

# Trend-based design research

INVESTIGACIÓN DE DISEÑO BASADA  
 EN EL SEGUIMIENTO DE TENDENCIAS

PESQUISA DE DESIGN  
 BASEADA EM TENDÊNCIAS

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**Recibido:** 25 de marzo de 2017

**Aprobado:** 28 de julio de 2017

<https://doi.org/10.15446/bitacora.v27n4Esp.63543>

## Abstract

This paper presents the main principles of the trend-based design research process as a tool for design innovation. It is based on the methods created, developed and implemented by the author throughout 20 years of applied professional, real-world experience and academic practice. It revolves around utilizing trend research as a tool rather than as an end, to identify market directions and potential design opportunities, based on tangible manifestations of consumer behavior.

**Key words:** strategic design, trend-based strategy, design research.

## Resumen

Este artículo presenta los principios del proceso de investigación de diseño basado en el seguimiento de tendencias como una herramienta para la innovación del diseño. Se basa en los métodos creados, desarrollados e implementados por la autora a lo largo de veinte años de experiencia aplicada en el mundo real y en la práctica académica. Se trata de utilizar la investigación de tendencias como una herramienta más que como un fin para identificar las direcciones del mercado y las oportunidades potenciales de diseño basadas en las manifestaciones tangibles del comportamiento del consumidor.

**Palabras claves:** diseño estratégico, estrategia de tendencias, investigación de diseño.

## Resumo

Este artigo apresenta os princípios básicos do processo de pesquisa em desenho baseado no seguimento de tendências como ferramenta de inovação em desenho. Isto é baseado nos métodos criados, desenvolvidos e implementados pela autora ao longo de vinte anos de experiência no mundo real e na prática acadêmica. Consiste em utilizar a pesquisa sobre as tendências como uma ferramenta, além de um fim, para identificar as direções do mercado e as possíveis oportunidades de desenho, com base em manifestações tangíveis do comportamento do consumidor.

**Palavras chave:** design estratégico, estratégia de tendências, pesquisa de design.

## 1. What is trend-based design research?

While the trend-based design research process presented in this paper could fall under the broader umbrella of a design thinking practice due to its visual, graphic and interactive nature (Brown, 2008), it is nonetheless a stand-alone process, focused on researching, analyzing and articulating emerging trends, relevant to different industries and topics in order to identify and anticipate new design and business opportunities for product innovation.

## 2. Why is trend-based design research important?

Working with trends –from research to definition to articulation– is a key process to understand the whats and the whys of past, current and future user and consumer behavior. Far from the traditional idea that the work around trends is a purely intuitive process left to visionary gurus, the trend-based design research process creates a consistent, verifiable and reliable framework for design innovation. While is true that in order to make the analysis and articulation of trends more effective, it is helpful to have a professional and academic background on general qualitative and quantitative research methodologies, it is important to note that trend-based design research can also be embraced and practiced by any individual with an innate disposition for creative enquiry.

## 3. The question

The process normally begins with a question which in commercial contexts comes from the client or private sector and within academic contexts –such as the Design Insights class I taught at ACCD, Art Center College of Design– is formulated together with the students in order to support their personal and professional interest and to ensure the best possible academic learning outcome.

### 3.1 Private sector

When the question comes from the client or the private sector, for the most part, the interest lays on increasing profitability through the launch of an innovative product or service that is in line with emerging shifts in consumer behavior and market trends. Some of the most common enquiries from tech-focused companies revolve around aspects like what are the most recent shifts in socio-cultural, technological and economic trends, and what is their prognosis or forecast within a specific market or region of the world. For instance, the fast growth of the middle class in important emerging markets of the world or in the countries commonly known as BRICS<sup>1</sup> has been and will continue to be a topic of great interest and importance for global multi-national companies looking to expand and localize their business and product offering. With these questions always comes the additional enquiry of how to tackle these trends from a design perspective within the framework of specific product categories and consumer segmentations. This means that it is not enough to research and list relevant industry-related trends, but also and most importantly, it is key to articulate the meaning and implication of the trends into a concrete, actionable and implementable way.

Generally speaking, companies that are leaders, or those which consistently create disruptive and innovative products and services while opening up new markets, have a different approach to product creation and implementation than companies that are followers, or those which tend to capitalize on the already existing products, services or established markets. Leading companies tend to have visionary thinking supported by large capital investments in research and development, followed by innovative product design strategies, which end up influencing

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<sup>1</sup> BRICS –Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa– is a term originally coined by Jim O'Neill (2001) in a research paper for Goldman Sachs's Global Economics series examining the relationship between the leading economies and new emerging market economies.

the entire marketplace and changing the dynamics of business. They can be large global corporations as well as small enterprises or start-ups and have an important role in creating and defining new trends, sometimes intentionally and sometimes simply as a consequence of their innovative approach. On the other hand, companies that are followers tend to have a wait-and-see approach to product creation in order to observe first which innovations are already being successful and especially which trends are becoming popular and mainstream to follow them. In general, there is no right or wrong approach to working with trends – whether taking a leading or a following approach – as long as this one is clear for the company so that it can be further translated into concrete product strategies.

### 3.2 Academic sector

When the question is formulated together with the students in academic contexts, the topic of research is chosen with clear emphasis on recent or current socio-cultural, economic, environmental or technological events, especially those expected to have great influence in the marketplace within the next two to five years. Here, the formulation of the question should not only be a topic of interest for the student, but also an area of study with some initial manifestations in the marketplace. Within the academic realm, there is room for slightly more creative and inventive frameworks, since the final articulation of the trend does not necessarily need to be implemented with the constraints of a real marketplace.

## 4. The methods

### 4.1 The research

Once the research framework has been created based on the initial question as explained above, the next step is to begin the research process. For trend-based design research this process is done mostly through qualitative processes although, in some cases, information obtained through quantitative methods such as statistical data or big data can be of great value to ensure proper fact checking. The main goal of this process is to gather as many relevant market manifestations examples as possible in order to support trend validation. In fact, a trend without concrete and systemic repetition of market examples, supported by actual retrievable data can't always be considered a trend, after all, they are about traceable patterns and not isolated events.

Some of the qualitative research methodologies include observation, market visits, consumer interviews and different forms of visual documentation.<sup>2</sup> Besides the traditional quantitative research methods, nowadays there is a great advantage and opportunity for research and compilation of information offered by several digital social media platforms such as Pinterest, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, as well as different blogs and aggregator sites.

<sup>2</sup> A contemporary tool for developing your own qualitative methodologies during a research process is the *Method cards* (IDEO, 2003) with 51 methods and explanations on how to use them.

These tools, paired with an extensive and rigorous process of reading and scouting through trend subscriptions, articles, news, magazines, websites, blogs, books, among others, can help to systemically build a robust body of information.

It is important to note that information without a research structure or a guiding strategy principle does not necessarily lead to a trend. Therefore, it is key to create an organized framework from the beginning of the process, under theoretical groups of themes in a digital research document format. Here, all the bibliography and links should be included under initial and generally descriptive titles so that once the information starts building up under those umbrella topics, it is easier to see which themes are stronger and more relevant versus those that are weaker and perhaps less relevant, as they don't present as many concrete market manifestations.

There is another aspect of the trend-based design research process which, though it sounds slightly less scientific than the traditional approaches, is nonetheless at the core of it. It is called trained intuition, which is the result of years of deliberate professional practice in the field, combined with real-world experience in constantly monitoring trends, emerging shifts and consumer behaviors, to an extent that the practice becomes second nature. This is the kind of expertise that only comes through time and applied experience. Once one starts working in this field, it soon becomes evident that it is a captivating and never-ending area of design research, since trends are constantly evolving.

### 4.2 The format

The format in this process is considered part of the method. When doing trend-based design research it is often easy to diverge and expand limitless. Rigor must be applied in order to edit down the information into a concrete format or layout to aid communication and storytelling. Throughout many years I have been creating, improving and perfecting the format for the compilation and presentation of the trends. If the format is too long and complicated, it will hinder the quick comprehension and abstraction of its information. But if it is too short and vague, it will lack the rigor and support of real-world references. Therefore, the recommendation is to use a simple visual layout with short, concise and well-defined sections in order to push for true analysis and quality editing of the information. Using a maximum of one page per trend will optimize the efficiency and understanding of information, as well as provide functional practicality during the trend mapping stage, a process in which each page becomes a trend card.

In terms of content, first and most importantly is the creation of the trend title. Although this often happens at the very end of the formatting exercise, it is what sets the tone of the trend. The title must be short, descriptive and no longer than two or three words, since this is the most visible part of the trend card during the mapping exercise. Creating a trend title is often hard and time consuming because it should instantly and immediately communicate what the trend is about and at the same time immerse and engage the reader to dive deeper into the topic. In corporate contexts, where time is of the essence, the title of a

trend also works as an executive summary, hence the importance of its accuracy.

After the trend title come the key contextual questions, which are normally used to help ground and articulate the findings. By responding to these grounding questions, one can also ensure a short and concise format. The most basic contextual questions are: what is the definition of the trend? Who is participating in it? Where is it happening? Why is this important? And lastly, what can we anticipate will happen next? Answering these questions can point to the fact that perhaps we don't have enough information to support the trend and that we may need additional research. It can also point out that two or more trends can be too similar and could perhaps be merged into a single, more compelling one.

### 4.3 Timeline and examples

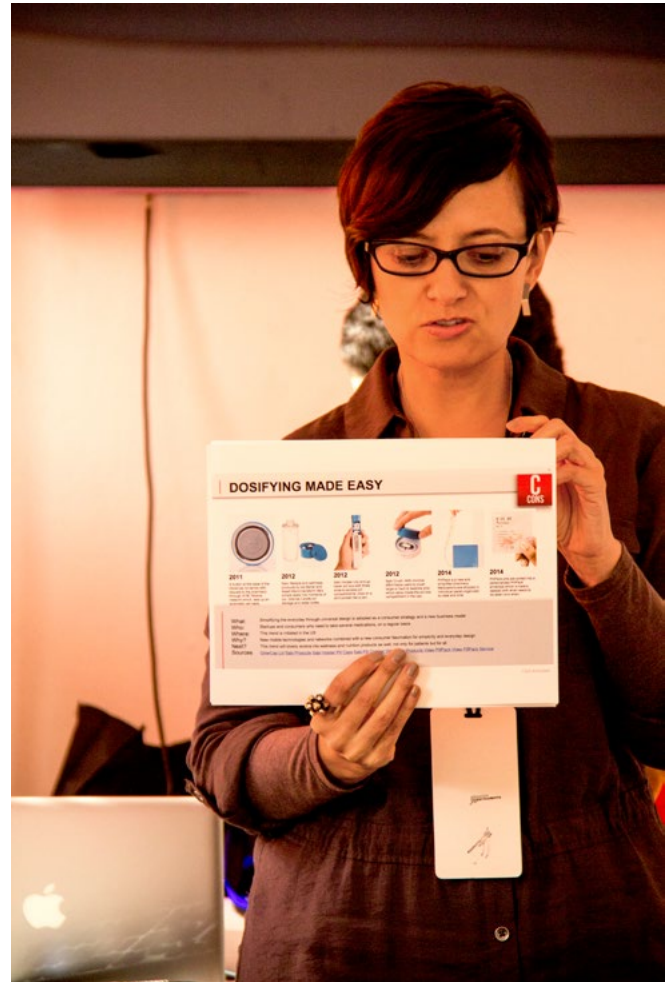
Since the process is carried on by designers and, for the most part, for designers, the creation of a visual time line with engaging images of each trend manifestation –usually from five to six– is key in order to make the content both compelling and aesthetically pleasing. The images are not only an important design feature, but they also help support the validity of the trend card content. An important aspect when creating a visual time line to support the trend is to choose examples that are not older than two or three years, the reason being that due to the fast pace of current times, trends tend to evolve very fast and therefore become outdated quite quickly. This presents both a challenge when it comes to keeping up and up to date with information, but also an opportunity for constant innovation.

In order to better curate the information within the trends cards before the mapping begins, it is recommended to start conducting the trend research already with a clear criteria, in other words, knowing what is the main question that needs to be answered, just as explained in the section titled “The question”. The identification of the topics of research can also be supported by creative brainstorming sessions about possible intersecting emerging topics that may have an important influence in the trends.

### 4.4 The mapping process

The mapping process is at the core of trend-based design research, a process I created and perfected throughout several hands-on trend-mapping exercises and workshops with both private sector clients and students during academic classes. In both cases, this is the process that engages people the most while creating a unique environment of participation and interaction, especially when the participants come from different professional backgrounds.

In terms of the process itself, the trend mapping ensures the cross pollination of ideas in a multi-industry, multi-trend context and, because every trend has been researched and created based on actual marketplace examples, the design and business opportunities identified through the process will automatically align with the current market context.



**Figure 1:** Liliana Becerra explaining the steps leading up to a trends-mapping workshop. Photo: Javier Alexander Lozano Brochero

The mapping is a converging process that filters relevant market influences from a broad, big picture level –involving technology advancements and emerging consumer behaviors– into a more focused level –involving specific aspects of product, such as design language, form, material, graphics and color design–.

Normally, the process initiates by laying onto a physical wall all the relevant trend cards, previously researched, created and curated, according to the topic area or the question that is being explored. The recommendation is to begin placing the broader trends to the left side of the wall and the most focused trends on the right side of the wall, in other words, to organize them from left to right from the macro to the micro level. The reasoning for this is that broader trends (macro level) tend to be the driver for more focused trends and in general tend to be more intangible and harder to measure and quantify. Since the ultimate goal of the trend mapping process is to identify potential design and business opportunities, it is better to derive them from the more tangible, more measurable trends (micro trends), since these are actually quantifiable and have visibly clear marketplace manifestations.



**Figure 2:** Workshop where participants dialog and explore trend connections leading to innovative opportunities.  
Photo: Javier Alexander Lozano Brochero

Once the trend cards are neatly organized on the wall, a process of physically connecting them with a visible connector begins – which could be a thread or masking tape–. The first step is to select one trend in order to initiate a group dialog about what it means for the topic being studied (academic) or for the product category being explored (private sector). Then, participants should choose another relevant trend that connects with the previous one and so on. Ideally, there should be a connection between at least one technology trend, one consumer trend and one design trend, from the macro to the micro level. The conversations, interactions and dialogs during this process –which should revolve around how the selected trends are related or connect with each other and to the topic of study– are fundamental to bring about different perspectives and ideas from the participants.

#### 4.5 The opportunities

The design and business opportunities identified at the end of the mapping process are at the core of the trend-based design research process. They can either be the result of the logical and natural connections that appear between trends, or they can also be the result of a random and looser selection of seemingly disconnecting trends. Often, with this last approach, surprisingly unexpected and unforeseen ideas and opportunities emerge. When working with multi-national corporations, it is rewardingly surprising to find new business and design opportunities as the result of totally unplanned trend connections that randomly happened during the mapping process, leading to disruptive market innovations.

The design and business opportunities should clearly be the result of the convergence of each of the previously connected trend cards and the group activity, hence the importance of the dialog and interaction between different stakeholders. They should articulate into concrete, applicable and actionable solutions for the specific market context or topic of study. To do this, it is recommended to give each of the opportunities a name, a short description and to make a quick visual sketch of how they would potentially work.

After the opportunities are drafted, and after sharing and selecting the most relevant ones for the selected project framework, usually there is a traditional process of sketching, concepting and prototyping of the new ideas, which is often lead by tactical teams through traditional methods of design development and implementation.

## 5. Feedback

After every trend-mapping workshop a survey is conducted in order to receive feedback from workshop participants as per what have been the main benefits of the process. Some of the most notorious comments include:

- The trend structure and the trend mapping process provide a very useful framework to manage, organize and use a huge amount of information, which otherwise would constitute only massive amounts of data.

- The process allows for linking design opportunities with core drivers relevant to the business, supported by concrete and current market examples.
- The process helps designers to challenge back project briefs through an informed process and by doing that find different/new core drivers and design opportunities.
- The process facilitates the grouping of trends into several different clusters, generating unique combinations and therefore truly innovative ideas.
- Looking at trends from a general category perspective helps foster the crosspollination of product solutions between different areas.


## 6. Conclusions of trend-based design research process

- Every industry is influenced by different set of trends and since all trends are intertwined, the process of research, rather than being a linear method, is something more comparable to a game of cards where each player or industry has a different hand of cards (trends) to play a successful match with his opponents (competitors).
- In some cases, the same trends, especially if they are global and broad enough, can represent the same concerns and opportunities for different industries. The execution of the trend however, can pose multiple approaches to design innovation. This implies that the same trend can be used for

multiple-context and industries over and over again, always leading to new and different opportunities.

- Is not enough to research and list important and relevant industry-related trends but it is key to articulate the meaning and implication of these trends, within a specific context and into a concrete, actionable and implementable way.

## 7. General facts about trends

- All trends are intertwined with no specific beginning or end.
- Trends can be forecasted but also backcasted.
- Trends are always shifting, merging and changing.
- Due to the fast pace of current times, trends tend to evolve faster than ever and therefore to become outdated very quickly.
- Trends can be considered trends only when a pattern of tangible manifestations can be identified and clearly followed through a time line.
- Once a trend is identified, it can be used to anticipate possible future incidences with new variations according to new contexts.
- Big picture level trends tend to be more intangible and harder to measure, while small picture level trends tend to be more tangible, actionable and measurable. 

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