



WOMEN WHO SEE THE FUTURE

THE ANATOMY
OF TREND
FORECASTING

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I'M NOT ONE TO FOLLOW TRENDS.

I always thought they were fads—fashion that would go out of style, food and drink that would make only a fleeting appearance in our diets, activities that we would soon tire of. There were times, though, when I succumbed to a trend or two. Maybe it was out of need, because skinny jeans were the only style kept in stock by *every* store. But it was mostly out of want, like peplum tops with their slightly flared ends hiding my belly bulge or a curiosity for the tart flavor of fro-yo.

Over the past decades, trends have been shaping our world—from the little black dress of the 1920s that has since evolved into a classic wardrobe must-have for women; to Pantone's color of the year that captures the period's zeitgeist and adorns every object imaginable; to smartphones that have changed the way we access and provide information.

So what exactly is a trend?

"A trend is a cultural current—a deep societal shift that happens across multiple realms of culture," says Faith Popcorn, founder and CEO of New York-based trend marketing consultancy Faith Popcorn's BrainReserve. "It's a directional movement that expresses a pervasive human need." These needs are the

driving force behind trends. They can influence how long a trend will last, how far it will reach, and the entirety of its impact.

Trends are divided into two groups: macro trends and micro trends. "A macro trend has a significant long-term effect on a large scale," say Anne Lise Kjaer, founder and CEO of Kjaer Global, a trend management consultancy based in London with offices across the world, and Louise Loecke, a senior strategist and associate at Kjaer Global. "Macro trends may evolve as a result of global advancements in science and technology, or can appear abruptly in the wake of a seismic event such as war or financial or social upheaval."

One such event was the 2008 financial crisis, which served as a catalyst for a number of trends. "Forced frugality spawned a new wave of creativity, and platforms such as Etsy made it possible to set up shop and connect to potential customers online," Kjaer and Loecke say. Another significant trend that grew out of the financial crisis was the sharing economy. "People's trust in businesses and government institutions dropped. We began to look to each other and found renewed value in engaging in community and sharing things."

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Kjaer and Loecke add that macro trends can lead to the forming of new ideologies, economic paradigms, and social structures. “They play a key role in shaping new lifestyles and behaviors and can inspire fundamental shifts in people’s values and outlook,” they say. They point to population growth and urbanization as classic examples of macro trends. Urbanization occurred in the U.S. and Great Britain during the Industrial Revolution of the 1800s, when new job opportunities triggered a mass movement away from the countryside and into the city. Meanwhile, population growth in China started in 1949, when Chinese women were encouraged to bear children in hopes of strengthening the nation.

Micro trends, on the other hand, have short-term effects and are usually started by specific groups or spring from a local context. Last year’s short-lived obsession with Pokémon Go and the hype over Google Glass and Snap Spectacles can be considered micro trends. “They seem to appear suddenly and grow rapidly, influencing culture and consumption behavior within a short time frame,” Kjaer and Loecke say.

But micro trends also have the potential to grow into macro trends. Take normcore, the anti-cool non-style coined by trend forecasting group K-Hole in 2014. “In essence, the trend was supposed to subvert the received wisdom of the millennial generation’s obsession with being unique and different into an aesthetic of extreme blandness,” say Kjaer and Loecke. Within months of normcore proliferating on social media, stores were filled with unbranded denim, boxy sweatshirts, and white sneakers. Normcore even has its own icons, like Jerry Seinfeld, Mark Zuckerberg, and the late Steve Jobs.

More than affecting the present, however, trends have the power to shape the future. “Trends are signposts that help us map out future scenarios,” says Amy Webb, a professor at the New York University Stern School of Business and founder of the Future Today Institute. “Each trend is a looking glass into the future, a way to see over time’s horizon.”

This mapping out of future scenarios based on trends is a practice known as trend forecasting. “Trend forecasting involves

recognizing patterns in the present and thinking about how they will impact the future, so you can actively engage in building what happens next or not be as surprised by what others develop,” Webb says. “While we cannot know with absolute certainty what the future will look like, we can use strategic foresight to gain a better understanding of possible, plausible, and probable future scenarios.”

Some of these future scenarios are outlined in Webb’s yearly tech trends report. For 2017, Webb’s forecasts include drones as autonomous underwater vehicles, the widespread use of the bitcoin digital currency and the blockchain transaction database, and the rise of universal basic income in the wake of artificial intelligence, automation, and advanced robotics.

By creating a map of the future, trend forecasting can help us make better and more informed decisions. “Our future insights reveal the opportunities and obstacles ahead,” says Popcorn. “If we know what’s ahead, we can figure out how to get on the path today to succeed tomorrow.”

Popcorn’s BrainReserve has helped its various clients identify and leverage opportunities for a more sustainable future. For instance, they spotted the rental economy revolution among millennials, which helped Home Depot better target the demographic by providing rent-suitable materials and rental installation and renovation services. For Nike, the team at BrainReserve recognized the shift to a more active lifestyle for women. They felt that Nike’s “Just Do It” slogan was too male, missing the active women’s self-motivated mindset. This prompted Nike to launch “Better For It,” their largest campaign aimed at athletic women.

Because trends are a manifestation of our needs, trend forecasting anticipates those needs. “It tells us what we’ll want before we want it, what we’ll do before we do it,” Popcorn says. But trend forecasting stops short of actually creating trends. “It simply identifies them. You can’t make something up and force it to happen.”

Trend forecasting has its roots in futures studies, an attempt to predict the future based on present-day trends. According to the World Futures Studies Federation, futures studies takes on a plural approach rather than the singular “future studies” because there can be no one future, only multiple possible ones.

Science fiction authors blazed the trail for futures studies with stories set in imagined future worlds. H.G. Wells’ 1914 novel “The World Set Free” describes an early version of nuclear weapons, while his 1923 utopian novel “Men Like Gods” envisions a future where people communicate using wireless systems, much like today’s version of email. Arthur C. Clarke wrote books with elements of space travel, Robert Heinlein’s writings contained themes of space exploration, and Isaac Asimov placed robots at the center of some of his most famous works. This natural fascination with predicting the unknown future may have paved the way for the emergence of trend forecasting.

In 1966, the World Future Society (WFS) was established and continues to “create new narratives for a thriving humanity.” The field was conceived as a way of rebuilding after cataclysmic world wars and envisioning a positive future for humanity. The WFS states that today, futures studies is taught at universities across the world. Its methods—change management, scenario planning, and trend forecasting—are used

by businesses, governments, and consulting firms all over the globe to ensure a market for themselves in the future.

Trend forecasting isn't an exact science; there is no one way to predict a trend. Kjaer Global employs an iterative process of imagining, exploring, reflecting, defining, and refining a trend with the use of research and analysis frameworks as well as strategic tools like mindset models and persona and scenario creation. Once a trend is refined, the team at Kjaer Global creates an action plan for its implementation.

Meanwhile, Webb has developed her own six-step forecasting method, which entails listening for weak signals at the fringe, identifying patterns, determining whether these patterns are actual trends or just temporary flashes in the pan, establishing the timing and trajectory of the trend, mapping out scenarios and strategies, and pressure-testing actions. "With each step, you're able to understand the future of X more clearly, determine the best action to take, and create a strategy that's pressure-tested," says Webb.

At Popcorn's BrainReserve, a tremendous amount of research is done, including reading mainstream press and obscure publications, digging through quantitative data, speaking with future-thinking experts, and looking for the signals of tomorrow in venues such as pop-up events, cannabis expos, underground clubs, cryotherapy chambers, and vibrational therapy classes, among others. "We take all the input and look for patterns," Popcorn says. "We also look for outliers—things that don't fit, things that are new and curious. Why is everyone suddenly obsessed with sound baths and sound therapy?"

If cannabis bars and cannabis tea parties are rising, what will that do to the alcohol industry?"

A common thread behind trend forecasting is recognizing patterns. "It's learning to connect the dots and observing the relationship between those dots," Webb says. More than that, however, is analyzing data, interpreting statistics, examining demographic and psychographic information, understanding expert insights, and on-the-street reporting.

But trend forecasting also involves intuition, a sixth sense of some kind. "It's akin to using all your senses, attuning them to see what you usually don't notice," says Popcorn. "For some reason, I've always had a talent for seeing where things are going." This is evident in her prediction of the rise of the clanning trend—people wanting to be with others who share their beliefs, much like the Facebook groups we have now.

Kjaer, Loecke, Popcorn, and Webb all agree that anyone can be a trend forecaster, as long as they're passionate about trends and the future. "If you're more aware of the current drivers and trends in society, you can better influence tomorrow's agenda," Kjaer and Loecke say. They add that thinking in terms of the big picture allows you to understand your role in shaping the future.

Kjaer Global's forecasters have backgrounds in the human sciences, design, and marketing while Popcorn's team consists of journalists, strategists, and digital experts. Popcorn even has a TalentBank, a database of experts and specialists representing a diverse range of industries—from anthropologists to medics to visual artists.

"Anyone can be a changemaker," Kjaer and Loecke say. "But to do that, you need to learn how to create your own map of the future so you can navigate complexity with more certainty."

Indeed, trends have steered us through this complex world. Popcorn points to cocooning—the need to feel safe and comfortable—as an example. "It began with the fun and cozy feeling that came with watching movies at home while sitting on a La-Z-Boy recliner chair and eating microwave popcorn. This gave rise to in-home, on-demand services. Today, you can have almost anything delivered to your home—a cocktail, a vegan meal, a facial, an ayahuasca journey," she says.

Another trend that has deeply affected us is the KonMari method of decluttering made popular by Japanese organizing consultant and author Marie Kondo. Kjaer and Loecke refer to this minimalistic trend as "intelligent reduction." "It's a lifestyle trend with several drivers—our rejection of mindless

consumption, our constant fight to balance work and life, our desire for slow living in an increasingly fast-paced world," they say. "Intelligent reduction is the response to these drivers and a new way to find that much-needed focus, well-being, and balance in life."

Kjaer and Loecke add that digital detox, mindfulness, and even the surge in subscription boxes delivering personalized items were brought about by this trend of scaling back. "Many people turned away from the 'goods life'—the rampant consumerism we have been encouraged to practice. Our focus now is on the 'good life'—less but better and more meaningful experiences. We expect to see this trend evolve and endure with the growing complexity of modern living," they say.

Trend forecasting may be our portal into the future—equipping us with a map and guiding us along the way. But trends also continue to influence our present, making a lasting impact on our culture and habits.

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