



Actively Driving Change: Q&A with Futurist Anne Lise Kjaer

Navigating the future with trends, tools, and design thinking

Renowned futurist, speaker, and author Anne Lise Kjaer is the CEO and founder of Kjaer Global, an internationally recognized ideas and trend management consultancy. We sat down with Anne Lise to discuss our recent collaboration on the Freeman initiative to navigate the future of brand experience, and how those in the industry can do the same. From hygge to hope, here's what Anne Lise had to say.

Q: What does it mean to be a futurist? What turn of events led you to this unique work?

ALK: Well, as a futurist, I help companies navigate the future. I have a background as a designer, so design thinking informs how we work with trends. Our unique methodology enables clients to understand the core building blocks of change and how to take advantage of them. Using our toolkit and the Trend Atlas, we assist organizations in mapping the society drivers affecting their industries in a Trend Compass to connect the dots in a meaningful way. In this way, we co-create a framework for an evaluation of current trend engagement within the organization to measure where the client is today and where they want to go tomorrow.

I started out as an entrepreneur almost 30 years ago. After my graduation, I travelled the world before returning to Denmark to work as a full-time designer. A few years later I started my own company, delivering trend and colour intelligence to designers

in the fashion, furniture, and lifestyle industries — leading to the publication of my first forecasting books in the 1990s. I moved around a bit, living in Paris, Hamburg, and London; during that time, I began examining global influences, shifting my focus towards delivering business trend intelligence and trend inspiration across industries.

In 1999, I was asked to deliver my first overseas keynote in Sydney, firmly establishing my company internationally. From there, we've continually developed our Trend Management Toolkit, published a wide range of trend studies, and have been working with many world-class organizations to help them navigate and take advantage of trends.

Q: Tell us a bit about your process.

ALK: I was inspired to develop my own process by a quote from William Blake, who said, "I must create a system or be enslaved by another man's." That's exactly how I felt. In order to be a confident decision maker and come up with relevant ideas for the future, we need to have a good foundation. I wanted to create a system for my clients and myself that was grounded and accessible, but at the same time inspirational and intuitive. My team uses a multidimensional framework to explore socioeconomics and consumer behaviour, alongside cultural and technological shifts in society. Over the years, we've developed a set of trend tools that work in concert with the design thinking process. Among our most important tools I'd like to mention are our Trend Atlas, the Trend Compass, and the Trend & Lifestyle Navigator. I believe that success isn't a secret — it's about having the right system. We help our clients develop systems that are customized for their businesses. Our Kjaer Academy is where it all begins, where our clients start their journeys and learn how to think like futurists.

Q: We already see the seedlings of some of the identified macro trends coming to bear. Is that by design?

ALK: Absolutely. Without the past and the present, the future doesn't make much sense. The whole idea of trend management is to carefully cherry-pick the macro trends that have the most impact or influence on your business or industry, to better see the things and themes driving society. The trends we see today impact tomorrow. They evolve and are all interconnected. The key is to observe them together, in the context of a whole. If you focus on one trend alone, you don't see the bigger picture and might lose out.

Q: What can an organization or an individual do to maximize these trends?

ALK: We use our Trend SWOT analysis to explore the trends in the Trend Compass one by one. Ask yourself, what strengths do I have as a company to tap into this trend? What are my weaknesses? Are there opportunities waiting to be grabbed and interpreted? What threats do we see ahead if we don't act?

Realize that the trend knowledge needs to be internalized within your company. Everyone can have access to the same information, but each organization will prioritize and interpret them differently, driving a change program that is uniquely its own. The key is to understand and manage the most meaningful trends that can get you ahead, create momentum, and use design thinking to make it happen.

Q: In five to ten years, do you see brand experiences and face-to-face connections becoming more or less important? Why or why not?

ALK: Face-to-face interaction will always be important — it is utterly draining to sit down in front of a computer all day. It is innate for human beings to be connected to nature and people, not just the computer.

Brand experiences will continue to flourish, especially those that take the human-centric dimension into consideration. Smaller, intimate, and more localized gatherings may grow in popularity, as well as those offering something you absolutely cannot replicate on a computer — curated, sensorial experiences that nourish body, mind, and spirit while cultivating the community factor.

Q: Which of the macro trends do you think presents the biggest challenge or greatest opportunity for marketers?

ALK: There are quite a few current trends that marketers need to pay attention to. Intelligent Reduction, for example, taps into the notion that people no longer just crave more stuff. They want the right stuff. They want meaningful connections and experiences. That's a shift. Also, pay attention to Economics for Humans. This trend will impact organizations differently but will have a ripple effect. Brands without clear purpose will miss out — consumers want to do business with purpose-driven businesses, and talented professionals want to work for purpose-driven leaders. That will drive a 4P bottom line where people, planet, purpose, and profit are balanced. Of course, this will require another one of our macro trends to be activated: New Models for doing business. And you can see the interconnected nature of the trends. At the end of the day, it's all about inspiring people within your ecosystem of stakeholders — customers, employees, and your audiences — so they know why they should care about, connect with, and support your brand.

Q: Tell us your perspective on the human experience. Why are experiences so foundational to who we are?

ALK: The notion of meaning has changed over time, hasn't it? In the 20th century, owning more stuff was a meaningful goal for many — but today, it's also about being emotionally connected and finding personal fulfillment. The quest for what we want is so profoundly different. We are seeing Maslow's hierarchy come to life in a very real way. Once our basic needs are filled, we are searching for more meaning and a spiritual connection.

As a result, there is nothing more profound than something you can experience only once. Time is now our greatest luxury. And it's often the simplest pleasures that have the greatest impact. In Denmark, we have a concept called hygge. You know, Danes and the Nordic people are rated among the happiest in the world.

And hygge underpins our culture. It's basically a deep feeling of well-being and contentment either in your own company or together with people you care about. It can involve a lot of coffee, cake, and candles, or a glass of wine by the fireplace — whatever gives you that cosy feeling of harmony, relaxation, and the joy of just 'being' (with self or others). It's not so much an experience, but rather an energy — integral to who we are as human beings.

Imagine if all brand experiences resulted in a nice fuzzy feeling of hygge.

Q: What a happy thought. Thank you for your time, Anne Lise. Do you have any closing thoughts or words you'd like to leave behind?

ALK: Yes! I think that tomorrow's successful leaders will be those who focus on not just being the 'best in the world', but also being the 'best for the world.' Look at the future as a place of opportunity — 'glass half-full' scenarios rather than 'glass half-empty.' Approach it with hope and cleverness rather than fear and you will be much better equipped to create positive change.

Remember, the future isn't just somewhere we go — we must create the future.

ABOUT: Anne Lise Kjaer is a futurist, entrepreneur, and author. She is also the CEO and founder of the Ideas and Trend Management consultancy Kjaer Global. This multidisciplinary practice has its roots in the humanities and has an impressive track record of helping global business players, governmental and not-for-profit organizations navigate the future. Clients include Accenture, BBVA, Bloomberg, Dell, E&Y, KPMG, and McKinsey & Co. Anne Lise has lectured and given keynotes at Cambridge University (UK), Lund University, London School of Economics, MIT Media Lab (US), as well as the European Union and UNICEF.

MEDIA & PUBLICATIONS: Kjaer has been featured in The Economist, Fast Company, Financial Times, The Guardian, Huffington Post, The Independent, The Times, and Wired Magazine and has appeared on Al-Jazeera, CNN, and BBC, among others. Kjaer has co-authored and contributed to a variety of international titles. Her book, The Trends Management Toolkit: A Practical Guide to the Future, is published by Palgrave Macmillan Business (now Springer Nature).

Learn more about Anne Lise and Kjaer Global by visiting the website and reading the blog.