



Style council (from left) Rob Wood, Jennifer McCormick, Molaroid Solomon

PHOTOGRAPHY NIK HARTLEY
WORDS EMMA JACOBS

THE CONSULTANTS OF COOL

Arena meets the new breed of unlikely lifestyle gurus who are trading in trends

Time was when the only way to make it in serious business was to shake hands with Gordon Gekko. You had to be hard-nosed, super driven and money motivated. Creativity and job satisfaction were for hippies and the terminally poor.

Not only are those days over, but the yuppies' enemies, the slackers, are now enjoying the last laugh. Having their hash cake and eating it, you might say.

Cool has become a commodity and a new breed of mavericks is cashing in on this, selling their creative skills to blue-chip companies and advising on anything from cutting-edge fashion and music to urban art. Such individuals, once hectored by their parents for wasting time on pastimes such as graffiti and DJing, are now brokering lucrative contracts with the likes of Diageo, Microsoft and Hilton hotels: making serious cash, as well as having fun.

They work the hours they choose, cherry-pick their clients and dictate their own dress code – though few have the chutzpah to rock a peroxide wig like Molaroid Solomon, the youth culture expert featured here. It's a long way from the traditional image of a business consultant. But in virtually every field, from entertainment and finance to hospitality, the task of establishing and maintaining brand loyalty is harder than ever. Any advantage is critical – especially if it secures credibility among the young.

Twentysomethings are an attractive market because they can spread the word about a brand to a large number of potential buyers. Mobile, tech-savvy and socially active, they have greater spending power than teenagers and interact across a wider number of different social groups than older consumers. "Most brands are preoccupied with the young," says Rita Clifton, chairman of marketing consultancy Interbrand. "They want to get the new generation on board." However, as she also points out, "Nothing is so uncool as trying to look cool. If you're too overt you can drive people away." The pitfalls of trying to be down with kids are numerous and companies have ended up looking, as Clifton says, "like the vicar in front of the jukebox."

Second Life, the online virtual world, is a classic example. Last year, after an enormous media buzz, brands flocked to get a presence. In the end the hype was misplaced, explains Jess Greenwood, deputy editor of *Contagious*, the marketing magazine. "Companies were forced to retreat because all those poor people in Second Life who were basically there trying to have sex with each other ended up being bombarded by unwanted crap."

Of course not all maverick consultants would dish out such short-sighted advice. Over the next few pages, *Arena* meets five new generation experts at the top of their game – and not a pair of red braces to be found on any of them. ▶▶

THE MUSIC CONSULTANT
ROB WOOD

A music nut from the age of nine, Rob Wood, 39, went on to become editor of *Jockey Slut* magazine, and has DJed to crowds at Fabric and the Big Chill festival. Last year he set up Music Concierge to create bespoke playlists for luxury hotels, bars and retailers. His clients include Mr & Mrs Smith, the boutique holiday service, and the new Alfred Dunhill members' club. He will even create a dinner-party playlist if you ask nicely (and pay well).

What was your eureka moment? You hear mainstream muzak in Sainsbury's and Boots and I believed you could take a different approach, which drew on music expertise. I'd always acted as a musical filter in journalism and DJing, and becoming a music concierge for boutique hotels is a natural and perhaps more mature extension.

Best thing about your job? Travelling to luxury hotels in the Maldives isn't too bad. But it's being paid to make the perfect mixtape that is most blokes' passion.

Most challenging aspect? We get lots of eclectic requests – Korean drums, medieval music... Sometimes we get private clients who say they want really authentic music, but it turns out they just want power ballads.

What do your parents think? They're supportive. When I got a contract at The Ritz, I knew it was a sign for them that I'd made it.

Is there any company you wouldn't work with? I wouldn't work with an arms company. Or do David Cameron's victory song. Though maybe could put Iron Maiden's *Run To The Hills* on.

