

Trend

— Qualified vision

It is impossible to look into the future with certainty. Nevertheless, a company like Audi has to plan within lengthy timeframes and to identify and act upon developments at an early stage. The route that Audi takes to achieve this is as new as it is unconventional – within the scope of studies on the future and new concepts, its market and trend researchers seek out selected individuals as discussion partners on specific topics. These individuals have a special instinct for change and, as “Trend Receivers”, provide the company with well-informed opinion and guidance.

— u u u Receivers



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Prof. Dr. Wolfgang Ullrich

Professor for Art Research and Media Philosophy at the Karlsruhe University of Arts and Design and author of many publications on the history and critique of art as a concept, contemporary visual culture and wealth phenomena, including *Gotta Have It. How Does Consumer Culture Work?*



Munich

Rebecca Swift

Photographic consultant; university lecturer; previously 16 years with Getty Images responsible for Creative Planning.



London

Chief Branding and Marketing Officer for the Kuoni Group, a global tourism company based in Switzerland; previously CMO of the Design Hotel Group.



SANDOZ KETTERER Ltd is a renowned designer of jewelry and watches that works with a number of luxury brands. Antoine Sandoz was previously responsible for jewelry design at Gucci in London; Gilles Ketterer was Chief Designer for watch brand Omega.

Let's say you are looking for the right school for your child. To whom do you go for advice? For sure, there are scientific studies that explain the advantages and disadvantages of different types of school, but they often end up being very abstract. It would be far more reasonable to ask friends and acquaintances with children, who know different schools from direct experience. You turn, therefore, to people that have specific knowledge and whose opinion you trust.

Qualified information and opinion on matters relating to the present time or the near future are relatively easy to come by. As soon as the perspective needs to extend farther into the future, it all gets a lot more complicated. "Predictions are very difficult, especially when it's about the future," is a familiar quote attributed to Danish physicist Niels Bohr. Or, to put it another way, there is no such thing as certainty when it comes to knowledge about the future.

A large industrial company, however, lives in the distant future. There is a constant stream of decisions to be taken that will impact the next decade or more, and on whose accuracy not only a great deal of money, but also jobs are dependent. At a car manufacturer like Audi, the product development process from the decision on a new concept to market launch takes from five to seven years, after which the vehicle normally remains in production for around seven years. Thus, models that are dreamed up and developed in 2013 must still be attractive in 2025.

But how are lifestyles, mobility and ownership behavior changing? And what technologies will gain a foothold and how quickly? Although it is ultimately up to the good judgment and decision-making qualities of those responsible within the company, it is important that the decisions are based on well-founded opinion and evaluation. As a consequence, companies like Audi must also seek out advice. And from people with a sound feel for those needs that will endure and those new ones that will emerge, and for which products and services will stand a good chance of success in a few years time.

This is where conventional market research reaches its limitations in some areas, despite being exceptionally well-equipped to address a wide range of topics. Most "normal" representative customers see certain new ideas and concepts too much with the mindset and experiences of the year 2013. The world of 2018 or even 2025 remains, in the true sense of the word, unimaginable.

But life has changed enormously, especially in the last one-and-a-half decades. Just before the turn of the new century, very few would have been able to envisage how much and how quickly mobile communication would influence the world, and how intensively life would be impacted by social networks. The rapid rise in the agenda of "sustainability" is something else that was recognizable to very few back then.

The trend and market research team at Audi has therefore developed its own, farther-reaching system that places less trust in the hands of well-known "trend gurus" that fill the pages of books. It has opted instead to weave a network of "friends" in the broadest sense of the word – people who, in the course of their private and professional lives, have developed a particularly finely tuned instinct for new things and thus possess a "qualified vision". Dr. Rupert Hofmann calls them "Trend Receivers". He developed the issue at AUDI AG as part of his post-graduate thesis and now manages Trend Receiver studies on a number of topics.

For Dr. Hofmann, "agents for the new" are those individuals that bring new things into the world. He has investigated a number of different existing topics on matters new and he divides them into three groups: the "inventors", i.e. the creative individuals who think up, devise and design new things, whereby these new things are usually a surprising combination of existing things. "There were mountains and there were bikes. And somewhere along the line mountain bikes appeared." Hofmann calls the second group "multipliers", who are the opinion leaders or early adopters – like the city people who were the very first to start riding mountain bikes; or those fans who camp out overnight in front of the Apple Store to be among the very first to get their hands on the latest iPad.

Trend

Dr. Rupert Hofmann
Ingolstadt

Project Leader, Trend Receiver Studies; he developed the concept at Audi as part of his doctorate work.



Receivers



NIDO - the red thread
Designer: Eva Marguerre

Hamburg designer Eva Marguerre experiments with plastics and textiles, craftsmanship and hi-tech. It leads to design objects of fragile beauty that are nevertheless extremely robust and enduring.

The third group is the "trend observers" – which also incorporates the Trend Receivers selected for specific topics. "These individuals have special antenna and can recognize even very weak signals of change at a very early stage, and can assess their development potential in a highly differentiated and finely honed manner. Trend Receivers possess an exceptional combination of openness and experience. They combine the customer perspective with the capability to abstract from themselves. They have enormous curiosity and heterogeneity and possess the necessary selection ability to pull out what is relevant from the maelstrom of new information and ideas. These are usually what you might call lay trend researchers, i.e. people who observe within their respective environments what drives people and what is changing, without actually being contracted or tasked to do so."

For the Trend Receivers sought by Audi, observation must be a fundamental and instinctive driver. Rebecca Swift in London is one example – as Creative Director for Getty Images, the world's largest image agency, she spent many years planning the style of the photography commissioned and thus shaped the imagery of the future. She now works as a consultant and university lecturer. "She has a finely tuned sense of developments in image aesthetics," says Rupert Hofmann.

Remo Masala, Chief Branding and Marketing Officer for Swiss tourism group Kuoni, is someone that Hofmann considers the perfect Trend Receiver. "He is very direct and possesses an exceptional combination of aesthetic and commercial instinct and strategic expertise. He travels around the world a great deal, and can think his way into emerging markets and new products and services in a way that is reflected, as well as open and creative." Then there is Prof. Dr. Wolfgang Ullrich, who teaches Art Research and Media Philosophy at the Karlsruhe University of Arts and Design. Hofmann regards him as a leading and independent thinker with an enormous understanding of human nature, who can place change with a great deal of sensitivity within its cultural and historical context and combine the most diverse issues with virtuosity.

Rupert Hofmann's list of Trend Receivers now numbers in high double digits, and is drawn from a wide array of cultural circles and fields of expertise – and it continues to grow. How does he find these names, how does he make contact? "It works with search profiles tailor-made for the respective issue and through the appropriate networks." When the topic is a good fit, it is simply a matter of asking. Refusals are rare, despite the fact that scheduling problems are inevitable in this particular field. But the sheer enjoyment of dialogue on the future is a great facilitator.

The issues tackled by Audi's Trend Receiver studies are wide and varied. Alongside discussions on brand new vehicle concepts, the focus can be on a future mobility concept or a retail concept for looking after premium customers. It might even concern the firming up of an apparently "fuzzy" subject, like the meaning of the idea of lightness for future vehicles. The interviews are structured specifically to suit; a classic questionnaire would not work. The discussion guidelines are intentionally kept loose and open.

"Audi is very interested in this kind of external input," says Rupert Hofmann. "It is simply part of our open corporate culture – and surely also an important part of our innovative power." It's good to have friends on your side with an uncluttered view and able to offer qualified advice.