MADE IN THE SHADE

How wasabi became the new black, and other tales from the color industry.

BY ERIC KONIGSBERG

You could say that Leslie Harrington owes much of her success to the rise of wasabi green. Harrington is a color consultant who helps manufacturers determine the palette of their products and packages. Her clients have included Crayola, Pottery Barn, and Avon, and she’s currently at work on a statistical survey for a pharmaceutical company, analyzing public reaction to different pill colors. "It depends on the context, of course—I wouldn’t expect it to be a huge seller for lipstick—but the biggest color story over the past five years has been wasabi, or any green in that color family," she said. "Everywhere you look—cars, furniture, stationery—you see it: a light, yellow-based green."

Harrington, who is forty-four, lives with her husband and daughter in Old Greenwich, Connecticut, though you can hear her Canadian origins in her gently upward cadences. Her hair is a color she might describe as "mid-chroma, mid-value blond with fruitwood undertoning." She didn’t invent wasabi green (a distinction that probably belongs to the Japanese), but she got in on the trend early. That was in 1998, at her previous job, as the director of color for the paint company Benjamin Moore, when she set about overhauling its entire contemporary palette. The system hadn’t been updated for twelve years, and the problem with it, Harrington recalled, was that its colors were “dirty”—in colorist’s parlance, they had a good deal of gray in their composition. “The system had been developed when gray was trending really strong. The eighties—it was the height of the gray period, you know?” At the time, Harrington had just begun to notice colors in the yellow-green family coming into use. “It was introduced in small doses as very acid, more of a chartreuse, and it was big in fashion, but we tweaked it over time and it became sort of more . . . minty, more pistachio,” she recalled. Two of its biggest popularizers were Pottery Barn (upholstery) and Martha Stewart (paint and housewares). Harrington’s palette, which is still Benjamin Moore’s basic contemporary color system, contains nearly fifty light, yellow-based greens, including Yew Green, Apple Green, Snow Cone Green, Spring Moss, Fresh Cut Grass, Lime Green, New Lime, Summer Lime, Eccentric Lime, Tequila Lime, Frosty Lime, Shimmering Lime, Neon Lime, Key Lime, Citra Lime, Fresh Lime, Lime Tart, Lime Froth, Lime Sorbet, and Limelight. By contrast, the previous palette had about twenty-five, including O’Reilly Green, Feel the Energy, and Sounds of Nature.

Harrington and her colleagues in the color business work for manufacturers of nearly every sort of product: paint, carpeting, pigment, fragrances, fabric, furniture, cars, sports equipment, electronics, home appliances, paper goods, building supplies, and even flowers. It’s only the fashion world that operates independently of the color consultants—“though fashion’s color decisions tend to trickle down to influence the rest of us,” according to John Bredenfoerder, a design director for a brand-consulting firm in Cincinnati. In the color industry, wasabi’s surge has been interpreted in a number of ways: as evidence of a back-to-nature trend in consumer aesthetics, spurred by a growing concern for the environment; as an indication that, since September 11th, public taste has run toward subtle, soothing colors; as a reflection of the ongoing luxury-spa craze (pale and clear blues, often referred to as “water colors,” are also in this category).

“It also tells us how quickly something that’s thought of as a no-no color can take off,” Harrington told me. For decades, a running joke among color professionals had been the avocado-hued kitchen appliances of the nine-
teen-seven. (The refrigerators outlasted the color's popularity, creating a vicious backlash.) During the ensuing decades, all yellow-based greens—often known as "puke green" or "snot green"—were off limits.

Harrington was raised in Ontario, where her mother supported their family by working at a Benjamin Moore paint store (her father died when she was eight). "I grew up in what I call 'the matchy-poo era'—when women like my mother went to all this trouble to make sure that the towels matched the sheets, which matched my wardrobe, which matched my car," she told me. In high school, she was too shy to order a pizza, and she flunked an English class for refusing to complete the public-speaking project.

To help her overcome the problem, her mother began bringing her into the paint store every day and making her wait on customers, something she continued to do through college, at the nearby International Academy of Merchandising and Design.

Shortly before graduating, she got a call from Benjamin Moore's Canadian headquarters. The company was preparing to launch a North American road show to promote a new computerized color-matching system, and the person who was supposed to run the show had fallen ill. Harrington recalled, "Apparently, somebody in corporate said, 'How about that girl at the Toronto store? She knows everything.'" Harrington has an M.B.A. from New York University and has recently earned her Ph.D., via a distance-learning program, in "color strategy," a discipline of her own design. But her first major contribution, when she was at Benjamin Moore, was to have invented "smooshing"—both the term and the technique. It involves applying sheets of plastic wrap to wet paint in order to create a marbled surface on walls. "I started the whole thing, put it in a book we sold in the stores, and it was huge in the eighties, when people were really painting their own rooms and making effects," she recalled. "It got, like, sixty thousand hits on Google, and I never got a penny from it." She also has proprietary feelings about her terms "Color Sellability" and "Color Shopability."

One of Harrington's current projects is to develop a range of colors for a manufacturer of residential siding. The company, James Hardie Industries, which is based in the Netherlands but has American headquarters in California, is eager to use its fifteen-year color warranty as a selling point, but the longevity makes the choice of color that much more important.

"The risk calculations are greater the larger, more expensive, and more durable the product," Harrington told me. "The consumer is more risk-averse when it comes to choosing a color. This is the central challenge with all exteriors. It means we're working with a smaller segment of the color wheel. On the other hand, what good is colored siding if they don't have choices?" In some high-population-growth markets such as Houston, a Hardie house tends to be situated in a subdivision of Hardie houses. "And nobody wants to have the same color home as their next-door neighbors," Harrington said.

It bothers Harrington when people refer to her as a "tastemaker." "The industrial-design element of what I do is probably more critical than taste," she told me. Her background in household construction goes back almost as long as her experience with paint. "When I was just out of college and my couch didn't fit in my living room, I got a circular saw and turned it into two reading chairs." She built by hand her work studio in Connecticut, in what was formerly her attic—from insulation to Sheetrock to cabinetry. For Christmas, she always asks for new power tools—

**Color forecasts for 2008 are influenced by the war in Iraq and the resurgence of India.**
This year it was a good electric nail-gun (which she didn't receive). Still, her husband, an accountant whom she met when she was in Greece to speak at a convention, prefers to buy her things like jewelry or Versace handbags. "It makes me crazy," she said. "He thinks it's all nonsense, what I do, by the way."

Most scholars of color theory acknowledge that although our color likes and dislikes may have some innate basis—a study by the Cambridge psychologist Nicholas Humphrey found that even rhesus monkeys tended to stick to a consistent order of preference (blue, green, yellow, orange, and red)—they are also subject to manipulation. "It's easy to come up with really obvious colors that you know people will like because they've always liked them," Harrington said. "But it's much better if you can come up with something subtle and sophisticated—you know, like the orange that somebody who's not an orange person likes? Like that orange that Range Rover did last year only on one of their most expensive models? If you put a special color on a product with a higher price point, it becomes the class signifier."

Although the birth of industry-wide color marketing is often dated to 1915, when American dressmakers banded together to order fabrics in bulk from Paris because the First World War had limited France's exporting capacity, an earlier occurrence was in 1907 and involved the house-painting industry. That year, according to the architectural historian Christine B. Hilke, the Paint Manufacturers' Association of America launched an advertising campaign, in the hope of generating sales and controlling costs, by reducing the number of colors on offer. The campaign featured only "copper brown" and "copper verde," because those were predicted to be fashionable colors in women's clothing for the following season. "In house painting it is women to whom we cater," an officer of the guild wrote in a promotional pamphlet. "If we can guide or educate the taste of the house-mistress in respect to the colors in which her dwelling is to be clad, we control the entire situation."

Color specialists enjoy trying to pinpoint when and where they first became aware of a particular trend. "The mauve of America began in the hospitality context, at the Hilton Hotel in Chicago, when they renovated in the eighties," said Ken Charbonneau, a color consultant who previously worked as Harrington's predecessor, and then her boss, at Benjamin Moore. "Believe it or not, it was pretty at first: rose, mauve, and gray—with a touch of teal. It was quickly in every dentist's office in America, and every hospital clinic. The worst thing about it was that it was huge in all these built-in laminates—commercial consoles, hotel dressers, reception desks. You couldn't get rid of it."

The accepted interpretation now is that the mauve moment reflected the eighties' collective grasping at understated "refinement": hence the "sophisticated" palette, built on a gray foundation that served to both tone the colors down and achieve a level of steeliness, which, in turn, signified modern science's triumph over nature. Hence, too, the permissive and shyly cosmetic quality of those roses and teals. "Those colors were a reaction to the excesses of the seventies—the avocados and harvest golds—which had celebrated nature in a way that people were suddenly feeling was too wild," Charbonneau said.

There's also a market-based incentive behind color trends: if a manufacturer makes last year's product in a new color, the product is perceived as new, and some consumers will feel the need to buy another one. Meanwhile, technological advances have accelerated the process of manufacturing, so that consumers are moving through product cycles more rapidly.

Because colors can influence consumer choices, Harrington is often asked to research the way people respond to various palettes. When Colorcon, an international maker of film coatings for pharmaceutical tablets, commissioned her to study the associations people have with pills of different colors, it may have been inspired by the branding triumphs of Viagra and Nexium. The popular recognition of both drugs is linked closely to their respective colors: "the little blue pill" and "the purple pill."

"I can only guess in those cases..."
whether color has anything to do with it," Harrington said. Indeed, given the intended function of the drug, "that blue"—Viagra is a chalky, medium-tone blue—"is a little bit safe," Lori Heron, a design director who consults for the pharmaceutical industry, told me. "It's a grounded, responsible color, but moving toward an aqua for a pill might be a more forward-thinking choice. That's where we're leaning right now." In 2002, when the manufacturers of Levitra were looking to position their drug to compete with Viagra, they decided (after considerable research) to make the pill orange. According to an article in Fortune, some focus groups found Viagra's blue to be chilly, whereas orange was "vibrant and energetic."

Harrington used a research firm to survey several thousand people, in twelve countries, about twenty-seven pill colors. She found that while lighter-value blues tend to be the most calming colors, respondents reported that pills in other hues—dark green in America, Great Britain, and Korea; medium green in Italy and Germany; brown in Japan—had the most calming effect. "So many colors mean different things from country to country," Harrington said. "Red pills in India evoke romance or happiness, but in Korea they mean romance or fear."

The blue of Viagra, meanwhile, was shown to have relatively few strong associations, positive or negative. "This makes me wonder if it isn't something of a blank slate," she said. "Viagra has come along, and they've been making the color their own." By the same reasoning, then, a light-purple pill—which, in every country surveyed, failed to make the top three colors for any attribute—presents a similar opportunity. "A lavender pill brand is very much out there for the taking," Harrington said.

The institution that plays the greatest role in determining next year's big color is a trade organization known as the Color Marketing Group, which holds a twice-yearly forecasting convention. Harrington has belonged to C.M.G. for more than fifteen years, and last April, at the spring conference—held at a Hyatt Regency in Denver—she chaired several forecasting workshops. The first afternoon, she had a group of nine in-house color specialists, and, perhaps because this particular workshop was devoted to colors for use in people's houses, all of them were women. They sat at a long table in a converted suite. "So—colors, home," Harrington said. "What's everybody thinking?"

Catherine Wunch, a pigment specialist for BASF, folded her hands. "I see an influence from the military situation, and I think it's going to be with us for a while," she said. "I kind of see colors for 2008 as being grayed." Wunch, who has short hair in a square and businesslike cut, passed around a handful of color chips, in gray-blues, gray-browns, and a grayish pink. They joined several other clusters of colors affixed to a whiteboard.

Jill Liebson, a designer for a fabric-printing company in Florida, seemed to agree. "I think we're going to go much deeper than before, because we aren't living in optimistic times," she said. "And in the home people want deep safety."

All participants had been instructed to bring in samples (chips or swatches or even photo spreads from magazines) of five or six colors they thought would be big in two or three years' time, and a corresponding list of trends, socioeconomic or aesthetic, that they expected to bring about. Among the influences they discussed were the war in Iraq and the attendant oil crisis; a certain ambivalence about technology's hold on our lives; the fact that the 2008 Olympics will be held in Beijing; the fact that India has become a player in the global economy; and the enduring purchasing power of both the first wave of baby boomers, who are beginning to turn sixty, and the younger generation of shoppers ever hungry for well-designed "discount-luxe" goods (a trend that was somehow tied to the popularity of reality TV).

"Some of the Asian markets are being totally opened up, and I see camel and earthier greens coming back," Robin Culbreath, a fortyish color consultant from Minnesota, said. ("Fabrics and paper products especially. I just did an amazingly adorable line of Post-it pads for 3M.") She wore a turquoise kimono over a pair of dungarees. "There's really

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cool stuff coming out of Mongolia. Their textiles are heavily influenced by these deep, inky blues.”

In another workshop, several stories down, Melanie Wood, an independent consultant who spent many years with Mannington, a New Jersey-based flooring company, spoke about “life shoppers—adults in their thirties and forties who keep trying out new lives without committing to anything. I call them ‘yuppies,’ for young, experience-seeking professionals.” They want a life that is protected from feeling bad, but they’re not sure how to get that. And this is a generation of adults that has their parents’ money to fall back on.” She smiled sheepishly—she has two grown children—and went on, “Colorwise, I see two things happening: neutrals and a momentary insight into luxury and richness, which will be reflected in mid-toned jewel tones.”

C.M.G., which has been around since 1962 and has some eleven hundred members worldwide, prides itself on being not only the largest color forecasting group but the most accurate. Since its forecasts draw on the opinions of nearly two hundred practitioners, this involves something of a self-fulfilling prophecy. The forecasts are divided into two broad palettes, each with its own annual convention: in the fall, the focus is on “contract colors,” which are for commercial-use products such as, say, shopping-mall floors, hospital curtains, or cubicle surfaces; the spring conference is devoted to “consumer colors,” for the sort of things that consumers buy. The industry-specific forecasting groups at the Denver convention included Transportation (cars, mostly), Action and Recreation (sports equipment), and Visual Communication (packaging, logos, paper products, graphics).

Charges of “color collusion” have sometimes been levied at C.M.G. (As a 1999 issue of the architecture and design magazine Metropolis had it, “614 marketers at the Montreal Sheraton have already decided on your next favorite color. Will you buy it?”) But the group doesn’t go so far as to advise reproducing its palette precisely. “It’s a directional forecast, with suggested names,” Melanie Wood told me. “The idea is for these professionals to go home and interpret it in a way that’s appropriate to what they’re making. After all, it wouldn’t do any of us much good if we went back to the companies we work for and designed products in the same colors as our competitors, who happened to get the very same idea here.” Perhaps not, but in the past some automotive-industry designers were said to be so guarded that they brought in “decoy” colors to propose, hoping to throw off their rivals. That problem has been rectified by assigning participants from the same industry to different workshops.

C.M.G. bills nonmembers seven thousand dollars for the year’s forecasts: printed cards with glossy color chips and an accompanying report. Even C.M.G. members are forbidden, for the first eight weeks after a new palette is declared, to use the forecasted colors in any kind of public forum, such as in newsletters or on the Web; after that, the group’s rules state, “generic information” about the colors may be shared by members, “but they may NOT communicate specific color references or notations.”

In order to be considered for the 2008 forecast card, a color must not have been on the C.M.G. palette (at least, not for the same industry group) in recent years. Several candidates represented only a slight evolution from something on the previous year’s palette. For example, Thunder, a blue-gray predicted for 2008, is based on a 2007-palette color called Mettle but is lighter and bluer, “in respect to Mother Nature and natural metals,” according to last year’s post-conference report.

Over the course of three days, subsequent committees produce a final palette. A spectrophotometer is typically used to “read” each color and assign it the proper notations in six indexing systems, such as Archroma (which works best with fabric dyes) or RAL (which is used for paint). Within a couple of
months, the color samples are printed in rows on an eleven-by-sixteen-inch card.

Later that first day, Harrington moved downstairs to a banquet-sized hall to run a “color-consolidation steering committee” session—the equivalent of a second round. The experience level of the average person in the room went up a few years, but some people had trouble justifying the inclusion of their favored colors. “If it doesn’t have strong influences that we can identify, it doesn’t get up there on the board,” Harrington said, as the group before her mulled over a pale brown.

“The wood tones are going more yellow,” Robin Culbreath said.

“It’s camel as leather, camel as skin,” C.J. Volk, who produces her own line of high-end paints in Tucson, added. She spun around to face Culbreath and raised her arm in mock self-congratulation.

“Those aren’t influences, you guys,” Harrington objected. “You’re describing the color.” Two popular dark colors, one brownish-orange and the other more purple-burgundy, ran into the same hurdle, and Harrington pressed the group to identify cultural trends behind the emerging palette.

“Ethnicity and immigration,” Volk said.

“Multicultural,” Rebecca Ewing, a boutique color forecaster from Decatur, Georgia, said.

Harrington was still skeptical. “O.K., so it’s different ethnic groups for these two?”

“The brown-orange is more Indian,” Ewing said. “The other one is Asia.” She thought about this for a moment. “And Eastern Europe, Russia, and Turkey.”

The brownish orange was one of the shades that survived to the end of the session and would go before the next consolidating panel. When it came time to name the color, Cimarron, which somebody said sounded like Spanish for “cinnamon” (though it’s actually Spanish for “wild, untamed”) was well received, until Volk told the group that Cimarron was also the name of the subdivision she lives in. They settled on Adobada.

In one group after another, forecasters championed the same color families and the same modifications of currently popular colors. Both blue and red got darker (with Cosmitech and Regalia, respectively), bright orange and various shades of turquoise were on the wane, the purples went from dusty lilacs to something very dark and baroque (Forbidden Plum), and green, while ever popular, was represented less by acidic and “botanical” hues and more by muted neutrals. The final 2008 palette of twenty-four colors—announced, with fanfare, in a large auditorium after an executive-committee all-nighter—was dominated by “nature colors.” There were eight hues described as “fusions of yellow, green, and brown,” another six in the green and blue-green families, and a couple of warm earth tones, including Brokeback Bronze.

The report accompanying the palette describes Buddha, one of the fusion colors and a nominee from the Visual Communication sector, as having been derived “from Asia and the Middle East. . . . This color brings depth and richness to the forecast, and can be communicated in a variety of finishes . . . matte, metallic, and varnish.” A description of Mineral Springs, from the Home group, is “a good blue gone bad. A slate-infused gray with watery undercurrents, this color is influenced by nature and tech.” A color called Soul is characterized as a “sophisticated” violet: “The spirituality of this color spans many cultures and offers comfort for questing minds and hearts in our erratic world.”

Hardie, the siding company, brought Harrington in as a consultant after it suffered a self-inflicted color disaster. In 2002, the company had introduced siding with a finish called ColorPlus, in a range of shades chosen without much thought by some people in the manufacturing department. It bombed.

Previously, Hardie siding had been sold only in primed, uncolored planks. “We’d wanted to do colored board because the profit margins are higher, but we had no idea what we were doing,” Rob Thomsen, a Hardie manager who has been supervising the product’s relaunch, told me. “Somebody here had looked into the colors that vinyl siding came in”—Hardie siding is made of fibre cement, and costs significantly more than vinyl—“and said, ‘These are the
Hanington raised her eyebrows. "The Hardie boys are such 'Type A's,'" she said.

Rockport, which is primarily a second-home community, was selected for a visit because it represents one extreme of the color bell curve. As Haley turned onto one of Rockport's main drags, we passed single-story motor inns painted pink and mint green, a bright-turquoise bait stand, a sky-blue seashell shop, and a tripartite storefront segmented in custard yellow, aquamarine, and deep coral. Later came a row of concrete bungalows painted bright purple, yellow, and blue, then two fishing shacks in electric green and periwinkle. Harrington photographed them all.

"This will be good for a historical perspective," she said. "These are older houses. I want to see how color evolved within the community. Maybe there's an opportunity to do some kind of regression palette." Haley and Romike exchanged appreciative nods.

The tour included five new developments in Rockport and nearby Port Aransas. The builders were at most of the sites, sweating in the heat. At one site, a crew of men had put up a row of town-house condominiums, and the exteriors were already hung with new ColorPlus siding. The colors they'd used were Sail Cloth and Woodland Cream. "This is the first time I've seen my colors in action," Harrington said. "This is my baby all grown up."

Before she left home, Harrington had made a new "exploration palette" consisting of a grid of chips: several light shades each of blue, green, and yellow and some colors in the light-brown family. The brighter blues and greens quickly emerged as the developers' favorites, and earth tones were roundly disliked. "No disparagement, but the browns and the mustard, I don't think those would be popular," one architect said. "Of course, we need a brown because some people just can't receive the water colors. They can't let go and relax."

She found another developer, Byron Pratt, standing on the porch of a house in Royal Sands, his ninety-unit subdivision, with property values ranging from about four hundred and fifty thousand dollars to one million dollars for larger homes on the two man-made lagoons or the beach. He had a mustache, shoulder-length hair, tortoiseshell sunglasses secured by Croakies, and a T-shirt that said "Sharkey's Pro Fishing Tournament."

Even for the area, his houses were painted in unusually fanciful colors. There were about fifty distinct shades, seemingly anything you might see on an Easter egg. Harrington asked how he had gone about choosing the colors.

"I just go through the pastels on the Sherwin-Williams chart and change them a little bit," he said. He pointed proudly at a coral-colored house nearby. "We just matched that off a Peach Baccardi ad."

"Are there any restrictions on color?"

"Yeah, the homeowners' association," Pratt said. "That's me."

Harrington asked Pratt to have a look at her exploration palette. "I could use a lot of these, but you don't have a real powder blue in there," he said. "And I wouldn't mind a pink."

Everybody Harrington asked thought her colors were too safe. When she returned home to Connecticut, she got out all her fan decks—she relies on about a dozen indexing systems—and began to consider more tropical-looking blues, greens, and yellows, and then a few pinks and light oranges.

"I'll give them more chroma and see what comes back," she said a week later, in her studio. "I'm beginning to think the coastal region, at least in Texas, is an outlier." She picked up an X-Acto knife and began cutting chips with amazing rapidity: Phthalo Green, Miami Ice, Buttercup, Flamingo. These were not the colors she had expected to use, but how could she argue with what she'd seen? "I've developed this process," she said. "I really try to validate and support the decisions with hard data and field evidence."

She paused to look at a pile of chips that she'd cut because they matched a slew of photographs from one of her trips, of different houses painted in shades of a color that brought to mind the contents of an old lady's compact, or perhaps a pair of flesh-colored pantyhose. "This color concerns me," she said. With some hesitation, she pushed the chips to the edge of her drafting table, letting a few of them fall to the floor. "We're not doing that color, because it's ugly. Data is data, but I'm making an executive decision on pinky-beige."
most popular colors. We'll make those.' It was a bunch of spec-house tans."

Harrington began by visiting the biggest markets the company had targeted, in order to check out housing styles and survey local developers and builders. "It's a matter of knowing which colors and materials are typical of a given market, and even getting a sense of the geography, the light, the climate," she said. "The idea was to come up with several regional palettes that could be produced independently."

"Regional patterns can't always be explained by anthropology, but they exist," she went on. "Birmingham, for example, is a heavy brick market, so even the sided houses tend to be brown or brick red. It's a very dark story. You still see more colors in Birmingham than in Dallas, but the colors in Dallas are more diverse—grays, greens, yellows. Tampa has more stucco, so it skews very light. Washington, D.C., is beigeville."

In time, Harrington put together a provisional palette of twenty-six colors, which Hardie has been introducing over the past year: three blues, six greens, two reds, and fifteen earth tones. "They all relate to each other, which means they share at least one of three things," she said. "One is the undertone of the hue, which is a measure of how much yellow or blue it has in it. All colors have one or the other, even if you don't think you can see it. The other two are chroma and value." Chroma measures the brightness or dullness of a color. Value refers to a color's position on the light-dark scale and measures how much light a color reflects.

"With exteriors, I tend to stay closer to the center of the color-space wheel," she said. "This means the value is fairly light, and they're not too saturated, because we see houses in direct sunlight, and they always look brighter."

In the more expensive segment of the new-construction market, Harrington said, the trend is toward "sophisticated" neutrals. "It's often difficult for people to describe the colors," she told me one day over lunch. We were on the Upper East Side, where she had an appointment to meet with a prospective client. "You heard it at C.M.G.—It's kind of a taupey beige with a little bit of green in it. The more high-end the color, the more colors have gone into it and the more words you use to describe it. When it's a lower-end neutral, people just say 'tan.' "

She pointed to a set of pale ceramic salt and pepper shakers on our table and asked what color I would call them. I told her off-white. "Well, every color but white is off-white," she said, and paused. "That's a color joke."

The only parts of the country for which the choice of twenty-six colors seemed insufficient were on the Southeastern coast and along the Gulf of Mexico, so Harrington began to think about adding several colors to form a "coastal palette." Around seven o'clock one morning last June, in Rockport, Texas, Harrington was riding in the back seat of a pickup truck driven by Tab Haley, a Hardie salesman responsible for southern Texas. He's fifty-one, has a sandy mustache and crow's-feet, and wore loose-fitting pants and a canvas fishing shirt. Next to him sat Brian Romike, his district sales manager, just in from Dallas. Romike, who is thirty-four, is tall and burly and had on black slacks, sturdy black lace-up shoes, and a striped golf shirt. Harrington wore white pants, a pink linen blouse, and sandals with floral appliqués, and carried a shocking-pink Burberry handbag with topstitching.

Romike said that the Hardie product accounts for about thirteen per cent of the roughly eleven billion square feet of exterior building material that goes up in America every year, but it gets a bad rap. "We don't like to be classified in the siding category," he said. "People hear that word, they think of vinyl or aluminum"—the stuff of inexpensive, prefabricated housing—"and that's a stigma we have, unfortunately. We're a premium product. It doesn't rot like wood does from moisture, it doesn't buckle or burn, termites can't get to it. Plus, you get a clad look"—cladding is the term for overlapped planks—"not that vinyl look." Haley said that vast segments of his sales territory are "mostly Hispanic, which means mostly brick. Hardie looks like wood, and their connotation of a wooden home is a cheap home."

Haley said he thought stucco posed the most significant challenge to Hardie's improving its market share in coastal regions. "But Carolina's a heavy vinyl market, and vinyl people were always out front in terms of color," he added. "Yes, and vinyl just took a giant leap," Harrington said. "For a long time, vinyl was just interested in your twelve best beiges. Now, Alcoa's expanded their color range to, like, seven hundred colors. They've taken a paint mentality."

"Dude, in my opinion, that's desperation," Romike said.