

Future consumer trends – from surviving to thriving

The world needs creativity and imagination if the human race is to survive, argues **Cheryl Swanson**, Toniq

I AM NOT a futurist but rather a brand strategist, which is an important distinction for the ‘surviving to thriving’ story I will explore here.

We look at trends over a five- to ten-year time horizon, factoring in the major cultural shifts that will influence lifestyles in the next decade and onwards. Key areas of study include institutional domains like government, religion, healthcare and business, and lifestyle domains like media, architecture, fashion, technology, entertainment, and design, that will enable clients to incorporate trend insights to optimise their brand performance as society evolves.

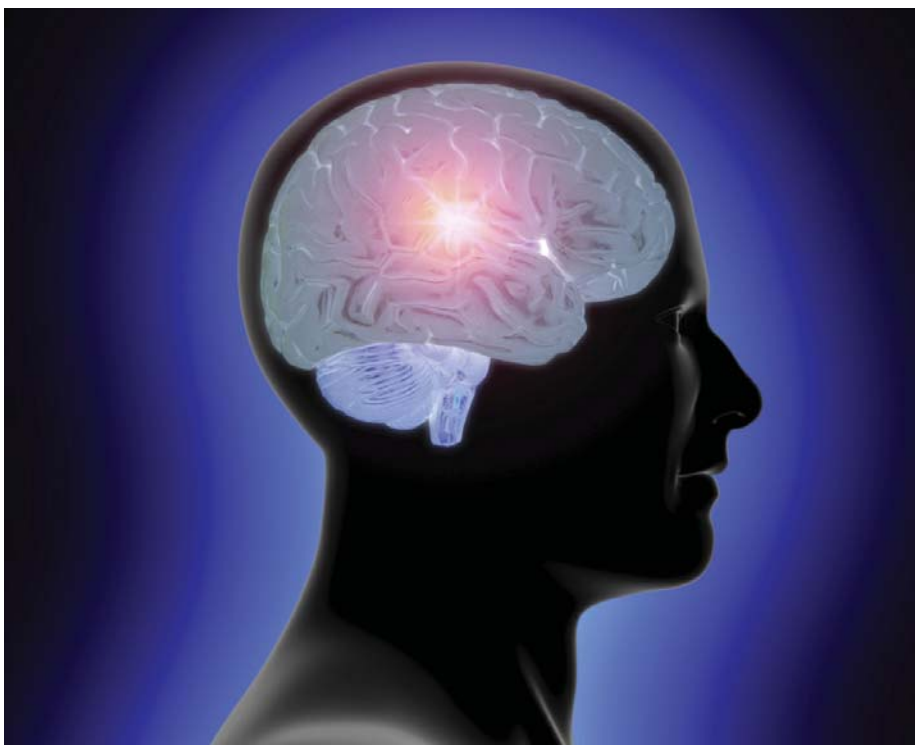
The ‘present’ doesn’t always unfold as intended, in a neat, ‘linear’ progression. And, often, increased knowledge transforms perceptions, breaking old paradigms and ushering in radically new eras. A vivid example of a ‘present moment’ unfolding in a non-linear progression was John F. Kennedy’s emboldening message to Congress in 1961 that led to the ‘space age’ of the 1960s, which laid the foundation for one of the more dramatic shifts of the last century and created a foundation for lifestyles during the past decade.

The fast-technology shift

The space race led to a cultural shift we started tracking in 1998. In ten short years, fast technology has radically changed the way we connect with our fellow humans, moving from 3D, ‘real world’ connections to a plethora of 2D, virtual experiences.

Technological progress is out-running our innate ability to adapt, demanding that we learn new skills, develop new coping techniques and establish new ways of being. We’ve worked very hard to keep up. We have adapted by learning how to hyper-task, to vigorously work our ‘to-do’ lists; even 20-year-olds write things down so they don’t forget them five minutes later.

Our brains have literally been overloaded. So quickly and collectively ramping up to live at the speed of technology has had serious repercussions.



Imagination liberates our minds, our creativity, our optimism, and differentiates us from all other species

Some 80% of what we learn about the world enters through our eyes – and to cope we edit out 85% of incoming stimuli. So if brand messages are not clear, symbolic and compelling, they will be edited out for the sake of survival.

We’ve given up sleep in our drive to keep up with daily demands. Two-thirds of us have serious sleep issues: no surprise that one of the top-selling drug categories is sleep aids ... like Ambien and Lunesta. Sleep has become the new luxury, as three out of four Americans believe it is more important than exercise and a good pillow is nine times more important than a sleep partner.

Crunch Fitness offers guided meditation classes that teach how to fall asleep with ultimate relaxation, and sells appropriate gear: mats, pillows, and blankets. Mid- to high-end hotels have a bed obsession; the sleep concierge at the Benjamin, in NYC, offers a choice of 12 pillows, 400-thread-count sheets and a bed with a money-back guarantee if you don’t sleep as well as you do at home.

The quest for happiness

As we live at an increasingly fast pace, feeling like work automatons at the end of each day, we yearn for happiness. Nigel French, the well-known fashion forecaster from the 1980s and 1990s, said trends often arise from voids in the culture. Things that we perceive may become extinct are what we yearn for, so we celebrate penguins, polar bears, bees and, now, happiness. The most popular course last year at Harvard was the ‘Happiness Class’, about the psychology of well-being; and the University of Erasmus (Rotterdam) publishes the *Journal of Happiness Studies*. A yearning for happiness has also accelerated the growth of anti-depression medications like Prozac.

In 100 years everything has changed. Then, 80% of our jobs were outside, in the fields. Today, 80% of our jobs are inside ...

Just 50 years ago, one in five Americans lived on farms; today it’s one in 100.

The agrarian to industrial to information revolutions have happened so fast that @ has become the symbol of early



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21st century technology. We have survived and succeeded in the information age, but we've spent most of our time trying to catch up. Now we need to find ways to reconnect to our humanity as we usher in the 'Imaginational Era'.

Imagination liberates our minds, our creativity, our optimism, and differentiates us from all other species. And it's re-emerging after a fast, tumultuous and transitional era marked by a limited collective vision and leaders who no longer embolden us to 'go beyond'.

Despite the legislated disregard for the arts and sciences demonstrated by cutbacks to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), our imaginations are fuelled by new visionaries in the arts and sciences. Our fast lives are forcing us to redefine our personal and collective tempos, as we embrace spontaneity, creativity and daydreaming, as an antidote to technology. In short, fantasy is our new creative fuel.

By managing the technology that ruled the past ten years, we are beginning to allow our imaginations to fuel the next ten. My teen niece, a paragon of one-handed, no-looking texting in 2006, was not texting in the summer of 2007 because now she'd rather talk to her friends or actually see them in person.

Technology is not going away, but we are starting to assert control over it to begin to thrive. We see signs in books like Tim Ferris's *The 4-Hour Workweek*, whose thesis is, delegate 'informational' tasks and control technology usage in order not to be overrun by work, so you can devote more time to what you imagine.

Fantasy, the new creative fuel

The last decade has seen fantasy and medievalism emerge in gaming and entertainment (for example, Harry Potter). These territories subliminally reconnect us with our primal stories, where good and evil are clearly drawn and wonder and imagination are central themes. These vocabularies are now being leveraged to target adults by leading advertisers like Disney, which commissioned Annie Liebowitz to photograph Scarlett

Johansson as Cinderella, David Beckham as Prince Charming, Beyonce Knowles as Alice, and Oliver Platt as the Mad Hatter. And fantasy reigns in campaigns selling the 'magic' of premium fashion and cosmetic brands such as Dolce&Gabbana, Vera Wang and Louis Vuitton.

Despite the imbalance in spending on art versus war in the US, artists at the fringes of the culture are creating a narrative of rejuvenation, renewal and thriving that we are collectively starting to hear. We all want to be asked, to be emboldened to do something beyond our own lives, for country and planet. Artists are starting to ask us; we're starting to listen.

Alyce Santoro, one of the Enviro Artists, provokes questions, creatively and aesthetically creating change. Her revolutionary 'Sonic Fabric', for which she reclaims recorded cassette tapes to create beautiful fabrics, clothes and accessories, is quintessentially human. When a tape head or Walkman is run across the fabric, the sounds of humanity can be heard, creating an encapsulation of human experience. And there are many other examples.

The impressive trash sculptures of Steven Siegel build on the rich tradition of using garbage and found objects to create art. Large boulders of compressed cans and plastic bottles, and multilayered newspaper ridges call attention to the abundant source material, yet stand on their own as sculptural forms in the landscape. Rather than technology flattening our senses, we're more confident in our mastery and are using technology to ignite our creativity.

Such works push us not only to reconnect with the best of our humanity but to care about our planet in ways that are interesting, compelling, even fun.

Performance art, once the province of the marginal fringe, has moved centre stage. This year's Performa 07 in NYC was packed with celebrities and regular people whose hunger for change brought them to watch two dozen hula hoopers do a synchronised routine for an hour on rooftops in Chinatown.

Lever House commissioned Damien Hirst to create a thought-provoking

installation in homage to modern artists, sited in a glass lobby where it can be seen 24/7. The goal was to celebrate art and reinforce the building's stature as a cultural landmark.

Meanwhile, Le Meridien is repositioning as a lifestyle brand focused on art and design. Each hotel will have a cultural concierge, who will provide cards with information about local cultural events. Their new key cards, designed by artists from around the world, are considered collectible. The hotels will also host art exhibits and lectures so 'when a person leaves the hotel, they have a feeling that their life has been enhanced and grown'.

Science for fun and profit

At the same time, respect for science and a need for discovery is burgeoning, again led by the private sector, which will fully flower in the next decade, allowing us to thrive and to sustain life long into the future. Those kids who saw the moon landing and dreamed of a life in space are now the ones getting us back into space for fun and profit, but also to discover ways to mine resources – like water – needed to sustain human life. Tickets start at \$200,000 for Virgin Galactic's sub-orbital space flights, including two days' training at the National Training and Aerospace Research Center (NASTAR).

A three-day vacation onboard the outer-space Galactic Suite hotel is expected to

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cost US\$4.15 million, which includes a round trip in a space shuttle and an 18-week training programme (space camp) on a Caribbean island.

Remember the Nigel French comment that we celebrate what is becoming scarce. For example, while only 1% of water on earth is used for human use, we already face serious shortages. A harbinger of our need to explore new sources of water, including outer space, may be seen in the American Museum of Natural History's current exhibition, 'Water, H₂O=Life'. Water brands might heed this in their planning; I can imagine an Aquafina fleet of rockets dedicated to off-world water mining.

Interest in science is rapidly going mainstream. Science cafés and pubs like Café Scientifique are gaining momentum internationally, while TV channels like Discovery, National Geographic and the Science Channel are experiencing record ratings for programmes about scientific developments and space exploration.

Most importantly, private foundations like the X Prize Foundation, started by engineer Peter Diamandis and funded by Paul Allen, offer multi-million-dollar prizes for quests to end global warming, cure diseases, develop a car that gets 100 miles per gallon; real prizes that break

barriers in human health, education, unleashing 'entrepreneurship in the public interest', according to former President Clinton.

Leading brands are jumping on the bandwagon. 'Math and science are everywhere' is the theme of an ExxonMobil campaign that premiered during the April 2007 Masters golf tournament. One commercial features golfer Phil Mickelson while a voice-over describes work he and Exxon Mobil are doing to support math and science education. In the other commercials, a series of images is tied to a voice-over describing the importance of maths and science in meeting current technological challenges, complete with superimposed equations making the point that, indeed, maths and science are crucial to our humanity (and survival).

Recalibrated rhythms

We, as individuals, need to recalibrate our collective rhythms to reconnect with our inherent human-ness so that we can thrive in the next decade and beyond. To do this, our relationship with technology must evolve, as we put parameters on addictive usage and begin to use it to optimise our lives and liberate our creativity, rather than destructively 'live fast'.

'We need to think beyond our laptops, pods and palms, to literally get our heads out of our hands and think beyond our daily lives'

Professionally, we need to transition our work cultures from 'surviving to thriving' by insisting, without exception, that we take time to be human. For example, IBM now urges its employees to use their full vacation time, and does not keep track of who takes how much time or when.

We need to think beyond our laptops, pods and palms, to literally get our heads out of our hands and think beyond our daily lives. We must not fear the absurd and we no longer have the luxury to fear failure. The artist MC Escher noted, 'Only those who attempt the absurd will achieve the impossible.'

Culturally we need to embrace our inherent aesthetic sensibilities, whether music, dance, painting or design, in a branding context. This means design is central because through media symbolism we realise our aspirations, wishes and desires. Art and design become our dreams come to life, allowing us to reconnect with the person inside who imagines, creates, explores, envisions – envisions things like planes that orbit the Earth, fabrics that encapsulate the sounds of human experience and discoveries of resources in places on-world and off.

It is imperative that we use our imaginations to steward the planet, its creatures and ourselves forward responsibly, boldly and with passion.

I know these are things to think about deeply and to plan for accordingly. Our global future is at stake. ■



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