



# The Innovators

*Conversations*

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## Interview with Marguerite La Corte Global Trend Tracker and Product Anthropologist™



Marguerite is a global trend tracker and product anthropologist. She travels the globe exploring a single country (5 states/provinces), or up to five countries during 30-45 day research treks helping clients to identify emerging consumer insights, local market intelligence, novel ingredients, and unique consumer rituals and products.

Prior to developing her NYC based research company, Marguerite held senior positions in product development and marketing for brands in Italy including ECHO Mario Valentino Profumi and Laura Biagiotti. In the US, she developed R.P. Scherer's Truscent fragrance sampler, TréSemmé Haircare, Le Zink colored Sunscreen, as well as Coty's Yue Sai Kan Color Cosmetics and Skincare. Marguerite can be reached at [daisyvino2@yahoo.com](mailto:daisyvino2@yahoo.com)

Interview conducted by Doug Berger, Managing Director, INNOVATE [doug@innovate1st.com](mailto:doug@innovate1st.com)

**Doug:** Marguerite, you have a very distinctive approach to identifying emerging trends in the consumer market before they become mainstream and to finding insights that are not in plain sight. How do you go about identifying early stage trends and insights?

**Marguerite:** In an increasingly competitive environment it becomes necessary for clients to think out of the box. Lifestyle behaviors may not become apparent if a researcher is visiting a locale for a week on a business trip. So I go deeper and broader into the local markets. I spend 30 days for individual countries and up to 45 days when going to 4 to 5 countries. I call them 'research treks'.

And over the years my treks have taken me back to the some of the same places so that I can see subtle market and lifestyle changes over time. Fortunately, after doing this for ten years, I am welcomed into these communities. For example, I spend time watching how local indigenous peoples as well as urban folks extract and use elements of a local fruit or plant, observing if it is used curatively by ingestion or in a topical manner.

I do a careful study of each culture as a whole, including political views, street trends, health trends, buying patterns, advertising techniques, and I look at how these elements shape the larger picture. For example, if a client was interested in packaging then I would look within art, architecture, design, fashion, jewelry, textiles, home furnishings, as well as packaging, and even in the electronics and automotive industries, while searching for common

denominators. I also talk with fresh design talent within different industries who know what is coming before the rest of us know, spotting trends before they become a mainstream.

My projects mostly revolve around unique innovation. Often, multinationals only learn about new ingredients after a supplier has already come to sell it and once it has been turned into a commercial molecule. I am identifying ingredients a few steps ahead of most suppliers, which have the potential to become the next great new innovative product. Therefore, both the supplier and the brand side can tap into my research.

People are sharing with me their unique regimens and rituals saying, "This is what I do when I cleanse my face and want healthier skin." They open their kitchen and bathroom cabinets. This is a camaraderie thing that happens when I go back every year and they are comfortable sharing their personal regimens, which would never be discovered in a focus group.

Doug: What are some of the things that you are looking at when you go into a locale?

Marguerite: First and foremost, clients give me their unique brief and they have specifics that they are interested in finding out about. These specifics are things that revolve not only around the local individual in a locale with access to competitive products, but also the local individual who may be remote. I tell people that I am like the wild boar looking for truffles. I am put on a mission; I know what I am supposed to do; and I have to come back with the results. And the results have to be unique not your average insights.

The client brief may be to find a new ingredient or a new technology. Based on the category and subcategory researched, such as skincare or anti-aging, I will meet with local experts, perhaps dermatologists, oral care surgeons and local healers. Determining how I plan my trek depends on the brief.

I created a category/subcategory menu just to make it easier, so that clients can see in front of them the range of research topics that are available in skincare, hair care, sunscreen, oral care, and so on. For example, one client may be interested in the household category and specifically want home environmental scent trends, or new cleaning ingredients and consumers lifestyle behaviors. A different client may be interested in nutrition/wellness, supplements, retail or consumer emotional connections.

Doug: If I understand correctly, your briefs really have two orientations. One orientation is what you can learn from local markets, consumers and local professionals, which you can bring back to corporate R&D and market research. The other aspect is what you can learn about local markets to help in entering those markets.

Marguerite: There are two different elements, what I call innovation insights and cultural insights.

There are clients structured with the mother ship that are mostly headquartered in the U.S. or Europe and have a global focus, as well as divisions with a regional focus. Some new product development ideas that I return home with are regional but might translate into being a global opportunity. These include consumers' desires for products that do not yet exist. Often this market intelligence from outside the culture can influence a global brand that they own. Those would be innovation driven insights.

An example of cultural insights would be “usage” or an attitude on how a product is literally used and performs according to the consumer. This could range from color cosmetics to a hair styling product. How that type of category and product is viewed in certain cultures may be very interesting for big multinationals in figuring out how to penetrate a particular and often difficult market to fully comprehend including, China, Southeast Asia, Brazil, Eastern Europe, or India. It is important to video these practices and take photographs to show firsthand accounts of what occurs.

Generally speaking, Innovation Insights and Cultural Insights combined create the basis of my unique findings.

Doug: How do you organize the overall structure of your treks?

Marguerite: I organize my treks as 90 projects in four stages, starting with the client brief. A brief from R&D is more interested in the scientific side with active, as well as natural ingredients, product formulations and new technology. The briefs from marketing and market research are generally more focused on consumer insights, product positioning, as well as competitive analysis as seen in person.

While in the field for 30-45 days I gather physical stimuli to bring to the client. This could include a tree bark or fruits for its unique chemical attributes, or a homemade curative. Local doctors will refer me to apothecaries and pharmacists who still whip up formulations based on an individual’s unique needs. I gather product samples that are made locally and may not be on a client’s radar because they are not UPC coded.

This is followed by 30 days of evaluation back in my New York office where I digest my findings, translate the product ingredients and positioning, continue to seek other common denominators that were unseen while in the field, but are easily noticeable when all of the elements and finding are in front of me.

The fourth phase is where client teams from either R&D, Insights, Market Research etc. will gather for a 2-3 hour interactive presentation. The teams physically experience the products by touching, smelling, feeling, as well as a Q&A on how I stumbled upon those insights and stimuli. This is all part of the overall written dossier.

Doug: Your work is aimed at nascent insights that may not be widely known. In this theater what kind of props have you learned to bring back or use when you’re talking to your clients to convey your insights?

Marguerite: I was in the Nordeste (Northeast) region of Brazil a year ago, and I was trying to find out what women did for skin care when they could not afford a department or drug store brand or where those brands were not available nearby. They would show me and I would video them taking a particular regional fruit or root from the garden or tree and they would create a creamy moisturizer out of it. This is profound because I am literally there watching them cook and steep and do different things to what they might normally eat or discard, behavioral insights that we have never seen in our culture.

Doug: How is this approach different from more traditional ethnography?

Marguerite: In more traditional ethnography you go to a family’s home as a visit. You ask them what they do. You watch them for brief periods of time not move in with them for a few days, as I do. Anthropologists live in the culture that they are studying, whether it’s animal or human society. When you are with people

every day and they tell you, "Yes, we brush our teeth three times a day." or "We use this conditioner every single morning." and then you go into the bathroom and see that nobody's used the toothpaste or conditioner, you know it is not true.

I would like to make a few important points about research. One, people do not tell you exactly the truth especially in a focus group setting. It may be that people themselves are not aware of that. In paid situations they tell the interviewer what he/she wants to hear. You have to watch and experience people firsthand. More importantly is a point that is a bit deeper intellectually. Sometimes you have local market people who are hired to send information. In the beginning when I started with clients, they would say, "Oh, we have people in China. We have people in India. We have offices there." Well, that's nice, but if they are from the local market, they are looking with insider eyes. They are not looking with outside eyes to see something new or something that might potentially be an opportunity, which can be utilized back in America or globally.

Most people from developed countries are not sure how to move about a third world country. It is complicated and even intimidating for them. Since they will be somewhat fearful or uncomfortable due to the unfamiliar surroundings, they will be focused on their own safety and well-being rather than the unique rituals and behaviors of locals. Trust me when I tell you, going to five regions in one of these enormous countries is pretty intense. I am finding the common denominator of city folks as well as locals, whether they're the Guarani Indians of Brazil, or whether they're the Mapuche down in Chile. There are common denominators. And to be able to process and sort all of this information in your brain, and then articulate it in writing, and then present it is no easy task.

Doug: I have done work in China and Brazil and one of the biases that I found was that my clients were from the major cities. They naturally brought their major city biases and extrapolated them out to some of the outlying regions. When, in fact, the customs, markets channels of distribution, and behavior patterns were actually very different.

Marguerite: A thousand percent accurate. The reason that companies choose those people from the major cities is because they're educated and more fluent in English. So, again, there is a bias, just as you perfectly described.

In addition, it is presumed that people who live in that market, whether they're educated or not educated, speak English or not, can articulate the information back to the multinational. This is incorrect. It's important to go in there with a fresh set of eyes, with a clean white slate. It has to be new. You have to put aside what you found before since things change constantly even in remote villages. The job of a competent global trend tracker and product anthropologist is to never assume anything as "a given" and to enter into cultures with no preconceived notions.

Doug: What are some of the areas that you are looking into, from which people might not even think to use this kind of anthropological approach to get ideas and insights?

Marguerite: The answer to that falls into the three areas that I cover: personal care, beauty, and OTC pharma, as well as the fast growing food & beverage category. OTC pharma is a very exciting area because it includes product categories of pain, oral care, upper respiratory and muscular skeletal.

Pain relief happens to be one of my passionate areas of interest. Clients tend to want to go deep to obtain information in this ever growing area, not just for topical pain like an Aspercreme, but they will want to find out about chronic body pain, muscle, and joint pain. Besides taking Advil, what can we do to take care of the inside with food and proper diet? This is quite tricky because in our culture when we have a problem, we go and pop a pill. That is not what other cultures do.

Doug: Can you talk about some trends and some insights that you've brought to clients over the years that are now available in commercial products, but at the time that you introduced them were kind of your hidden secrets?

Marguerite: It takes up to three or more years after being introduced to a new ingredient or product for companies to even decide whether to use or abandon an idea. When I first brought Açai Berry to the United States people pooh-poohed it. They still cannot even pronounce it a decade later.

It really takes not just having a great idea but the right client to run with it. Once I bring back something that is brand new, I cannot discuss it in an open or closed forum until that particular concept, ingredient or idea has become a mass idea. Now everybody from GNC to mass shampoo brands are using acai berry in their formula therefore it has become mainstream.

Another one that has recently been introduced to the beauty industry is the Maracujá oil from the Amazon, which is an incredible emollient. One client decided to creatively use the ingredient in lipstick, which is less complicated than doing clinical trials on a skincare product. Maracujá is Portuguese for Passion Fruit.

Doug: You have a trend research trek trip coming up in April. Where are you going?

Marguerite: I will be heading on my Asia trek. This will be very interesting because it'll be a 45-day trek. It will incorporate Asia Pacific, as well as Southeast Asia countries. Clients will get to handpick the countries and cities that they want, and each sub-category will be proprietary to that client

Doug: You are obviously passionate about your research.

Marguerite: The world is changing at such an unfathomable speed. The brands of today may not be around tomorrow if those brands continue to be afraid to be leaders, and if they are too busy being too mainstream. There is too much of that. It is about not just surviving, but rather 'striving' to get away from archaic thinking, as well as empowering employees to be open to utilizing unique research methodologies.

