1. INTRODUCTION

Reading a fresh trend report should fill your head with new thoughts and ideas about how to transform your business. However, the value of a trend report often hinges on the ability to understand and translate its themes correctly. When misunderstood, trends can feel uninspiring, confusing, or just plain weird. Given that there are few standards for how trends should be communicated, the chances of misinterpreting them seems high. This study uncovers two strategies that dramatically improve a designer’s ability to translate trend information into relevant ideas: the use of sensory language and image-based priming exercises.

Brands utilize trends to project a future vision of the culture, technology, style, and environment in which they compete. Trends give brands a method for maintaining their relevance, empowering choices that must be made in advance of a future that sometimes won’t exist for years. Imagine a beauty brand focused on “natural” benefits. Over the course of the last 40 years, views on “natural” have dramatically shifted from “crunchy granola” to “juicy vibrance” to “clean and colorless.” With good trend work, a brand can navigate these changes appropriately rather than appearing dated and out of touch with consumers. While some trend reports produce enlightening experiences that inspire teams to think about their projects in meaningful new ways, others fall short, leaving their audiences feeling disappointed and confused. However, the source of this problem does not appear to be “in” the documents themselves. An audit of recent trend documents online indicates that there is an ample quantity of solid thinking from trend forecasters from around the globe. Rather than the documents themselves, it’s how they’re used that can make the difference between good and bad experiences.

How are trends used? While there are a variety of uses from strategy to styling, at the most basic level creative teams use trends to develop new ideas. This process is known as translation – the process of changing from one form to another. In this case, teams are translating the trend information (usually in the form of a short description of text and visuals) into design ideas. The focus of this study is on defining the insights and principles that lead to good translation.

2. PROBLEM DEFINITION

To identify challenges with translation, we analyzed existing trend work, interviewed professionals who work with them, and reviewed existing research on the topic. We started by analyzing ten trend reports on a variety of topics in a range of styles. The audit revealed a variety of dimensions along which trend reports exist, including differences in scope as well as different levels of categorization, detail, certainty, and pragmatism. Despite some interesting observations, this audit showed that there is no one right way to present trend information. A trend report with a narrow scope and high level of categorization could be just as relevant as one with a broad scope and low level of categorization. The quality of the trends comes from properly aligning the project needs with the right approach.

To understand how trends are used, we interviewed eight professionals. The group consisted of different types of designers, managers, and creative directors, people who both use and create trends from corporate and consulting backgrounds. Conversations revealed two key themes. First, people are sensitive to the language in trend documents. As one interviewee stated, “You need to be inspiring but not so lofty that it’s over people’s
heads.” Trend imagery wasn’t seen as a challenge, it was the language of trends on which people had the most feedback. Second, people evaluate trend information in an introspective way. The majority of people interviewed reported doing a “mini-ideation” in their head while being presented trend information. They ask themselves, “How often do I see this pop up in my own reading?” If the trend aligns with their own experiences and begins to inspire ideas, then it will become accepted as a good source of inspiration. Research by Goldschmidt and Sever (2010) and Goncalves (2012) supported the same insights. The importance of “moderately-related” text is a key driver in good verbal-to-visual translation. Designers need inspiration that is relatable, but not too close to their existing expertise. Additionally, designers “rewrite the brief” as a best practice for getting deeply engaged in a project. This aligns nicely with the mini-ideation described in the interviews. Given these insights, we hypothesize that trend translation will improve when describing the trend using the right language and by priming people before ideation begins. To test this, we conducted two ideation sessions and recorded the results.

![Diagram of sensory language]

**Fig. 1** Sensory language attends to one or more of the five senses in specific ways to help articulate design ideas more clearly.

### 3. STUDY 1 – RIGHT LANGUAGE

Insights from experts suggested that some language is more translatable than others. In particular, the use of adjectives that describe one or more of the senses might be advantageous (fig. 1). Analyzing trend texts supplied by branding firm LPK, we identified ambiguous language and sensory language as we developed the stimulus. For example, we designated the word “gourmet” as an ambiguous one, because there are so many versions of this idea that it isn’t clear which one the trend is describing. Instead, we used “chef-inspired” to create sensory visions of a professional working in a clean environment filled with white and metallic surfaces. The term “mood-altering” begged the questions, “What mood? Altered in what way?” To make it more sensory, we selected the word “hallucinogenic” in hopes to inspire surreal imagery often associated with the term. Two trends were written...
in two versions: an ambiguous form and a sensory form (fig. 2). The total four stimuli were then presented to twelve design students divided into two groups to achieve a range of disciplines, experience levels, and gender. They took part in two 30-minute ideation sessions to design a dining experience, an open-ended problem selected to suit every participant. To control for order bias, one group started with the ambiguous stimulus and the other with the sensory stimulus. After 30 minutes, the groups then switched to a new trend and the opposite stimulus form. All ideas (approximately 100 total) were collected and scored according to their creativity and relevance on a 3-point scale. Ideas that were highly-creative (score:3/3) proposed solutions that currently do not exist and combined ideas from different domains. Ideas that were highly-relevant (score:3/3) directly referenced the brief in multiple ways.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ambiguous</th>
<th>Sensory</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>evolution</td>
<td>dirty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>inspired</td>
<td>fueled</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>world</td>
<td>natural planet</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>unexplored areas</td>
<td>dark secrets</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>respect</td>
<td>romanticized</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>less desirable features</td>
<td>seedy underbelly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ingredients</td>
<td>truffles, morel mushrooms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>gourmet</td>
<td>nuanced, chef-inspired</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>vegetable-based</td>
<td>mycelium-based</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mood-altering</td>
<td>magic, hallucinogenic</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Fig. 2 Examples of ambiguous language and sensory language.

4. STUDY 2 – RIGHT PRIMING

The second study explored different ways to prime participants before an ideation session. We hypothesized that by creating exercises for priming people, their translation abilities would improve. Using team members from LPK, we divided participants into 3 groups evenly according to their experience-level, discipline, gender, and talent. Each participant was given a trend in text form and asked to develop ideas for a new dining experience. In group 1, participants were asked to immediately start ideating. In group 2, participants spent the first 15 minutes rewriting the brief using whatever word-based techniques (i.e. mind mapping) they found helpful. In group 3, participants spent the first 15 minutes browsing magazines in search of imagery that represented the written trend description. All participants developed ideas for 30 minutes. Concepts were scored in the same fashion as Study 1.
5. RESULTS

The two studies each produced results that improved translation. In the first study, sensory language produced more highly-relevant ideas (63%) than ambiguous language (53%). Additionally, moderately-relevant ideas (score: 2/3) were higher in ambiguous language (39%) than in sensory language (29%), by the same margin. This suggests that sensory words might produce an “upgrade effect” that transforms average ideas into more relevant ones. An unintended benefit of this approach is that sensory language enables the reviewer to more easily evaluate the work.

Relevance also improved with priming (fig. 4). Image-based warmups (15% of the concepts from this group were highly-relevant) provided the most striking improvement in translation, 5 times higher than word-based warmups (3%) or no warmup (0%).

Creativity was unaffected in either study. Both studies saw their respective groups produce the same quantity of ideas on average, and the creativity scores were nearly identical as well. This suggests that creativity is not affected by either study, and designers need not worry that either of the translation techniques studied will be detrimental to divergent thinking.
6. ANALYSIS

We see two potential reasons for the dramatic increase in relevance through image-based warmups. First, the success of this technique may be a result of adding an “ownership step” in the creative process. By having people engage in visualizing, refining, or building upon a trend, they gain a sense of ownership around it that enables enthusiasm, confidence, and responsibility. Second, the 15-minute warmup before ideation may give participants time to relax their mind and let creative energy build sufficiently before jumping into action. When athletes warm up before playing a match, they’re warming up their muscles but also their minds, thinking about the things they need to do to be successful. The same could be true of participants in an ideation session. Browsing through magazines could give people time to think through their ideas a little before having to commit them to a piece of paper. Follow up study could investigate different versions of image-based priming to search for the most ideal form, including the difference between imagery typically supplied in a trend brief and imagery self-selected by participants.

The success of these warmups suggests that teams make this an imperative step in all new product development phases. Current approaches, (i.e. mood boards) are typically done once during a project and often by a single designer. Instead, teams should repeat the process periodically over time, and each team member should contribute his/her own version of this work.

Sensory language saw a slight improvement over ambiguous language. Sensory language provided specific direction by triggering a shape, texture, flavor or another sensory quality that can easily be made tangible. In reality, the source of the benefit that sensory language brings may be in its rigor. A trend describing something as “natural” perhaps leaves too many options open to translation. The demand for more sensory language actually may be a challenge to the author of a trend to be more specific and think harder about what he/she wants to
recommend. Whether or not this specificity must be in the form of sensory language could be beneficial to explore in future research.

As a somewhat unintended benefit, sensory language improved the authors’ ability to evaluate the ideas as well as the participants’ ability to create them. Reflecting on this observation, sensory language is a two-way street that clarifies multiple points in the creative process. While a 19% improvement in relevance from sensory language isn’t huge, consideration of the additional evaluation benefits makes the use of sensory language a valuable habit for creative teams to develop. For this study, we defined sensory language broadly. Further research should be conducted to better define sensory words and how they may be applied to inspire design.

The creative mind is an essential asset that many businesses see as a strategic advantage, but the results of this study showed no affect on creativity. Creativity’s independence from relevance can be seen as a positive, given that no offsetting, detrimental effects were seen. While it might seem obvious given the value placed on creativity today, we recommend more study on ways to improve creativity, especially as it relates to translation.

7. CONCLUSION

Many design projects incorporate ideation sessions in early development phases. Considering the findings in this study, the use of sensory words paired with image-based priming will dramatically improve a team’s ability to translate a trend brief into relevant ideas. For example, if the output of a session is 130 ideas, in many cases only a few of them will be highly-relevant and therefore useful. Employing these techniques will result in 75 highly-relevant ideas, or more than half of the total 130. This is a staggering difference and begs the question: if pressed for time, is it worth the risk to skip the warmup?

Beyond trend-inspired initiatives, almost all design revolves around translating a piece of information from one form to another, so these findings should remain highly-relevant throughout the process. As such, these findings need not be restricted to use with trends. Any situation where a designer must move between verbal and visual domains would be well suited for a sensory language review and an image-based warmup. This suggests that some techniques (mood boards) normally used at the front end of the process should be integrated throughout the process whenever ideas need to be developed. We see these techniques applicable for onboarding new team members, collaborating with clients/vendors on brief development, evaluating existing knowledge, exploring multiple design themes, and refining ideas (see fig. 5 for one example).

Finally, as superficial as it may seem, these techniques will benefit the process by making it more pleasurable. Sensory language will eradicate the buzzwords that challenge communication, and searching for beautiful imagery is already known to be a favorite pastime of many designers. We know that these techniques are already a part of many designers’ processes, and so we encourage a heightened level of appreciation for them now that we’ve better defined their benefits to translation.
Fig. 5 To prepare for ideation, worksheets can guide teams or individuals to use and then visualize sensory language.
APPENDIX: EXAMPLES OF STIMULUS FROM STUDY 1.

AMBIGUOUS LANGUAGE: “EVOLUTION OF NATURAL”

Inspired by an understanding of our world and its many unexplored areas, we go beyond our respect for the perceptible parts of the environment and instead turn our attention to its less desirable features as the new frontier. Yeast strains and their origins could be a platform for storytelling, or as inspiration for premium experiences. Dirt-inspired ingredients lend themselves to gourmet flavor profiles. Vegetable-based materials are an opportunity to explore sustainability. Consider allusions to the mood-altering properties of mushrooms.

SENSORY LANGUAGE: “DIRTY NATURE”

Fueled by a scientific understanding of our natural planet and its many dark secrets, we go beyond a romanticized reverence of nature and instead turn our attention to its “seedy underbelly” – spiny viruses, furry bacteria, and clusters of fungi – as the new frontier. Ancient yeast strains and their prehistoric origins could be a platform for storytelling. Dirty Nature-inspired flavor notes (truffles, morel mushrooms, kombucha, kimchee) lend themselves to more nuanced, gourmet or chef-inspired flavor profiles ideal for pairing. Mycelium-based materials are an opportunity to explore sustainable or renewable packaging. Inspired by the notion of magic mushrooms, consider allusions to hallucinogenic properties.

REFERENCES


Photography courtesy of LPK.