

the taste makers

by Sara Eckel

These fashion leaders predict what will be next season's must-have styles—and get paid for being trendy.

Watching runway shows on TV, it might seem like the fashion industry is an elite world of pouty supermodels and billionaire designers. But actually, the people who'll influence what you'll be wearing next season are more likely to be sitting next to you in study hall than attending a Hollywood premiere with Johnny Depp.

They are the *alpha teens*—fashion-forward young people who educate clothing company executives about style. "Teens are one of the largest groups of people buying clothes,"

says LaTangela Newsome, 17, of New York City, who reports on trends for Levi Strauss & Co. "I give Levi's designers an idea of what's coming next so they know what to sell." LaTangela's first assignment was to make a video, interviewing teen girls about their sense of style. (She says she was way ahead of the curve on the pedal pusher trend that exploded this summer.) Then she jetted off to the Levi's San Francisco headquarters to make a presentation. Other alpha teens have created video autobiographies or allowed designers to raid their closets for inspiration.

Nice work if you can get it. Companies that need to know the complex ins and outs of teen style hire 20-something trend watchers, called cool-hunters, to sniff out the alphas at clubs and parks. But in order to qualify as an alpha, a teen must truly be a trendsetter. "We're already wearing what the magazines are predicting for 2004," says Neil Crammond, 20, of Los Angeles, who

scouts trends for JNCO. "We're going to be the lead into everyone else doing it."

Trendsetting is a complicated system: Alphas often spark a trend by modifying their clothes or combing vintage stores to create a new look. Then pop culture leaders like musicians and movie stars showcase the trend, adding fuel to the fire, says Lindzi Scharf, 15, of Fort Lauderdale, Fla. Lindzi writes for a trend-spotting newsletter called Trends, published by a firm that researches teen culture for companies like Converse and Eastpak. "Then the popular people spread it," she says, "and then it's over really, really quickly because that's just fashion."

Alphas are a crucial link between clothing companies and teens because it's no longer up to certain designers and magazine editors to dictate fashion trends. "Fashion is so diverse, everything is acceptable," LaTangela says. "If you're wearing it, and you look good in it, it's hot."

Lindzi Scharf, 15, Fort Lauderdale, Fla.: writer for trend-spotting newsletter Trends

Alpha credentials: Producer of Lindzi's Page Insanity, a Web site devoted to fashion, makeup, celebrity interviews and Leonardo DiCaprio. Cheerleader. Aspiring actress, "but due to uptight parents, I must postpone this dream until after college."

Her style: "I'm into everything—surfer, alternative, whatever. My favorite outfit is a silver dress and a crazy reversible leopard bag with green faux fur."

Style philosophy: "I like getting a reaction. And sometimes my friends are

pretty harsh. It doesn't really bother me because I don't want to be like any average person. I have a jacket that is vinyl with gray fur. Other people might think it's ugly, but I think it's kind of cool."

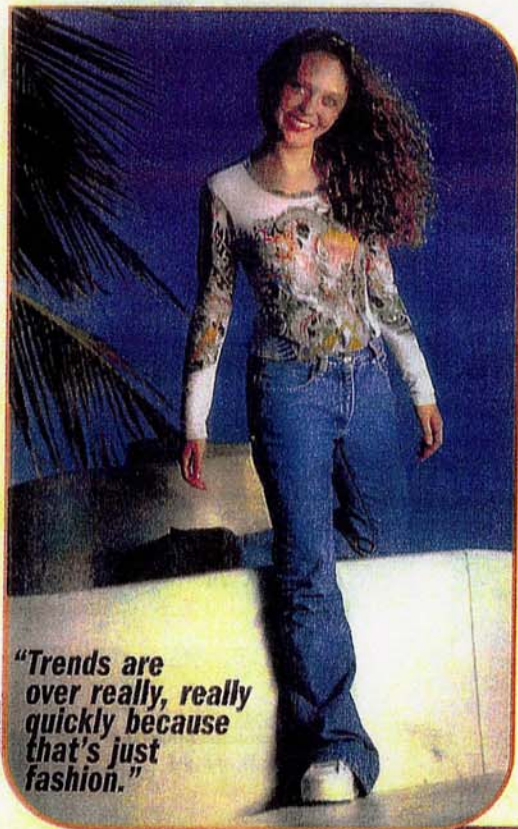
What's coming: "Preppy is definitely back, and I think teens made it come back. It wasn't even in stores. Teens were just picking up something they already had."

How she knows: "I see a few kids wearing it here and there, and then I see a lot of kids wearing it, even at other schools. A lot of stuff starts at camp."

What's out: "High-heeled platform sneakers are not as popular as they once were. The trend started in New York City, and I saw it at camp last summer, then everyone was wearing them. Now, I'm not seeing them as much as I was at the beginning of the year. They've been sitting in my closet for a while."

Who starts a trend: "It's sad to say, but it's basically started by popular people."

Dreams for the future: "Star in a couple of movies, open my own business and live happily ever after."



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