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Photos by Rob Larson



COLOR SELLS

Color consultant Nada Rutka helps clients find the right hues

Nada Rutka has a theory about where Sen. John McCain went wrong in his presidential bid, and it has nothing to do with platforms, vice presidential picks or Joe the Plumber. It was the color of his clothes.

"In most of the debates, Obama wore either a charcoal or black suit, white shirt and red tie and that was a very strong power statement," says Rutka. "McCain wore a blue suit, a blue or white shirt and a light blue tie. All that blue was meant to convey trust and loyalty. But it looked so weak in comparison to Obama."

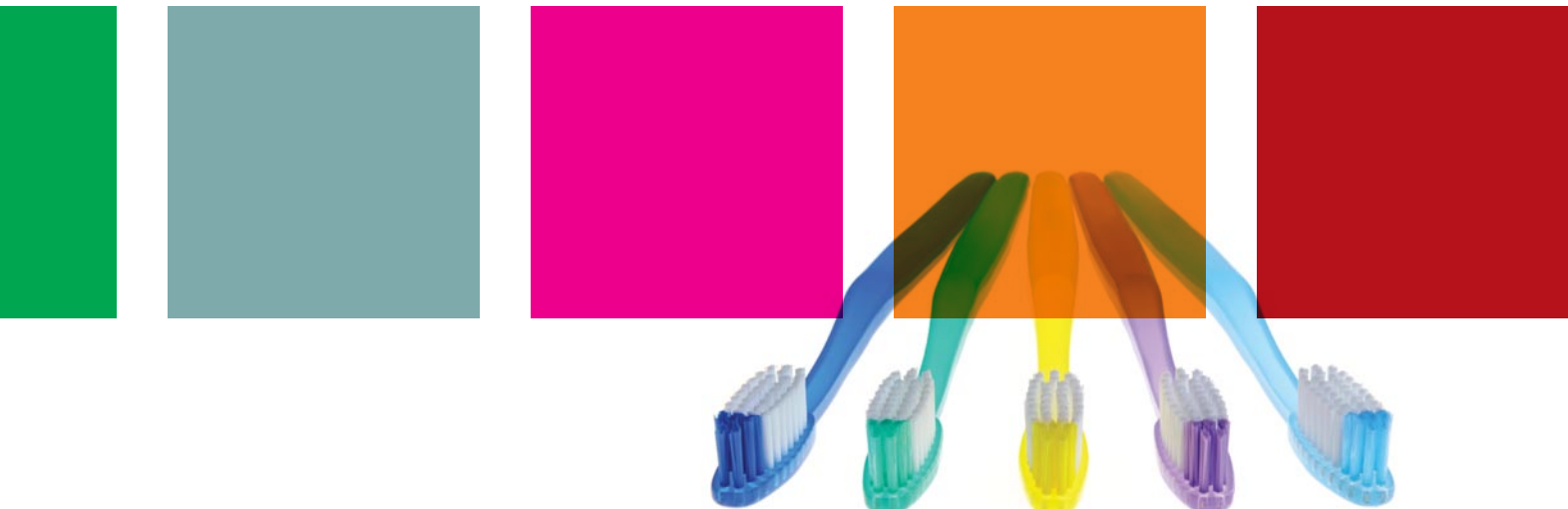
As the founder and principal of Nada Associates, a Southpointe-based color, design and marketing consulting firm, it's Rutka's business to understand how color influences people's decisions. For over 20 years, she's helped domestic and international clients like Philips North America, The Coleman Company

and Proctor & Gamble improve their bottom line through the strategic use of color.

"Color sells and the right color sells better," says Rutka, borrowing a tag line from the Color Marketing Group, an association for color design professionals.

At its simplest level, Rutka takes the guesswork out of color design for manufacturers who may not have her aesthetic sense. "You can influence purchases through color," says Rutka, who has a degree in interior design from Florida State University. "You can influence people's environment and attitudes toward what they're doing, and along the way create greater profits for clients."

Rutka says research shows that more than 65 percent of product purchase decisions are defined by color, whether we realize it or not. "You may buy something because you need it, but when you are buying a toothbrush do you



just pick the first one off the shelf? Or do you look to see, oh this one's red, this one's blue, this one's purple. Let me pull one that I want."

Even the most prosaic products can benefit from a color makeover. Rutka recalled one project that involved developing colors for a line of toilet partitions. The company was using flat, barely-there colors. Rutka brought depth and texture to the color and finish, and sales increased 50 percent.

When she developed a new color line for Norelco razors in 1997, GQ magazine took notice, naming them one of its top 10 men's products and specifically praising the color selection. A new color line for another client's existing product helped sales increase 60 percent.

Achieving those kinds of results is more complicated than a spin of the color wheel. Rutka's job is both science and art. As part of the science, her first task on any project is to identify her client's objective. Ultimately, it's always more sales, but beyond that Rutka examines how the manufacturer seeks to position its product in the market. Is it a high-end or low-end product? Does the manufacturer want to be considered a color or fashion leader, or are they seeking a conservative image?

Colors that work in one target market do not necessarily work in another. Once the target market is clear, Rutka reviews sales data and existing color lines. She considers what direction color is taking overall, then applies umbrella trends for specific products.

That's where the art comes in. Much like a writer interpreting culture through words, Rutka interprets

it through color. Color trends are influenced by everything from the environment and economy to pop culture and politics.

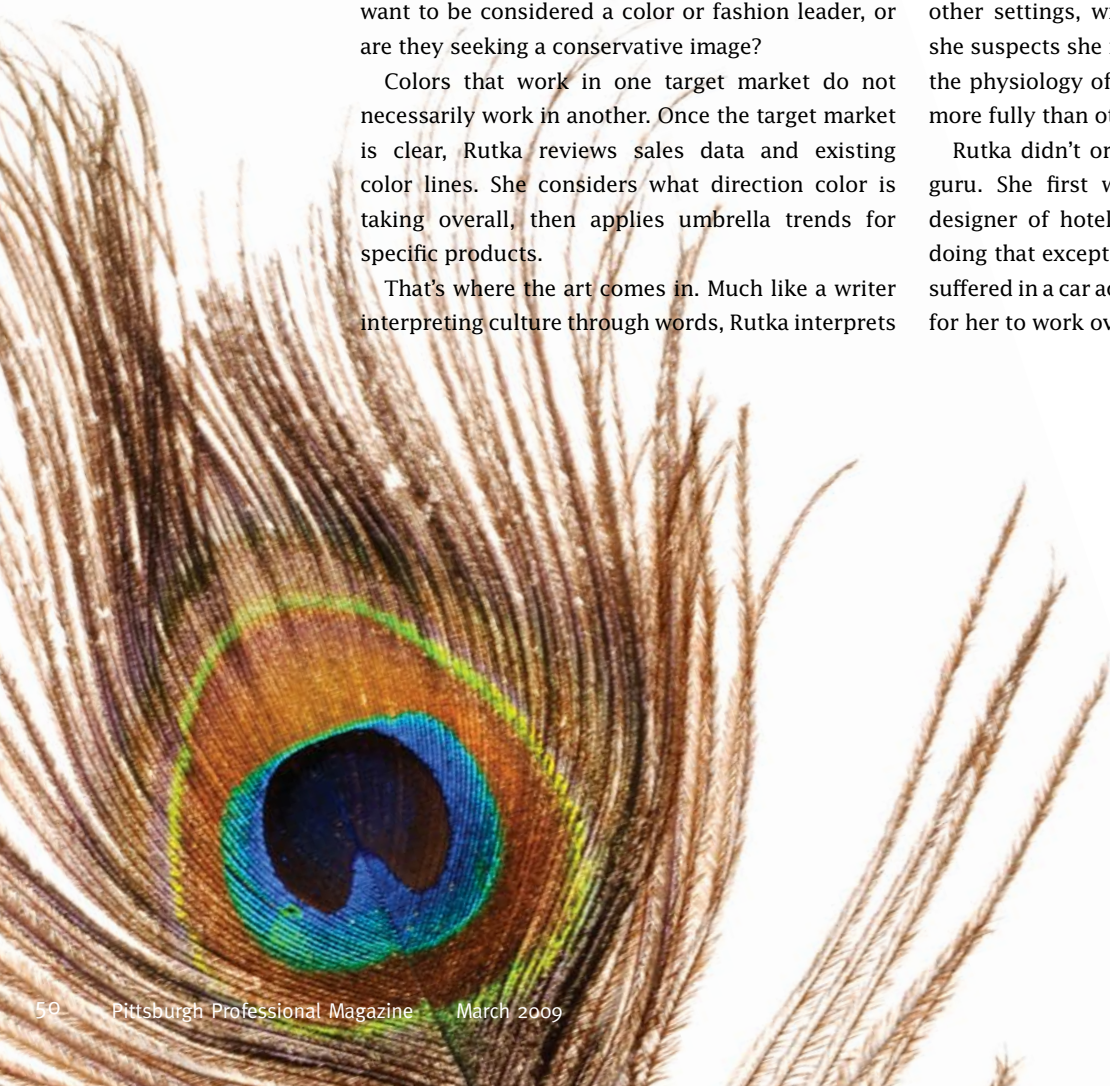
For example, Rutka points to the pervasiveness of computers and high definition television in our modern perception of color. "We see color as luminous on those items. People don't like to see flat color. They like luminosity. It's color with a soul." Rutka says this trend was reflected in the opening ceremonies of the Beijing Olympics, where LED lights were used to illuminate props and costumes from within.

With the economy tanking, Rutka says use of brighter color will shift to accent pieces, while safer neutral colors will be popular on higher end investment pieces.

Rutka can point to numerous influences, but says it's difficult to explain exactly how she forecasts color. Like an artist, her decisions are partly intuitive. And she astutely observes the world around her.

"I define intuition as the learned art of what to remember or recall and what to edit out," she says. Having a remarkable color memory doesn't hurt. She can see a color and remember it accurately in other settings, without referring to a swatch. And she suspects she is one of those people who, due to the physiology of the brain and eye, perceive color more fully than others.

Rutka didn't originally intend to become a color guru. She first worked as a commercial interior designer of hotels and motels, and might still be doing that except for some torn shoulder ligaments suffered in a car accident. The injury made it difficult for her to work over a drafting board.



So when a headhunter called about a position with Hunter Douglas window treatments, Rutka was intrigued. The company was looking for a salesperson with an interior design background.

"I decided I'd give it a try, but I said, you need better colors. They said, 'Go ahead and do them,' and that's how I got involved in color design for products," Rutka recalls.

After stints with Hunter Douglas and Verasol, another window treatment company, Rutka founded Nada Associates in 1987. Since then her work has won numerous awards, including a lifetime achievement award in 2008 from the Color Marketing Group.

But the best testament to her skill is the fact that 80 percent of her business comes from repeat clients. Many initially were skeptical that color design could impact their bottom line, but those clients keep coming back because Rutka gets results and because color design has a shelf life, as anyone who remembers harvest gold kitchen appliances can attest.

"Once you achieve the desired results, you can't just sit there," says Rutka. "The hardest part of consulting is when a client doesn't pursue the aesthetics the way they should."

How long a color trend lasts depends on its application. Colors used in high fashion items may fade in popularity in as little as two years. Market colors widely accepted by consumers may last five to seven years. Generally, she recommends that clients review color lines on major products every two to three years.

After more than 20 years in the business, Rutka knows there is no such thing as a new color. It's consumers' acceptance of particular hues that changes. Five years ago orange was just the color of a fruit. Now, it's also the color of iPods, sofas, and even automobiles.

Rutka says she never tires of predicting what's next. "What I love about consulting is that with every new project there is something to discover and create. I love the opportunity to create projects that delight the consumer and increase sales for my clients," she says. 📌

