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.
Prof. Dr. Wolfgang Ullrich

Professor for Art Research and Media Philosophy at the Karlsruhe University of Arts and Design. His work focuses on the history and critique of art as a concept, contemporary visual culture, and wealthy phenomena, including the book "Gotta Have It. How Does Consumer Culture Work?"

Rebecca Swift

Remo Masala

Antoine Sandoz and Gilles Ketterer

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.

Zurich

Encounter Audi Brand

London
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, it all gets a lot more complicated. “Predictions are very difficult, especially when it’s about the future.”

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 an 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 of 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 surprisingly combination of existing things.

“...There were mountains and there were bikes. And somewhere along the line mountain bikes appeared.” Hofmann calls the second group the “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.

But for someone to be recognized as a “Trend Receiver,” it 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 Masaia, 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 Fribourg 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 and Media Philosophy within its cultural and historical context and combine the most diverse issues with virtuosity.

Rupert Hofmann’s list of Trend Receivers now numbers in the 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. Accordingly on board 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 unclouded view and able to offer qualified advice.