

Trend-watchers, style gurus, futurists; most of the world's major brands hire their services, and their books can be found on every top manager's shelf. At the same time, they are the object of a sceptical research industry. Professional envy, or is the gap really that big? By Robert Heeg

A fine nose for hype

They're flamboyant, outspoken and have the gift of the gab. Whether they publish a new book or speak at a conference, the leading trend-watchers are often blessed with a fine nose for hype or controversy. Their amplified predictions make big brands shake in their boots. But some say it's just rhetoric without a serious method to support the findings. In fact, in some circles trend-watching has become a dirty word.

However, a closer look at the sector often reveals refreshingly down-to-earth professionals, often utilising rather elaborate and well-tested methods of their own. For instance, Nice-based Style-Vision works with the Mood Consumption Theory; predicting changing moods in consumers from (online) tests. Co-author of this method and Style-Vision's Managing Partner is Genevieve Flaven. The last two years she was in charge of consolidating the approach, supervising the marketing thesis to validate the (theoretical hypothesis and its application (measurement testing of moods). Flaven explains how her agency supplies an additional service, rather than replacing one. "Market research quantifies the potential for a market. For instance, they might tell a cosmetics firm that there is an opportunity

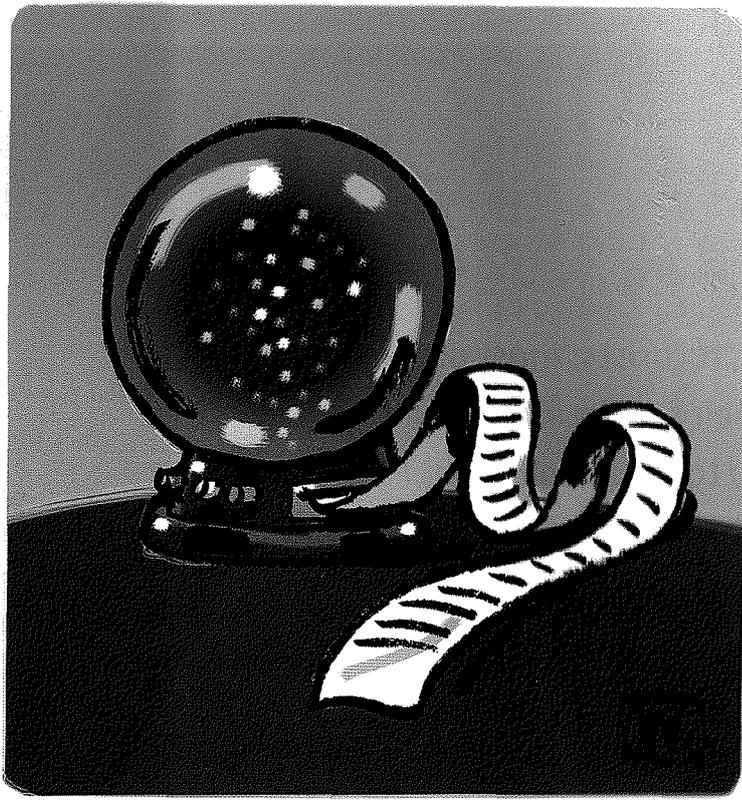
for a new men's product. Whereas we identify the future mood of the consumer, and explain what this means for certain products."

High sensitivity

At Publicis Sasserath Brand Consultancy the attitude towards trend research could be best described as the search for 'socio-cultural empathy' for various target groups, brands, categories and lifestyles. Founder and CEO Marc Sasserath publishes for several organisations, including ESOMAR, as well as being responsible for several training courses. Associate partner and co-founder Christiane Wenhart is now responsible for the unit for trend research B R+D (Brand Trend Research + Innovation Development).

She explains how Publicis Sasserath understands brands holistically, meaning that the consultants take into consideration all the different target groups and their (sometimes differing) image of a brand. "This is particularly important when it comes to brand consulting and the implementation of brands. At the same time, planners/brand consultants need a high sensitivity for trends, for what is going on outside the agency – in the 'real world' – and





what makes people tick. The essence lies in the combination of market research and ongoing qualitative trend research. You have to be aware of the large-scale influences in people's everyday life in order to generate 'true' insights on an individual level."

Darwin principle

Michael Hänni applies an entirely different method. Operating worldwide since 1998 from an online franchise platform, his Trendguide.com compiles brand rankings from the votes of a young audience. From that, recommendations can be made. But Hänni is cautious about his company's predictive powers. "When Siemens created a hype around mobile phones that looked and were meant to be worn like jewellery, the product scored in our ranking. Yet the phones flopped. We call it the Darwin principle: only the strong survive. But such things can only be established in retrospect."

Richard Watson is less cautious regarding predictions, as he doesn't consider it his job to validate or quantify his statements on the future. Based in Sydney, Australia, he edits *What's Next*, the bi-monthly business intelligence report on new ideas and trends. He also co-founded the Global Innovation Network and is a regular columnist and speaker. Advising such clients as Virgin, Toyota, Unilever and Tesco, Watson feels his role is to ask questions, to provoke thinking and to get potential issues on the radar as early as possible. "I sometimes say that I liberate the corporate imagination and that's pretty much it in terms of getting companies to think about things that they might ordinarily dismiss. Obviously it would be pretty easy to design a quantitative - or better still qualitative - survey to validate most statements, although observational research is pretty useful too."

Shock waves

It's the mono-disciplinary approach of statisticians that restrict their outlook, feels Adjiedj Bakas. Combining qualitative and quantitative matters from a multidisciplinary focus, he has no qualms about calling himself a trend-watcher. Bakas runs the Amsterdam-based trend agency

Dexter and wrote the best-sellers *Megatrends Europe* and *Megatrends The Netherlands*. This fall will see the publication of his latest book, *The Future of God*, in which he explores 49 religious and spiritual trends in Europe. Undoubtedly, it will feed more heated debates in those countries already rocked by political and religious murders (Holland) or ethnic riots (France, the UK). But then, Bakas was never one to look for the politically correct answer. "No researcher could predict the murder of Pim Fortuyn (the Dutch politician, ed.), whilst most trend-watchers already saw what was going on." Not surprisingly, he feels that many a misunderstanding exists between market researchers and trend-watchers.

Hänni thinks Trendguide.com could never replace market research panels, and says his service is an additional one. Yet, he reckons that market research could learn a thing or two from his methods. "Commercialising information is what we do. Maybe researchers should go more into that direction."

Modest objective

Looking at the differences between market research and trend-watching, Wenhart thinks even the starting point of both professions is different: "The market researcher's focus is rather on the here and now, most of the times with a

Crystal ball

Speaking to some of the world's leading trend-watchers and futurists we couldn't resist asking them: What will tomorrow hold for us? Here's how they see the future.

Genevieve Flaven, Style-Vision: "Consumers in mature markets are confused by excessive branding and advertising, so brand-fatigue will set in. Consuming for the sake of it, has lost its appeal. People now need to 'feel' a brand, to really connect to it. And they can do that in a more direct way than ever before; with their iPods or through the Internet. This is how brands can strengthen their charisma."

Michael Hänni, Trendguide.com: "A very strong trend is the convergence of telecoms, TV, internet; it's all coming together."

specific topic or question as a research objective. In contrast, the trend-watcher's job is largely to uncover changes and tendencies over a certain period of time, and on a more comprehensive scale. This means that the impact of a trend for the individual is not part of the initial task and will have to be deduced from the observations. The actual power lies in the combination of both capacities; the prediction of important societal developments, and a valid conclusion of their actual consequences for expected attitudes and behaviour."

At Style-Vision Flaven encounters less and less scepticism from the market research industry. "Because we are modest in our objective, and never give a certainty to launch new products. We create a conviction from market analysis, and add many quantitative figures."

Although differences will remain, Bakas feels bridges can be built. "Trend-watchers can feed researchers by pointing them in the direction of issues, by making connections, or by teaching researchers to think more out of the box. Trend-watchers can liven up researchers and put some bling into them." ■

All major companies, from Google to MSN, are working on it. Fashion-wise, jeans are evergreens but they will always produce new forms. As for the media, Big Brother may be over - and it was a great earner - but the search for new superstars will go on. People simply need them."

Marc Sasserath and Christiane Wenhart, Publicis Sasserath Brand Consultancy: "We see four key developments that redefine the role of communication and marketing:

1. The omniscient mobile: people will become even more dependent on mobile communication devices.
2. Blurring age groups: age is no longer a distinguishing target group characteristic.
3. Opinion surfing: traditional sources for opinion forming are

replaced by smart, credible online communities.

4. Mobile roots: in this era of mobility, modern communication and cheap transportation, the social cruising radius of people will become wider and wider."

Adjiedj Bakas, Dexter: "Thanks to globalisation, talented people that used to emigrate, will now stay home and participate in the three billion strong global labour market. There will be part-time migration limited to a few years at most. Full-time migration will be restricted to the less educated classes, like the Africans who are currently invading ageing Europe. Countries with a strong social security system will attract the lowest quality immigrants. There, we'll see increased ethnic tension and the

departure of highly educated young locals, who don't want to pay for the masses of old-age pensioners and poor black immigrants."

Richard Watson, What's Next: "Anxiety is a trend, caused by wars, terrorism and global pandemics. Post 9/11 the feeling was probably fearful but this has now settled down to anxiety. Trust in institutions like government or the police has all but evaporated, and the speed of change, together with technology that disempowers, has left people yearning for the past. This insecurity is to some extent generational, but there is a general feeling of powerlessness. This in turn is fuelling everything from an interest in nostalgia to the growth in narcissism, localisation and tribalism."

