The New Now: Forecasting Trends to Create the Future

by Mikel Cirkus

There is an aspect of the future that is predictable.

Those who understand trends – seeing relationships that lead to new ideas, making connections of things seemingly unrelated, perceiving smart re-combinations – have the ability to influence what actually happens. Firmenich, the largest privately owned company in the fragrance and flavor industry – where creativity is both our essence and a fundamental – has developed and is employing a strategic tool, Trenz®, for identifying and interpreting socio-cultural events and forecasting the next important industry and consumer trends. This tool constitutes an important aspect of our innovation process and is integral to our new product development. While the details of Trenz® are proprietary, this article shares some of the general features of the methodology and how it helps us to focus on the long-term.

From prospective view to creating the future.

To be a true business partner with one’s customers, a company needs to contribute to the innovation pipeline. This is helped immeasurably by harnessing the power of trends – by developing a clear understanding (globally) of the direction in which the future is headed – which provides the ability to influence what actually happens. It is possible to develop the ability to hear answers when others hear only questions; to truly be able to speak about the future with conviction and passion, while making connections that lead to new opportunities; to see forced connections of things seemingly unrelated. Smart re-combinations – they’re everywhere we look in this ‘mash-up’ culture we live in today. We need to appreciate that questioning existing reality and using lateral thinking to connect the dots will help us understand where the future is heading and lead to greater innovation.

The idea of predicting the future is an ancient one. Wise-men, sages, prophets, mystics, magicians, fortune tellers, psychics and gurus all have paved the way with a myriad of tools and techniques to offer a glimpse of what is yet to come. Right or wrong was not as important as the hope or direction the vision provided.

The truth is, you don’t need a crystal ball to see the future. There are people already living and working there everyday. These are the visionaries, the inventors, the creators, the dreamers creating the new. The next. The world they live and play in is truly in the clouds, but is grounded in the cultural values of a rich past. Drawing inspiration from the sciences, arts, beliefs and present day technologies, they are the architects of tomorrow. The macro trends that will have an impact on near-future innovation have their origins in these factories of dreams. As the visionary Steven van der Kruit says, “the babies are already born, they just need to be nurtured.”

By interpreting socio-cultural events and forecasting the next important trends, it is possible to stimulate thinking in additional innovative dimensions. The inclusion of thoroughly researched, substantiated, and consistent trend information adds significant value to the new product development activity, and is critical in today’s fast changing, competitive environment. The successes of 2018 are already in the making. It is possible to increase the success rate of your new product innovation by using this ‘New Now’ approach.

Trends drive consumers, and consumers drive sales. As the economy rebounds, consumers are emerging as more sophisticated, more demanding, and more in control than ever before. As a result businesses must evolve. The power of trends is in the application of deep cultural insights to real business challenges and consolidating and analyzing the global trends that our Creative Marketing teams were tracking. Like Billboard’s Hot 100 Music Chart, we wanted to have a single, unified, global resource that monitored the culturally relevant trends as they rose and fell on the ‘hot list.’ It was at this early stage that we began to discover the patterns that led to the Trenz® perspective.

As a global strategic tool aimed at projecting and initiating new fragrance and flavor trends, Trenz® provides a consistent source of creative inspiration. By forecasting and monitoring major changes in our society, Trenz® stimulates our creative, cross-functional teams to think in new dimensions and translate trends into successful business opportunities. Trenz® enables our teams to foresee the changing needs of consumers’ lifestyles and values that will impact our and our Clients’ taste and smell visions, thereby contributing to the definition of Firmenich’s flavor and fragrance strategies and increasing our own Thought Leadership.

Firmenich’s business is all about emotions, and Trenz® is about the emotional implications of new trends. Trenz® enables our teams to actually create fragrance and flavor trends, not follow them. Ideally our development teams need about two years to

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work proactively on new opportunities. With regular time to market in our industry today being closer to one to two years, proactive projections should therefore be as much as four to five years in advance. Using Trenz®, Firmenich is able to tap into “the source” of global trends at their embryonic stages.

To win in a quickly changing world takes both imagination and courage. Creating a shared innovation mindset isn’t an easy task, but our methodology helps us do this. It helps us to focus on the long-term – thinking waaay ahead. Decision makers and innovators need to not only anticipate the future of the industries they work in, but also of those affecting society and technology as well.

As mentioned, there is an aspect of the future that is predictable. With Trenz® we’re able to reveal a part – if only a small part – of what the future will look like. We are like authorized stalkers – observing and studying people and places to really understand their needs and values. One simply cannot continue to look for new ideas in one’s own backyard. To actively engage in this process you need to explore outside your comfort zone, outside your professional or developmental category, even just plain outside. Trenz® provides one road map that can take you there by exposing you to new sources of inspiration. It can show you how to find ‘ah-ha moments’ by connecting the dots. Only then can the process of creating the products that consumers don’t even know they need, yet, really begin.

One of the earliest stages of trend forecasting is a simple observation exercise that we refer to as a TrenzWalk®. Other trend forecasting specialists may call this concept Cool Hunting, Trend Trekking, or a Street Safari, but no matter what it is called, the idea is to go ‘where the fun, action, danger and pain are’– the foundations for capturing trends in their infancy. Marcel Proust stated that, “The real art of discovery consists not in finding new lands, but in seeing with new eyes.”

Today’s business leaders must get closer and deeper to reality in order to connect to consumers. Getting literally out in the streets and doing some real cultural anthropology will bring you to a higher platform for observing societal changes and give you an opportunity to get a hands-on understanding of the processes of identifying, deciphering and utilizing trends.

As cultural anthropologists, when we go on a TrenzWalk® we’re on a voyage of discovery into the latest. Exploring various retail environments from restaurants to unique boutiques, the street art movement and the colorful world of graffiti, niche cafes and independent galleries and showrooms – all while incorporating our tracking skills of slowing, looking down, and expanding perceptions to generate new insights and creative thinking.

Most information, in whatever form, is reaching us with a delay (and transformed) of roughly half a year. But we live in a world where the ‘speed of change’ is ever accelerating. In order to signal change, or trends, one has to detect them in their embryonic state. Most of us in the decision-making field are disconnected with the outside world and are visually ‘handicapped.’ The TrenzWalk® exercise is not a unique system of observing trends, but it allows the observer to not only signal ‘the new’ early, but also to reveal the process of change itself – for it is not trends we are looking for. It is change. Change can only be recognized by repeated observation. There must be a record of regular reality checks to notice the change – if any. What is here that wasn’t here before? What is still here since I was last here? What used to be here that is no longer? It’s an awareness over time that enables observation to become a predictive tool.

... it is not trends we are looking for. It is change. Change can only be recognized by repeated observation. It's an awareness over time that enables observation to become a predictive tool. TRENDS = Observing major CHANGE in society on a social, cultural, economic and technological level.

Learn how to see differently, while observing the things you have never seen before. As we like to say – see with artist’s eyes. It trains you to detect change in an early stage, allowing ample time to anticipate and implement winning business propositions. The designer Henry Miller has said, “One’s destination is never a place, but a new way of seeing things.” Vision is therefore not just a predictive tool, but is an empowered means of capturing trends as they are happening and finding ways to make them work for you.

In the business world of the future, engaging such new tools to improve your view of trends will ultimately improve your decisions – and your profits.

Ask yourself the following three questions:

What is your company’s strategy for differentiation? What is your process for maintaining innovation and inspiration within your organization? How will your products and their communications stay on-trend with today’s changing marketplace conditions?

Marketers will often tell you that the best sources of new product ideas are customers, both current and potential. Increasingly, though, we are seeing that customers lack the imagination to envision innovative products that address their emerging, or even existing, needs or desires. At the same time, the global citizen is becoming increasingly pro-active. This citizen ponders and carefully selects, scrutinizing the company or brand just as closely as the product.

In the 21st century the key drivers for customer-driven solutions are empathy and emotional connection – reaching people in meaningful ways. It is important to remember that consumers are emotional beings. Searching deeply into their emotional, spiritual and psychological needs while anticipating future behaviors is a proven means of targeting the very heart of the consumer. We need to foster and utilize predictive tools to stay ahead of the innovation curve. Global trend identification and interpretation become absolutely essential in attempting to predict the future.

As we grow richer new needs arise, and we consume more in the form of intangibles such as experiences, entertainment, etc. Desire is the new driving force. Many companies have focused on making better products, when real advantage comes from making different products and better product experiences. Trend forecasting is a creative process which connects seemingly disparate threads of information. It’s a process of making a new picture out of seemingly unrelated elements. It requires a multi-disciplinary approach because consumers themselves are multi-dimensional and growing ever more in complexity.

Tracking trends starts at the edge. And the edge is the underground. To truly get as close to the origin of a trend – to delve deeper into the flow of information that
begins with our inventors – we must venture to the outskirts of the cities. We’re not looking for change on Main Street or City Center. The changes we need to be paying attention to are residing in the edgiest of neighborhoods, the Bohemian areas, amongst the warehouses and the artist’s lofts and the studios. It’s rough around the edges, but it’s a proven ground of youthful energy, vibrancy, anger, rebellion and creativity that the streets are literally communicating. These are the early signals that are picked up by the so-called transmitters of bundled trend scenarios. Themes, colors, and styles are captured here and provided as a forecasted trend product or service for a diverse range of industries including high-fashion design and automotive manufacturing. The cities in which these “trend kitchens” exist are global. From Bangkok to Brooklyn, from Sao Paulo to Istanbul. The streets are alive and speaking loud and clear. It’s all a matter of who is yelling the loudest and who is in fact listening to what they have to say. The real power of trends is in the application of deep cultural insights to real business challenges and solutions.

In order to succeed in today’s consumer landscape, we must blend art and science to spot the emerging trends as early as possible and quickly translate them into actionable strategic opportunities. Going to the edge to identify these trends results in culturally relevant business opportunities, from branding, to product development, to delivery.

Quite frankly, it’s not a complicated process. Once you have found your way to “the edge” you simply begin gathering your impulses and observations from the REAL life environment you’re in. Remember to look with artist’s eyes. Be open minded and non-judgmental. You’re hunting and gathering the things you may or may not have ever seen before. For whatever reason. These collected impulses cluster over time into what we refer to as ‘future scenarios.’ Think of them as the folders in which you want to put like objects and ideas. As these scenarios get global momentum you might find they have begun to form a living trend. Seems simple enough, but it’s only as good as your own frame of reference. Permanent reality checks, over time, enable the ability to recognize the change.

It’s equally important to understand that the very ‘process of trends’ is actually more important than the trend itself. There is no ‘trickling down’ anymore. Today, everything influences everything else. It is now feasible, in any industry, to create trends and not to follow them. It’s a little bit of a self-fulfilling prophecy. You may recall the famous cliché line from the movie “Field of Dreams” - “If you build it, (he) they will come.” Well, the same holds true with trends. You have the ability to be the change that others are observing – and signaling.

When considering that the successes of 2018, and beyond, are already in the making, you have to ask yourself - What customer segment will emerge in the next five years that doesn’t exist today? What are the basic assumptions under which my industry operates? And, What if the opposite were true? Are these scary questions about the future or thought-provoking windows of opportunity? Take to

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**Figure 1** is a timeline showing the flow of information that drives trend development. It begins with the Inventors, the real visionaries who draw their inspiration from the library of cultural categories, creating the new in the technology world, in street or urban fashion and in high design. As you move from left to right, each of the positions (artists, specialists, designers, etc.) in the headings is influenced by, or inspired by, the one prior. In some cases the information is shared, and in others it is quite literally sold, as relevant trend content to work with for future development or innovation.

The information flows from left to right, however the timeline itself is actually going ‘back to the future’ from right to left. For instance, if you were to begin your trend research in the present, you might do what is referred to as a “store check” – observing your own category of products wherever they may be bought or sold and seeing what’s new, and possibly identifying the ‘white space.’ If you’re reading trade publications or magazines reporting the latest trend in “whatever,” then at best you might be six months ahead. Reading about trends is like fishing behind the net. You’re already too late to get the catch. These are essentially the more traditional methods for identifying trends. Market product samples and clippings from magazines will only take you so far into the future.

The magazines are getting their designer trend content from press releases put out by the Adopters themselves. Those adopters, in most cases, are utilizing macro-trend concepts and color palettes that are being packaged and sold to them by the Transmitters, who are truly specialists at reporting on the very latest. Their offerings are concise, global and provided with all of the conviction of the authorities that they are. By purchasing or subscribing to their content one can be on-trend as much as eighteen months in advance. This is significant in time-to-market for new product development, especially in the worlds of fashion and automotive design.

Between the Visionaries and the Transmitters lie the Translators. As described in the text, this is ‘the edge’ where you’ll find the graffiti writers, street artists, indie, urban and world musicians and their accompanying viral video campaigns. This is where the streets themselves are literally communicating the messages, colors and themes of self-expression as these alternative artists’ interpretations are influenced by their surroundings and the work of the visionaries.

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**Figure 1. The Observe & Forecast Flow of Trend Information**
the streets. Go out and spy on consumers while digging in new lands. Think like an outsider while creating an environment of open content. Define emotional touchpoints that clearly link to your brand or category. Be sure to find the patterns, partners, packaging, and ingredients necessary to have a product that just so happens to be completely consumer created.

Ultimately, by recognizing change and identifying trends, you will be able to provide the coherency necessary to package your dream.

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**About the Author**

**Mikel Cirkus** (www.mikelcirkus.com) has spent his 25 year career in creative thinking. As a designer, photographer, illustrator and writer, he has a unique perspective on the rapidly changing world of trends, content creation, and execution. He is currently the Global Director of Conceptual Design for the Flavors Division of Firmenich, the largest privately owned company in the fragrance and flavor industry. He has worked personally with many of the most innovative people in marketing, R&D, technical applications and brand management, for hundreds of products in nearly every category of consumer package goods, worldwide. Mikel is a graduate of The Art Center College of Design in Pasadena, California.

As a founding member of the global Trenz® team, Mikel identifies key industry and consumer trends, combines them with on-going analysis of competitive environments, and creates a proven means to encourage and enable clients to embrace, adapt and even create changes that have added value to their brands while also strengthening their relationship with Firmenich.

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**Figure 2. An Integrated Approach to Innovation**

*Figure 2 is a flow chart tracing the journey from inspiration to development to market – and back. It’s a cycle that begins on an emotional level, inspired by observations from the streets, and works its way through to the more rational, where the traditional aspects of new product development unfold and eventually lead to the marketplace.*

Following the course from the top left, you begin this creative journey in the city streets themselves, on the edge of the places where the trends are literally cooking. These are the cities around the world that we refer to as Innovation Kitchens. Photography on your cultural safari is essential, as it’s the means by which you’ll be capturing your initial inspirations. These collected photos, over time, get grouped, bundled, categorized, tagged – whatever is necessary to keep them a part of your information context – which will also include articles and papers that may be related to the scenario that you’re building. That’s when you begin to connect the dots. What at first seemed unrelated, now seem to form a pattern. Take coincidence out of the equation and those dots you’re connecting begin to form a new picture. a scenario that can be enriched with further definition and justification that best tells the story you’re looking to tell. For us, these scenarios, as they gain global momentum, as many do, form a so-called macro-trend that become a part of the Firmenich Trenz® assessment.

The identified macro-trend goes into a new scenario building “box.” This is perhaps where the emotional is handed over to the rational, where new product development begins to unfold. This identified trend now becomes a “dot” itself as it connects with other dots from Consumer Insights, R&D, Technical, Marketing, Ingredients, or any of the other possible teams you may need to be a part of the ideation that leads to creation. Collectively, your “dots” now connect to form a new picture – a new concept or idea – an idea that is truly on trend.

The new product idea or concept may follow many possible courses of development, of course, depending on the industry you are working in. Moving from an idea, through design application and new product development, to creating growth in the marketplace, are traditional parts of the innovation process. But identifying a trend far enough in advance and using it as an integral part of the creative process enables the product you are creating to be ahead of the tipping point and perhaps the very inspiration that others are looking for when they’re out in the streets observing what’s new.