

Visionary change is a very disciplined business

At ESOMAR's, 70th anniversary, World Congress from 10-13 September in Amsterdam www.esomar.org/congress we will be presenting a paper on transformational change in the financial services industry, entitled ...

Are you insured, Scarlett? 'I can't think about that right now... I'll think about that tomorrow'. How MetLife imagined a new future for the insurance industry... and is delivering it today

In the run up to this presentation we will be exploring some of the themes touched on in the paper with a weekly(ish) blog post. We will also provide a link to the paper and presentation at the end of the Congress.

In the first four blogs of this series we explored some of the issues that will be playing out over the next few years when it comes to the world of work and in society more generally. In this fifth blog entitled ... 'Visionary change is a very disciplined business', we examine how organisations may respond to some of these challenges, and the role of insight and foresight in this transformation.

We all know (don't we?) that Steve Jobs famously eschewed market research, preferring instead to rely on his intuition on the basis that, *"a lot of times, people don't know what they want until you show it to them."* In a mid-eighties Playboy interview he said: *"We built [the Mac] for ourselves. We were the group of people who were going to judge whether it was great or not. We weren't going to go out and do market research"* and in response to a question about what market research supported the Macintosh launch ... *"did Alexander Graham Bell do any market research before he invented the phone?"*

"Some people say, 'Give customers what they want.' But that's not my approach. Our job is to figure out what they're going to want before they do. I think Henry Ford once said, 'If I'd asked customers what they wanted, they would have told me, "A faster horse!"' People don't know what they want until you show it to them. That's why I never rely on market research. Our task is to read things that are not yet on the page."

Similarly Anita Roddick (running a very different business although perhaps sharing much of the Jobs ethos on life) advised that *"Running a company on market research is like driving while looking in the rear-view mirror [...] you can't change the world from the rear view mirror."*

While too much has been read into both of these positions – in all probability neither was really 'against' market

"The future belongs to those who prepare for it"

Ralph Waldo Emerson

research, but rather against bad or ill-conceived market research and/or research that, as in the drunk and lamppost, was more for support than illumination. This distinction leads us to the contemporary discipline of 'insight' and from there to the more powerful discipline of 'foresight' ... *figuring out what consumers are going to want before they do and reading things that are not yet on the page.*

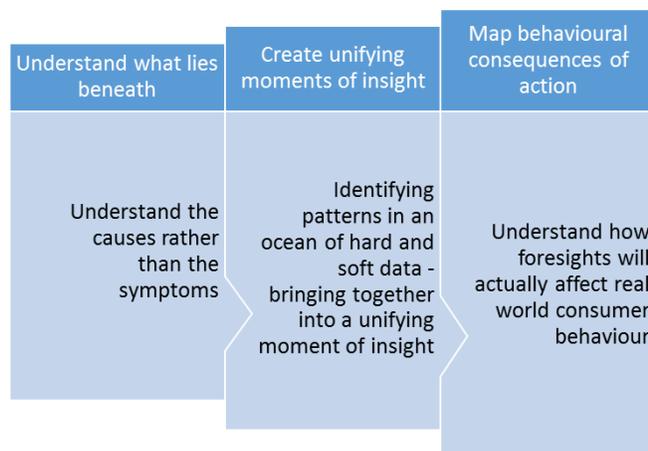
But is systematized foresight really possible? Can we really structure foresight as a discipline? Does visionary change happen instead by a creative ‘leap-in-the-dark’ – many of which are bound to fail but the strongest succeed, and in a Darwinian sense move us all forward. When a global organization, especially a financial services company that has historically pushed product through its sales channels without much of a nod to what the customer actually wants or needs, embarks on the journey of transformational change, does it rely on ‘gut instinct’ or does it bring the discipline of actionable ‘strategic foresight’ into the c-suite? And what do we mean by ‘strategic foresight’?

Here a definition is probably in order. By ‘strategic foresight’ we mean building business advantage with an informed and credible perspective on people's future wants, needs or beliefs, resulting from synergies amongst trends that have a practical application (not our definition). For insight professionals (or maybe ‘foresight professionals’) the new implied skill set includes seeing the big picture, joining up the evidence, the ability to read market signals and offering immediate advice based on what we currently know or can deduce. They will become the organisation’s ‘panorama thinkers’

Visionary transformation is rarely, if ever, the result of a damascene conversion. Paradoxically, creativity or ‘visionary change’ is a very disciplined business. It is one thing to recognise the need for radical change in the ways and means that we provide financial security and protection for customers in a volatile and uncertain world, but it is another to know how to proactively read and respond to these trends. In reality it requires a combination of senior level commitment coupled with in-depth strategic foresights, observing key critical strategic trends that affect the customer experience and translating this into concrete forward looking action

A panorama thinker ‘joins the dots’ ... building a holistic view of the world – scanning the data landscape, monitoring a broad range of ‘sensors in the ground’, allowing them to immediately see the significance of critical trends and developments, spotting the fundamental changes attitudes, needs, desires, aspirations and behavior and articulating the implications and opportunities for the business.

With the right ‘sensors in the ground’ and monitoring the flow of information from a broad set of sources – the panorama thinker can ladder up from specific point in time observations to early identification of key trends, which can be



The Strategic Foresight Engine

grouped into overarching strategic themes. The ability to identify the business implications, impact and opportunity inherent in these themes is 'strategic foresight'.

The end goal for a foresight professional is to develop a holistic framework, built on strategic *data-rich thinking*, which pulls together what is known with what can be deduced, identifies the implications of this knowledge and frames choices for the decision maker.

We will outline more of the approach we took to create MetLife's strategic foresight engine, and the actions that resulted, in the congress paper – available in September.

