping prices low."

## Bring On the Kids

One of the most important elements in Target's approach to setting up a new and appealing look was to find the right designers—and for that the company turned to youth.

"In trying to build a good design department we decided to recruit talented designers to come live at our headquarters in Minneapolis, and that wasn't going to be easy since most designers at that time wanted to live on the coasts," Waters says. "So we went to some of the top design schools in the country and sponsored design contests where the students who won were offered jobs with Target. We brought in some great young talent by doing that.

"Target's brand promise became *Expect More. Pay Less*," she adds. "The 'Expect More' part meant to expect more

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trend, more quality, more fun, more design and the 'Pay Less' part meant pay less for it than you would if you were buying the very same thing at a department or specialty store—NOT at another discounter. That brand promise essentially provided my team with the permission to be as creative as we could be—as long as we were trend right, focused on our guests' lives, and offered innovative and exclusive product designs to our merchants.

"We also had a different kind of freedom as a result of our strategy. While we were always aware of what the other discounters were doing, we never worried too much about them from a product point of view."

When Waters left Target 10 years later, it was a \$48 billion dollar nationally recognized "upscale discounter."

Waters has since moved on to become a top-selling author of marketing and design books, including *The Trendmaster's Guide: Get a Jump on What Your Customer Wants Next* and *The Hummer and the Mini: Navigating the Contradictions of the New Trend Landscape*.

### Relevance to Self Storage

So what ideas can self storage owner/operators and managers take from a trendmaster like Waters?

"Things have meaning to people," says Waters. "They hang onto their possessions in large part because they have monetary value AND because they have sentimental value. They may be in transition; they may have too much on their plates to do everything they feel that they need to do to stay organized. There is a certain level of stress in that equation. Possessions can weigh you down, and a busy life with bumps along the way can make matters worse.

"In today's world, if you're a marketer you have to think in terms beyond 'selling something.' You need to think about what you do and what you have to offer as 'healing.' How can you make your customer's lives easier, richer, happier, better, more comfortable, more fun even? I'll borrow a quote from Melinda Davis (author of *The New Culture of Desire*). She says that today, 'Peace of mind is the new gold standard.'

"A lot of what self storage offers can be looked at in that light," Waters concludes. "This business can help a customer through transitions, both happy and sad. Death, loss of job, marriage, divorce, even storing someone's 'life' as they take off on their life's dream—a trip around the world.

"You can reframe what it is that this business is all about. It's not about 'storing stuff.' By virtue of your industry, you offer safety, security, comfort, technical support, and most of all, peace of mind to your customers." ❖

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