

SKEPTICS RULE

2007 seen as the year of truth-seeking

BY JEFF ELDER

If you want to know the main theme for 2007, don't believe this story.

Just "think for yourself."

Skeptical Americans are making up their own minds and searching for a "new authenticity," say top trendspotters.

"People are facing hypocrisy at every level," says Gerald Celente of the Trends Research Institute in Rhinebeck, N.Y., who's been tracking trends and talking about them on CNN and elsewhere for 25 years. "The war, Congress, Wall Street. They feel they've been sold a bill of goods."

"There's been a real loss of faith in institutions," says Marian Salzman, executive vice president of JWT, the largest advertising agency in the country. In the book "Next Now: Trends for the Future," co-written by Ira Matathia, Salzman has identified 10 top trends of 2007. She says this cynicism about institutions has brought a new demand for integrity and "much more emphasis on personal relationships." Strong, decision-making "alpha moms" will take the lead personally and professionally, Salzman says.

Marita Wesely-Clough, a trends expert at Hallmark Cards, says individuals "will be counted on more than large institutions" to solve problems. Some baby boomers—activists during another era dominated by a divisive war and Washington scandals—are returning to their old values. "We boomers did a lot of singing and talking about ideals. Then we moved into big houses and turned our backs on our beliefs. Now we have a chance to implement our ideals."

Or, as Celente says: "History hates a hypocrite. Boomers have got a shot at redemption."

The main tool for this new empowerment of the individual is the Internet—but not the Web of urban myths and bogus information.

The Internet isn't a toy anymore, says Walker Smith, president of Yankelovich marketing research, headquartered in Chapel Hill. "People want good information. They want to use the Web better. It's almost like they're saying, 'OK, I've got access, now I want good stuff. I want to find real experts, real knowledge, people who know what they're talking about.'"

Smith says there's been a backlash against "open-sourcing" on sites like Wikipedia, "the free encyclopedia that anyone can edit" because user-provided information can be suspect.

Tapping into reputable online sources will help consumers re-examine their values and question the powers that be, the experts say. And that will bring social and political change.

What about Charlotte?

Immigrants from Latin America and Asia will continue to flow into Charlotte, bringing cultural influence and playing key roles in the economy. Alan Shao, an associate dean at the Belk College of Business at UNC Charlotte, sees a growing international culture here and across the country. He says we'll see more U.S. students educated abroad, more Asian and Latino news anchors and actors.

"Charlotte will continue to do very well," says the author Salzman. "People want to be part of a community. The cities in the southeast are much more approachable. NASCAR is an experience you share with neighbors and friends. It's very in."

"NASCAR will stay strong because it has tapped into the Britney Spears celebrity culture. The drivers are personalities. Will Ferrell wouldn't be in a baseball movie right now. Like country music, NASCAR has gotten away from its roots, but that's working."

Look for three other key trends this year, the experts say:

The phenomenon of the viable female presidential candidate. "Change is the political theme," says Hallmark's Wesely-Clough, and such a candidate—perhaps Hillary Rodham Clinton or Condoleezza Rice—will be very well-watched because she will represent how much we are willing to change. "We might not be ready for a woman president, but we are ready to change the patterns and rhythms of the process."

People don't want to own things. "You don't have to buy CDs," says Smith. "You can just download or trade the music. You can tap into all kinds of things online." Photos, plane tickets, shopping items are all often accessed and sent in the virtual world.

Nobody plays the culture-sharing game better than young people, who become our "owners" of music, tech and other culture.

Rap is on its way out. "It's lost its edge," says Smith of Chapel Hill's Yankelovich. "Rap's influence will remain strong in other forms of music, though." Trend veteran Celente puts it another way: "Play the instrument. Attitude doesn't count—anyone can have attitude. People want old-school cool. And quality is the key."

BUZZ WORDS OF 2007

Top trendspotter Marian Salzman and slang guru Grant Barrett (doubletongued.org) foresee these top slang terms for 2007.

Adultescents—Young adults who won't grow up—or move out.

Alpha moms—Mothers who are strong, decision-making multitaskers.

Data Valdez—Personal and private info accidentally released online.

Fling a craving on—Cause someone to desire something, such as food.

Gastroporn—The glorification of food.

God wink—An incident that seems to indicate presence of a higher power.

Hummer house—Grotesquely large single-family residence.

Litter on a stick—Billboards, signs and ads.

MAWG—Middle-aged white guy. (Still not hip.)

Peerents—Parents who are friends to their kids.

3,000-mile screwdriver—Micro-management from the home office.

Trailing spouse—Husband or wife who follows a partner to a job in a new city.