Trend Forecasting for Design Futures

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Abstract

'When you are in the futurology business there are three problems that you run into. First of all, you're wrong. Second of all, you get the timing wrong even when you're right. And third of all, when you're right you're never believed.' (Woudhuysen, 1992)

Despite the wealth of knowledge in trend forecasting evident within many disciplines, there is no commonly accepted approach employed within the design industry. This paper aims to investigate current trend forecasting methods and considers their relevance to the design discipline.

Where design companies do address the issue of trends and forecasting, no established approach is prevalent. Methods employed are often exclusive to particular organisations and reflect the requirements of the sector. Approaches are frequently idiosyncratic and adhoc. Due to commercial sensitivity, these methods are commonly confidential in nature, with organisations reluctant to disclose their approach to trends and forecasting to competitors and the wider industry.

While this paper reviews the ways in which design companies consider trends and forecasting, it also considers tools and techniques used by other agencies and how these could be developed into more formal design forecasting approaches. It identifies areas of best practice and assesses their relevance to design practice and education.

Trend Forecasting for Design Futures

Introduction

Despite the wealth of knowledge in trend forecasting evident within many disciplines, there is no commonly accepted approach employed within the design industry. This paper aims to investigate current trend forecasting methods and considers their relevance to the design discipline.

Commercial sensitivity does mean that much of the activity of trend forecasting in the design industry is not in the public domain. This provides a challenge to trend forecasters – or futurologists – as organizations are reluctant to disclose their approach to their competitors and the wider industry. Ward (2002b) confirms this industry tendency: 'Seymour Powell Foresight (SPF) is as bound by a client confidentiality as are the rest of the (design) industry, and by necessity has to be wary of describing exactly what it has done for the progressive blue chip consumer product companies it has worked for' (Ward 2002b)

What is evident is the growing acknowledgement of the importance of trend information in design and the wider business community. 'Trends are not about revolution, they are about evolution. Our job is not to invent things.

Our job is to see things in advance and bring them to people. After all, a trend is something that has already begun' (Poignant interviewed in Ward 2002a).

Forecasting

The future holds our destiny. Throughout history people have attempted to see into the future - predicting what will happen before it has occurred. So what does the future actually hold? This is a question that has been asked many, many times, yet its answer is beyond our reach. Or is it? Can we predict what has yet to happen? Does the physical act of predicting a particular event – its prophecy - result in that event actually occurring or is this just mumbo jumbo?

There are numerous terms that relate to the notion of 'seeing into the future'. These include futurology, trend forecasting, foresight, or predictions, yet they all deal with mapping out in one way or another what is yet to be. They are used in many ways to describe events that we feel will (or could) happen, if we want these events to occur or not. In simple terms the notion of the future is all encompassing, covering many interrelated activities.

'The future seems more complicated and more difficult than ever to forecast, yet people feel the urge, more than ever before, to know what lies ahead. It is of key importance for companies to satisfy this need by exploring the future and in this way remaining at the cutting edge and maintaining credibility and leadership' (Bevolo 2002).

Everyday Forecasting

It is not just multinational organisations that operate in the area of forecasting. Every day uses are widespread. Turn on the television and you get to experience forecasting first hand. Weather Forecasters deliver their predictions for the coming days. Will it rain? Will it shine? They convey insights based upon analysis of metrological data. They are trained to make predictions. This said they are regularly wrong. There are numerous examples where their predictions go spectacularly wrong. In 1997, Weather forecaster Michael Fish famously indicated that an impending weather front would pass without note. The next day Great Britain suffered the worst storms in over 100 years.

Astrology, Tarot Cards and Horoscopes all deliver predictions in one form or another. This can range from meeting a 'dark stranger' to the right time to ask your boss for a pay rise. The language used is often open to interpretation, with 'exacts' usually absent. The very notion that crystal ball gazing being able inform the future does carry with it a level of scepticism in many quarters. 'Perhaps it is the necessary vagueness of trend forecasting's vocabulary that so unsettles us. Like a horoscope, trend predictions are a translation of mass observations and instincts 'into a vocabulary that can be used by different industries' Ward (2002a).

Government utilise a wealth of information to inform policy. Changes in demographics, lifestyle, social expectations, health, etc. are important in informing the decision making process. Social research methods are employed across a range of sectors to identify social trends and future scenarios.

Forecasting Techniques

There are a wealth of approaches used to look into the future. These are employed across seemingly disparate disciplines, from finance to farming, or politics to purchasing. Many organisations have identified the importance of information relating of this type of information and thus utilise numerous techniques to provide it.

'They (forecasters) have never claimed to be able to see into the future. What they do claim, and it is this that sees clients from hard-headed industries such as the automotive sector pay considerable sums for trends dossiers, is that they simply look a little more closely at the present that the rest of us' (Ward 2002a).

Scenario Planning

Scenario Planning is an established forecasting technique. The internationally renowned futurist Peter Schwartz is one of its leading advocates. It can be described as 'a technique that helps organisations "think the unthinkable" by creating alternative stories, or scenarios, about how the future might pan out' (Dearlove 2002). Many of the concepts and vocabulary used in this area were introduced to companies around the world in his book 'The Art of the Long View' (Schwartz 1991). It shows managers how to use scenario planning to be prepared for all possible future events that might affect their companies taking seemingly disparate threads of information to weave different scenarios for what the future COULD look like. The information is presented such that you can apply these techniques to your personal life as well as your business. Schwartz has undertaken scenario exercises with such companies and institutions as The White House, Volvo, Nissan and the International Stock Exchange reinforcing its usefulness.

With its basis in the Rand Corporation in the 1940s, developed by Herman Khan at the Hudson Institute in the 1960s, and further developed by Shell in the 1970s, scenario planning has seen changes in approaches to its use. 'There is a recognition that big complicated methodologies and elaborate computer models are not the optimal way. It (scenario planning) has moved away from formal planning-like processes more toward a thinking tool. And it's not much more profound than that. So it's a methodology for contingent thinking, for thinking about different possibilities and asking the question "what if?"' (Schwartz interviewed in Dearlove 2002).

The notion of actually being able to tell the future through technique such as scenarios planning is questionable. Its focus is not necessarily upon influencing the external world, but the internal. Schwartz elaborates. 'The objective is not to get a more accurate picture of the world around us but to influence decision making inside the mind of the decision maker. The objective of good scenarios is better decisions not better predictions' (Schwartz interviewed in Dearlove 2002).

Trend Forecasting and Design

Designers design for the future. They are called upon to provide solutions to situations that have yet to occur. This can range from the identity of a company yet to be established to the book jacket of a proposed novel, the interface of a new mobile phone under development to the next collection for a fashion house 12 months hence. The timescale may vary, often dependant upon the lead times associated with a particular sector, but they design for the future. That's what they do.

The notion of what the future holds is often central to this design process. In essence, it is part of the design process, intertwined with form, function, usability, suitability, sustainability, manufacturability, desirability, and the many, many other considerations designers address. If designers 'initiate change in man-made things' (Jones 1970) understanding in what context the 'man' will operate is essential.

Futurology and Trend Forecasting

Futurology – the buzzword used to describe activities associated with predictions of the future – provides notions of the way the future will (or could) be. Its use does bring with it a level of scepticism and doubt. The notion of the forecasting of events yet to happen, and the manner in which these supposed events are delivered, leads observers to display misgivings. Ward compares trend forecasting to astrology - seemingly disparate activities. 'Trend forecasting seems to attract fascination and derision in equal amounts. Perhaps it extends the same intrigues as astrology – 'can these people really tell the future?' – and maybe cause the same self-doubt' (Ward 2002a).

The vocabulary of trend forecasting in part contributes to this scepticism. Predictions or future scenarios are often conveyed using 'stories' rather than definite facts – the general rather than the finite. They act as a method for

establishing an overview of these predictions, drawing from information that includes generalisations at one extreme, and narrow number crunching on the other. These scenarios act as the vehicle trend forecasters utilise, allowing them to establish future alternatives. This said, it does not mean that specifics are not included in these scenarios, but Ward maintains that 'it's a myth that trend forecasting ever says 'In two years time we will all be wearing blue' (Ward 2002a).

These stories or narratives employ a mixture of elements to communicate future scenarios, using visual and factual information in this process. The visual is the dominant method for conveying this information, often supported by background or factual information. 'Trends are ideally presented visually throughout the creative session. They can be clustered on a trend matrix: a grid where aspects run along one axis and the corresponding trend categories – short term, emerging, long term, certain, uncertain, regional, global, etc. – run along the other. (Mavrommati 2001)

As many of these scenarios are not sector specific, aimed as a broad range of industries, the language needs to be as widely accepted as possible. This leads to a dilemma. Be too specific and the broad appeal of predictions diminishes. Be too broad and the relevance to a specific sector is lost. 'Perhaps it is the necessary vagueness of trend forecasting's vocabulary that so unsettles us. Again like a horoscope, trend predictions are a translation of mass observations and instincts into a vocabulary that can be used by different industries.' (Ward 2002a)

James Woudhuysen, leading futurologist takes this notion a little further. 'When you are in the futurology business there are three problems that you run into. First of all, you're wrong. Second of all, you get the timing wrong even when you're right. And third of all, when you're right you're never believed.' (Woudhuysen, 1992)

Trend predictions contribute to the creative process of design, helping to ground future proposals in a state of 'believability'. They assist in helping the viewer to undertake a leap of faith and believe that the future may be radically different to the world of today. It is unlikely that many would have predicted, 10 years ago, the extent to which mobile phones have integrated themselves into today's society. With the benefit of hindsight, it is much easier to understand this development, but the current situation would have been received with much scepticism. Trend forecasting could have been an aid to the designer in the delivery of such a proposition. 'An important part of the creative process is an understanding of where the trends for personal values, beliefs and lifestyle for the target users and technology are heading as this helps with the identification of possible gaps in the market that could be addressed with the design or product concept. A trend expert, futurologist or sociologist may supply this trend information.' (Mavrommati 2001)

Mavrommati discusses the importance of trend prediction in the creative process but ends with the identification of the providers of such information. It is interesting that 'the designer' is not mentioned in this process, yet the importance of 'trends' are. The methods that designers use in relation to trend prediction are somewhat adhoc. There are many designers who see trend prediction as an 'add on' to the design process, not acknowledging the importance it can hold. It is able to contribute to the creative and design development process by providing information of prime importance. This said, designers in certain contexts do employ processes that contribute to the trend process. Although organisations are aware of their importance some do not undertake any form of formal prediction or forecasting.

Trend Forecasting in the Design Business

Where trend forecasting is employed in design orientated companies, commercial sensitivities mean that little information regarding the actual processes they employ is in the public domain. This is understandable. Much of their competitiveness can be attributed their ability to produce proposals that are insightful, with an awareness of the (future) market they will operate in. The context that will 'occur' in the future is important and as such

companies keep their forecasting processes under wraps. They do employ the services of specialist organisations to provide them with tailored forecasting information. Reports are commissioned at great cost, yet their value is understood. These studies often locate predictions in a broad context, placing insights in the realm of the consumer and not just in the realm of design. 'Things become clearer when these predictions are considered in a wider context, what can be described as a general reorientation away from the dominance of the visual in the way we interpret the world.' (Ward 2002a)

Some design led companies have communicated some of their approaches to forecasting to the wider community despite the commercial sensitivity of this information. Often they leave out much of the detail or process, providing a broad overview of their activities. It is usually the output rather than the process that they disclose leaving many questions unanswered.

An overview of three approaches to forecasting and trend prediction follows, allowing an insight to current working practices to be developed. The case studies are: Fitch, Philips and Samsung/Seymour Powell Foresight.

Fitch

During his time at Fitch, Woudhuysen ensured a focused approach to design futures. As director of its Information Group – the section of the company responsible for undertaking research into futurology – a coherent and co-ordinated approach was employed. 'The perspective of design futures - gathering information so that we can get a clear idea of the future, is something we need to move on to if we wish to make a special contribution on behalf of the design industry.' (Woudhuysen, 1992) Focusing upon three areas their efforts are structured thus:

Commercial Information – understanding the industry, its sectors, trade shows, exhibitions, market reports, etc. Likely economic trends in countries are observed as this highlights potential market developments. "Understanding which countries are going to 'do the business in design', it is important to keep trends in international relations under the microscope" (Woudhuysen, 1992).

Design Information – library of materials and samples. This information helps designers specify materials, colours, textures, etc. Trends are predicted for identified periods – 1 year, 2 years, etc. Associational words are also used to summarise potential trends.

Visual Information – in the design press, at product launches, trade fairs, in books, magazines and the output of numerous design groups. This information allows an informed overview of current developments to be reviewed.

The Information Group also monitors developments outside the design arena. Woudhuysen states that 'What the United States Air Force does today will happen in the living room tomorrow (in roughly in 20 years time). The filtering through of defence technology to the civilian area is something the (information) group keep a very close track of.' (Woudhuysen, 1992)

He adds… 'The working methods of the Information Group (at Fitch) are largely analytical, but also very synthetic. We like to put together a number of different perspectives. We are also very idealistic – although we like to quantify, although we are interested in economics, we think that intuition, metaphor and these sorts of emotional issues are, and must remain, very important to design. Aesthetic, stylistic or intuitive issues are very important for us to consider. And finally we are also pragmatic. We do in the information group have our own clients and all of our work is very much directed to making sure that when they run into doing a serious project they are well informed. They know what its about and know what the future is going to be.' (Woudhuysen, 1992)

Philips

Conducted in 1996, Philips 'Vision of the Future' project was undertaken to identify 'what life will be like in 2005'. The project was set up to meet four specific objectives:

to demonstrate Philips' commitment and ability to make a positive contribution to the future by offering products, services and software that enhance the quality of people's lives;
to further stimulate the imagination and creativity of the Philips community as a whole;
to explore the opportunities provided by merging technologies and the significance of socio-cultural developments in determining how they can be used;
to show the benefits of shifting from the model of quantity and complexity towards a greater focus on quality, simplicity and customer satisfaction.

A multidisciplinary team of individuals including not just designers but an international panel of leading futurologists and trend analysts – including futurologists, trend forecasters, cultural anthropologists, ergonomists, scenario builders, strategic planners, strategic consultants, engineers, sociologists, psychologists, mathematicians, inventors, and technologists were consulted throughout this major undertaking. Extensive research was undertaken in two main areas: socio-cultural trends and developments in technology. Research was carried out both within the Philips organisation and with reference to global forecasting done in Japan and Europe. (Marzano 1996)

A series of creative workshops enabled more than 300 scenarios based on the socio-cultural and technological research to be developed. These scenarios (short stories describing a product concept and its use) were developed using five basic parameters: people, time, space, objects and circumstances. In view of the extensive nature of the project, further grouping was necessary to break this wide scope down into more manageable pieces. A simple structure, focusing on people rather than technological categories, was used to represent all aspects of everyday life - the four 'domains' (Marzano 1996):

- Personal
- Domestic
- Public and Work
- Mobile

The next stage in the project was to develop and enrich the basic concepts and make them more easily understandable to a wider audience. To do this, the ideas for future products and services had to be manifested in the form of tangible models, simulations of interfaces and short films. Integral to the concepts was an approach to interaction design, incorporating natural modes of communication such as speech, writing and gesture, which would allow the use of the products and services to be easy and intuitive. Marzano indicates that the approach employed 'of showing people abstract ideas in tangible form is one that Philips are pursuing in earnest'. (Marzano 1999)

To achieve an important objective of the project - gaining feedback - the results were communicated to as broad an audience as possible. The project was presented using a variety of media including an exhibition, a series of communication events, a video compilation, a book and a web site. (Marzano 1996)

Samsung/Seymour Powell Foresight (SPF)

Since 2000 Samsung have been utilizing the expertise of Seymour Powell Foresight (SPF) - the research and development department of UK product design consultancy Seymour Powell - to gain a greater understanding of the diverse European consumer electronics market. 'Samsung already had some knowledge of European design trends – and in particular how European trends differed from the home market in Korea – but its goal here was

twofold. As well as refining its understanding of European trends, Samsung's long term goal was to begin to build a model of European culture – and of differences between European nations – that would help in future product development' (Ward 2002b).

Kevin McCullagh, who directs SPF since James Woudhuysen's departure in 2001, describes what they do as 'the system for integrating the examination of economic, social, cultural and technological futures into the design process' and adds they undertake 'an action-orientated vision of the future, which informs design strategy, rather than a detached conjecture about (or prediction of) the future' (Ward 2002b). The group has a core set of multidisciplinary competences that includes sociology, technological insight, user research and marketing and of course design.

'Distilling a diverse mass of data (mood boards, statistics, ethnographic research, scenario plans, etc.), the results of months of research, into a format that both the clients, who are paying for the service, and the designers, who will have to convert these recommendations into products, can understand and are willing to embrace is no mean feat' (Ward 2002b).

SPF's work for Samsung included an analysis of those aspects of a country's history that continue to define its visual culture. Focusing upon five European countries, Samsung used the phrase 'cultural basement' to describe this. 'The idea of knowing about the products that today's consumers had been exposed to – and may have bought or aspired to buy in the recent past – would, especially when aligned to an analysis of recent design trends, give a more nuanced insight into both the aesthetics of popular culture and the realities of consumer buying habits' (Ward 2002b).

SPF proceeded to delineate some pan-European trends and importantly predict their trajectories. This, along with identifying the prevalent design trends, helped to formulate Samsung's design strategy or new product language. Examples were identified, developed and named. They were presented using a montage of images (indicative of the future trends, and their trajectory) and words (stating what the trend was and importantly was not).

For example - Emotional Expressionism is: *bold, colourful, delightful, friendly, playful, tactile.* Emotional Expressionism is not: *discreet, serious, elitist* (Ward 2002b).

Trend predictions were developed, refined and then communicated to Samsung. Ward states that this allowed Samsung to develop a visual language 'that sets much store by authenticity: in materials for example, like cold-to-the-touch metals, or in the mastery and application of technology that is appropriate to users' needs'. This emphasis upon tactility implied recognition that consumer electronics are no longer sold on function alone.

Conclusions

One of the key findings identified in the study was the importance of a multidisciplinary approach. Activities include not only the valued input of designers, but also a selection of perspectives from experts from various backgrounds. This is an area that the author feels a level of commonality between organisations undertaking trend forecasting is evident. The use of input from outside of design is seen as a strength very much worth building upon.

The notion that forecasting is just 'research' is met by a level of derision by its practitioners. McCullagh takes exception to this notion stating futurologists and forecasters are "as much 'researchers' as designers are 'sketchers'" (McCullagh in Ward 2002b). He explains that 'research at SPF is analogous to sketching for designers: it is a means to an end'.

The methods employed to communicate 'forecasted' information utilises a number of approaches. Visual information is all-important as this is where designer's strengths often lie. This said, it alone is not sufficient to articulate all of the nuances or information involved. Stories or scenarios are commonplace, especially where the timescale of these predictions is extended. The further into the future we look – the more conceptual our approach - the broader, less defined these insights become. Factual information is appropriate but in general, it is not the driving factor in such cases.

It is clear from these studies that the use of trend forecasting and associated methods, in the design industry has increased markedly over the last few years. Its 'public profile' has increased to a level that design led companies are now willing to enter into a more open discussion with regard to the methods they employ. Again commercial sensitivities are always evident as this information, if correct, can provide companies with a competitive edge.

The author has identified that further work will need to be done, within the design industry, to identify if, and where, common approaches are being employed in trend forecasting. A series of one to one interviews with exponents of trend forecasting are proposed to extend the work already undertaken. The development of approaches or 'models' that assist with the identification of trends, their prediction and application is intended.

Perhaps Woudhuysen sums up the area of trend forecasting well when he describes his desire to have a 'periscope on the future' and concludes that '…its pioneering stuff. There are no route maps for what we are trying to do, and we are probably doing half of it wrong' (Woudhuysen 1992) At least this means he is doing half of it right.

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