

# Pearls of prediction

Trying to make sense of a world in flux? **Iain Aitchison** provides five tips

With financial markets in turmoil and the global economy teetering on the edge of serious downturn, many certainties of the last 15 years have been thrown into question. Will the growth in luxury goods prevail in a time of increasing thrift and is the willingness to pay extra for ethical goods compatible with the pressures of rising fuel bills?

As we stand at the edge of a historical tipping point, with world leaders pledging to part-nationalise swathes of the global banking system, all bets are off. Evaluating the impact of shifts in society and lifestyle has rarely been so critical, as budgets come under threat and business priorities reshuffle. With an excess of information and no shortage of people willing to analyse it, cynicism towards the value of trend analysis runs high.

How then, can those trying to make sense of change up their game and present a more compelling vision of the way ahead?

A systematic approach to the future can bring real clarity to strategic planning, helping to situate design within a future context and aid decision making. Here are five tips:

## 1 - Know your audience

Reaching an understanding of the objectives and world-view of your audience is essential

before embarking on any trends research or analysis. Doing so will help frame the scope of work and method of delivery.

Passing-off generic inspirational imagery as bespoke work or rehearsing well known truths about our 'ageing society' is of limited value. Focus on trends that are likely to be relevant to the sector, category or segment that your audience operates in. Perhaps counter-intuitively - consider if it is worth digging for new trends at all! Getting beyond the conventional received wisdom of a well-known trend to identify specific impacts may be far more useful to those swamped with news of the new and the novel.

It is important to understand the eventual use context of your work. In recent years Plan, a London-based product strategy consultancy, has looked at the dynamics of social change in Europe for two very different clients with specific objectives: the design manager of a Chinese firm with limited English wanting to evaluate future design strategies; and the academically-minded corporate strategists of an automotive company wishing to conduct an ongoing horizon-scanning exercise.

Although dealing with similar subject matter, both of these projects resulted in deliverables of varying levels of detail in different communications media. Understanding these constraints

up-front helped to frame the scope and amount of research and analysis required.

## 2 - Structure first, Google later

Be it the statistical indicators of long-wave social change, or the latest launches from the global circuit of design fairs - switched-on professionals now have access to the same up-to-date information from around the globe.

Although having the world at your fingertips has its advantages, opportunities for getting 'lost in research' have increased exponentially and hasten the need for a more rigorous approach. As the American psychologist Howard Gardner noted in his book *Five minds for the future*, this situation demands 'capacities that until now have been optional'. For Gardner, the ability to hold information mentally and recall it later used to be a key skill that has been made less critical by ubiquitous access to Google. Information overload means that the capacity to filter and synthesise has become a more important skill.

How can those trying to make sense of change then apply this in practice? After doing a very short amount of reading or searching, develop a short top-of-head hypothesis on a trend. Although an hypothesis at this stage may seem counter-intuitive, having a structure in

place early on in your research is a good way to direct the search for further information. As your analysis evolves with further research, this hypothesis can be refined and developed.

### 3 - Stand on the shoulders of giants

As the line between fact and opinion blurs - with much commentary from the blogosphere amounting to little more than pub chat - being able to quickly identify and summarise the most important schools of thought on a new subject area will help you filter the wheat from the chaff and refine hypotheses.

Having the most reputable sources of data at your fingertips helps. One way to speed up this process is to build a dossier of the key authorities on subjects that you are most commonly asked to investigate. Having an easily accessible resource that details the best statistical indices or authors to turn to is invaluable. This will allow you to quickly track the course of change since you last investigated a subject, but will also help newcomers in your team get up to speed quickly and master key concepts and terminology.

As well as relying on trusted old favourites, it is just as important to be curious and get outside your comfort zone to find new sources of knowledge. The widespread availability of podcasts from conferences and lectures around the world means that keeping track of the intellectual debate around an issue in business, society or design has never been easier.

### 4 - Challenge conventional wisdom

Although trends are always useful abstractions of

a more complex reality, we should not dismiss counter arguments and contradictions for the sake of simplicity.

Presenting a more nuanced argument is difficult, but identifying and interweaving different schools of thought will make it more likely that your analysis will stand up to future scrutiny.

As the author F. Scott Fitzgerald said, “the test of a first rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in the mind at the same time, and still retain the ability to function.”

One way we challenge conventional wisdom on ‘big picture’ social trends projects is by sparring with a small group of well-informed contrarians: sociologists, economists and academics, with whom it is possible to rehearse argumentation and seek out weaknesses in thinking.

On a recent project, Plan was asked to research the values and attitudes of Europe’s 20 somethings, (otherwise known as Generation Y) to find out what really makes them tick. While the received wisdom portrays this generation in a largely positive light - as highly educated, digital natives - Plan found the reality to be much more complex. Many young Europeans are more anxious than ever as they enter the workforce later and are underpaid. One recent study found that French graduates have an average of three years more education than their parents, a worse job and a lower standard of living!

### 5 - Build a convincing narrative

Constructing a compelling and concise narrative from your analysis takes time, many iterations and practice.

While the results of your research may be compiled in a 40-page dossier documenting the drivers, inhibitors and effects of key trends, communicating the dynamics of such complex subject matter, involves many tough choices. The detail of your analysis is probably too dense to be of real value in the cut and thrust of the meetings and workshops in which it may be aired.

Having lost count of the number of times I have sat through PowerPoint presentations that try to summarise the dynamics of a whole market in one slide, we strive for clarity and concision in content and visual communication.

Think about what key top-level points need to be made to communicate your point of view. If each point can’t be summarised in one short sentence, try again. Spend time identifying the killer statistic, graph, quote or image that will bring each point to life. Consider what needs to be done to hook your audience into the narrative of a trend and make it hit home.

While the perils of prediction are plenty, looking at the dynamics of change with structure, rigour and a critical eye can help make sense of a world in flux. Successful trends analysis works by engaging your audience, providing a common framework for discussion and a real decision making tool.

In these uncertain times, what could be more useful? **I**

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