

THE NEXT BIG THING
THE DEATH OF COOL



Though it's been nearly two years since he went to work for the car company, Wales cannot—or will not—reveal just which of his insights have found their way into Toyota products. "I think it would be better if your article said that coolhunters are, by and large, cagey about what they do," he says evenly.

Later, over fries and Cokes, Wales elaborates. "I suppose, when you think about it, it is a bit like therapy," he tells me. "People don't want to be known that they're in therapy. In the same way, I don't think Toyota wants to be seen as trying to be cool. They want to be seen as cool."

They are not the only ones. On March 17, 1997, *The New Yorker* published a piece entitled "The Cool-hunt." "Who decides what's cool?" read the headline. "Certain kids in certain places—and only the coolhunters know who they are." The piece, by Malcolm Gladwell, recounted the inspiring tale of Baisie Wightman, product manager for Converse, who had asked her funky friend DeeDee Gordon to trawl bodegas and skater parks in Southern California in search of the new hot thing. Their collaboration resulted in the One Star, a sneaker-sandal derived from the *cholo* look favored by Mexican girl gangs.

In marketing departments across the country, the *New Yorker* piece exploded with the force of a neutron bomb. "You just know every marketing director in America was circling that article, saying, 'Why don't we have a coolhunter?'" says Jane Rinzler Buckingham, president of Youth Intelligence, a youth-culture research firm. "It became a bit of a frenzy."

The frenzy continues. In the last few years, coolhunting firms have sprung up faster than retro mica coffee tables, as blue-chip firms from Pepsi to Unilever seized on these globe-trotting cuties as the solution to their corporate ills. There is talk of trend car-



Above: Lauren Holden, Nike's design-inspiration director, complains: "You might find something you think is really cool and the designers will say, 'Yeah, we thought of that twenty years ago.'" Right: "Fake is the new real." Toyota man David Wales declares breezily.

tels and DNA panels, of going out of the box and under the radar to tap the passion zones of the alpha consumer. There's just one problem: There is scant evidence that all the Tokyo-hopping and Aeron-chair ogling has resulted in any commercially viable product.

"I challenge you to point to something meaningful created in business that was driven, in any way, by cool-hunting," says Nick Shore, president of a New York brand consultancy called Nick and Paul. The problem, he says, is that "coolhunters don't know what to do with cool. They hunt, and they hunt, but they don't make."

THE PATIENT ZERO OF COOLHUNTING was DeeDee Gordon, of Converse fame. By the time the *New Yorker* piece was published, she had joined Lambesis, an ad agency in Del Mar, California where she put out a quarterly tip sheet called the *LReport*, sold to corporate clients for \$20,000 a year. At the time of Gladwell's story, "the *LReport* was really struggling," says a source

close to Gordon. "Once that piece came out, companies jumped on the bandwagon. It launched Lambesis. It launched DeeDee."

There were television appearances, a *Vogue* profile, even a movie deal. Almost overnight, Gordon, a rainbow-haired former boutique owner, became the It Girl of corporate America. "Four, five years ago, I would have doors literally slammed in my face," she told me. Today, Gordon, who recently founded Look-Look, an online youth-culture consultancy, receives a kinder reception. "It's not just the edgier companies who are reaching out," she says. "It's soft-drink companies. Financial-services companies. We just had Procter & Gamble request a presentation. They're stoked that we can fulfill so many of their needs."

Across the country, Ivy Leaguers who used to covet jobs as script readers and editors now dream of being like DeeDee. "All of a sudden,

I'm hearing people say, 'I want to be a coolhunter,'" says Daniel Maiman of the Bay Area ad agency OWN+P. "It's become a mainstream career choice."

Lauren Holden, director of design inspiration at Nike, is an example of the new breed. She was European advertising director for the athletic-shoe conglomerate when she read the *New Yorker* piece. "I thought, hmm, this is pretty interesting," she says. Months later, Nike gave the okay, and Holden was off and running.

These days, the exuberant 33-year-old blonde is intrigued by organic love beads, white mesh boots from Christian Dior, and "the Puerto Rican Schwinn club." She's also been thinking about recycling. "Recycling can be cool when it's not tied to this political-correctness thing," she says. "It's more the idea that old things can be new again. Maybe you take the swoosh and recycle it from shoe to shoe," she muses. "And, like, there