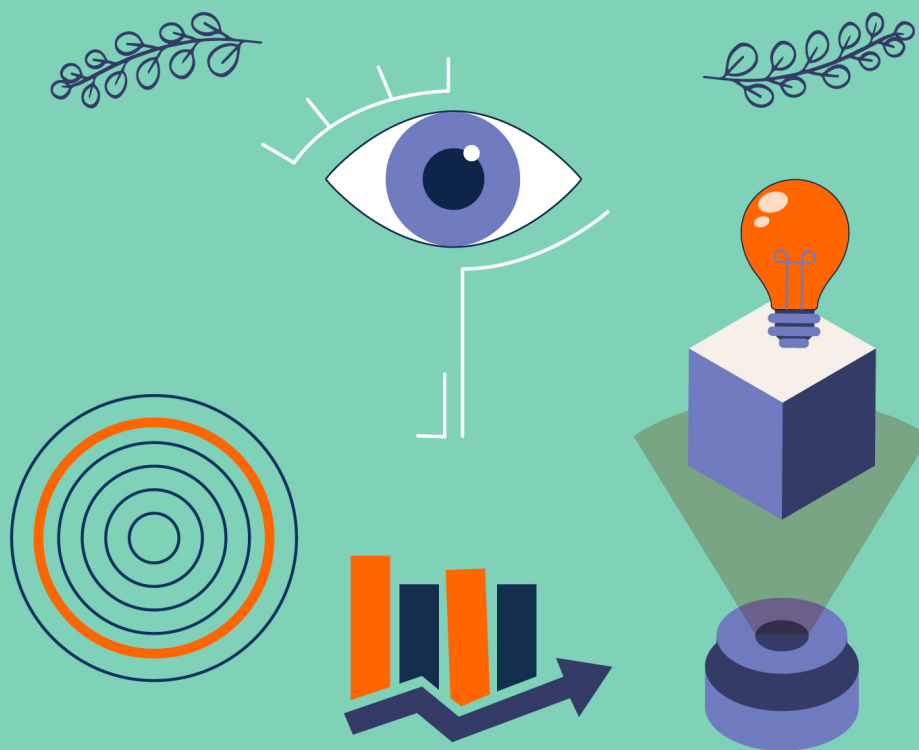


# SUMMARY

## NON-OBVIOUS

ROHIT BHARGAVA



# **Summary of Non-Obvious by Rohit Bhargava**

Written Nicolas Stewart

Learn to identify non-obvious market trends, and  
how to profit from them.

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# Introduction

“You can't understand the world better simply by reading about it as much as possible. You do so by being intentional about what you pay attention to in the first place. What if you could become a lifelong learner, curious about the world and able to see, understand, and expect things others miss? And what if, once you put all the pieces together, you could actually learn to predict the future. You can, and my ambitious aim is to teach you how to do it. I call my approach Non-Obvious Thinking, and it can change your life.”

One of the central elements of the marketing industry is to predict trends. It's not enough to understand what people want, you have to have an idea of what they're going to want in the future.

But to nobody's surprise, predicting the future isn't a simple task. What do you base predictions off of? Past trends? That might seem sensible, but how could past trends have predicted that in the 2010's teenagers would start purposefully wearing crocs, a shoe previously associated exclusively with the elderly?

A cursory glance at how people 50 years ago thought today would look tells us that whether you base it on past trends, or potential future technology, we've mostly been wrong when it comes to predicting the future.

The lesson here is that if you look at what potential trends seem obvious, you're likely going to be disappointed. Does this mean it's impossible to predict future trends?

Not at all. What it means is that we need to start looking at the non-obvious possibilities.

# Building a Haystack to Find a Needle

The phrase “like finding a needle in a haystack” refers to a search that is so difficult it seems nearly impossible. Identifying non-obvious trends is like that but worse, because in this case we don’t even know what haystack to start looking through.

Which means that in our search for non-obvious trends we must first begin by building a haystack. In this case the “hay” is marketing data. Finding polls and stories and information about whatever market you’re working in, and aggregating that information.

Once you have your proverbial haystack, start looking for patterns, common themes that stand out to you. Ask yourself why those things stand out to you and then expand your search based on your conclusions.

For instance you might have seen a news article about google trying to tailor search results for products that are priced similarly to previous products a user has bought. Elsewhere you may have noticed multiple companies adding price comparison features to their shopping apps. What’s the common theme you’re finding here? That people are spending more time comparing costs when they shop.

Now that you have a potential needle you go back through the information you’ve been searching and see if there are other examples of this theme, if there are enough examples you might just have a trend on your hands.

However that in and of itself isn’t necessarily useful. You also need to ask yourself whether this information is actionable, whether you have reason to believe it will have a noticeable market effect, and whether you can reasonably argue that the trend will be ongoing.

This is called the Haystack Method; gather information, define your “needle”, search for it, and if found, analyze the implications of it.

# Predicting Trends Requires Curiosity and Skepticism

The art of predicting and curating trends requires curiosity above all else. No one besides the intensely curious would ever bother looking for data just to try and understand people's buying habits.

Curiosity goes hand in hand with the creativity required to be a trend curator. The ability to have an idea of what information you should be looking for depends on intense creativity, and curiosity provides the patience and diligence needed to find what you're looking for.

Curiosity also allows you to follow wherever the flow of information leads you. You might not find what you initially set out to look for, but instead you might find something even more interesting that you decide to pursue instead.

However you also need a healthy dose of skepticism. Not every potential trend you find will turn out to be real, indeed most of them won't. You need to be able to question your own ideas and assumptions.

# Trend Curators Must Be Thorough and Thoughtful

To be a trend curator you also have to be thorough and thoughtful. Thorough in that you really need to put in the work in regards to your research, and thoughtful in that you need to genuinely consider your ideas.

You have to be capable of recognizing that perhaps you were too excited by an idea and pursued it despite it not truly being supported by the evidence, and then being ok with scrapping it and starting from scratch.

Creativity once again plays a vital role in regards to how you present your ideas and arguments to clients, or readers, or whomever. When arguing for a trend you believe is going to happen you must be elegant in your simplicity.

Brevity is the soul of wit, and concision is the soul persuasion. If you rely too much on industry jargon and drawn out explanations you risk losing people's interest, or risk them thinking you're bloviating. If you are too short and simplistic however you risk seeming like your ideas are ill-thought out.

When presenting the trends you've curated emphasize the creativity it required for you to reach your conclusions. Present them with an artful flair, not boring academic language. This is how you separate your work from the crowd and make it memorable.



# What To Do With Your Trends?

So you've identified non-obvious emerging trends, great, so what? Being aware of a trend is useless on its own, you have to find a way to use it.

An excellent use for trends you've identified is to find ways to combine them. The author calls this intersection thinking, finding the ways in which trends intersect and how those intersections could be used.

For example, a marketing company was hired to create an ad campaign to sell baby carrots, and so they found an intersection between the marketing trends of junk food companies, and the popularity of health foods and vegan diets. They build a campaign around the observation that baby carrots already featured a number of standard hallmarks of a junk food; they're bite sized, they're a bright neon color, they're crunchy, and they're dippable.

From this they designed the "Eat 'Em Like Junk Food" marketing campaign.

The author lists 4 fundamentals of fostering intersection thinking:

1. Focus on similarities.
2. Embrace serendipitous ideas.
3. Wander into the unfamiliar.
4. Be persuadable.

The second point, embrace serendipitous ideas, takes its cue from improvisational comedy techniques. A core concept within improv is "yes, and". What this means is that when someone is improvising a scene the other participants follow their lead and then expand upon it. If one improv partner starts the scene by saying "excuse me, are you the doctor?" you don't respond by saying "no", because then the scene doesn't go anywhere,

it just ends. Instead you respond with “yes” and then follow it up to expand the scene. You always answer “yes, and...”

Workshopping trend intersections involves similar logic. Don't just immediately shoot down someone's idea because you don't initially like it, first expand upon it, follow the flow of it and see where it leads to. These are the third and fourth elements of intersection thinking, be willing to change your mind, and be unafraid to explore new ideas.

## Examples of Non-Obvious Trends

The author then moves beyond the abstract and discusses several actual trends he predicts we will see in the near future.

One major trend he foresees is what he calls “Amplified Identity” which he defines as being the way in which we purposefully curate our online identities so as to control how we wish to appear to other people.

“As individualism rises globally, people are carefully cultivating how they are perceived both online and offline, chasing stardom, and making themselves vulnerable to criticism in the process. Social media may be giving us the one thing we need to shape our identities in a digital world: power over our stories.”

This trend can be used to create cottage industries based around helping people manage their identities. Fashion specialists, lifestyle coaches, and self-help gurus will all see an uptick in business.

The second trend he lists is “Ungendering”, the political views of the younger generation are leading companies to utilize more gender neutral terminology.

“Traditional gender divisions and labels are getting replaced with a more fluid understanding of gender identity, forcing a reevaluation of how we see employees, customers, brands and one another. Many people no longer consider gender to be a label determined at conception. Instead, it is increasingly accepted as a choice that we make for our current selves and maybe even evolve throughout our lifetime.

As the stereotypes of feminine and masculine ideals are supplanted, the traditional labels and roles once prescribed to our identities based on gender are no longer as meaningful.”

Companies wishing to take advantage of this should consider focusing on taking products that currently have exclusive marketing and making them more inclusive.

Another trend is what he calls “Revivalism”:

“Overwhelmed by technology and a sense that life is now too complex and shallow, people seek out simpler experiences that offer a sense of nostalgia and remind them of a more trustworthy time.”

This trend is based on observations such as the fact that printed book sales are higher than they have been in years, and are projected to continue growing moderately. Retro brands, artisan artforms, and boardgames will also see growing popularity. People are also becoming more interested in “downgraded” technology. Flip phones and other older styles of cell phones without smartphone capabilities have started to make a comeback, and many new “smart” technologies, from TV’s to tractors are being viewed with growing suspicion as the older technologies are noticeably more reliable, less likely to break, and easier to fix.

Companies wishing to take advantage of the revivalist trend should offer “classic modes” for their software and might consider documenting and sharing their company’s histories demonstrating their connection to older times and putting a human face to them.

Yet another trend is “Human Mode”

“Tired of technology that isolates us from one another, people seek out and place greater value on physical, authentic and ‘unperfected’ experiences designed with empathy and delivered by humans.”

With growing fears about automation, and the generally isolated and alienated feeling that modern methods of interaction have left consumers with, they have become increasingly interested in experiences rather than products. Innovations in entertainment such as the Escape Room demonstrate the desire by consumers to have group experiences that

involve direct interaction and cooperation with one another, and consumers desire more authentic human experiences and connections in terms of marketing.

Companies wishing to take advantage of this should avoid using sterile and academic sounding vocabulary in their marketing materials. Focus on a colloquial and casual style of communication. Focus less on perfection, even in mass produced products, instead emphasize an imperfect hand-made appearance.

### **“Instant Knowledge”:**

“As we become accustomed to consuming bite-sized knowledge on demand, we benefit from learning everything more quickly but risk forgetting the value of mastery and wisdom.”

Knowledge is seen as universally available and increasingly consumers assume that it should be free to obtain. Further the speed at which we learn has increased exponentially, which has resulted in a slower attention span.

Companies can use this trend by chopping up information into smaller, bite sized chunks. The longer something takes to get through the more likely consumers are to give up and move on.

Content can even be sped up in a literal sense. Video and audio played at 1.25x speed doesn't become less comprehensible and can increase the likelihood that consumers watch/listen through the end.

Information and learning materials should be on-demand, with “how to” videos being preferred to written instructions.

### **“Purposeful Profit”:**

“As consumers and employees demand more sustainable and ethical practices from businesses, companies respond by adapting products, taking

stands on issues, and putting purpose first. Thanks to the growing transparency of information on the Internet, consumers can learn about and shine a bright light on the practices of individual companies or entire industries. Smart entrepreneurs and organizations have created tools to make information about production processes and company behaviors actionable by offering consumers scorecards on brands, their products, workplace practices, and their own dealings.”

Consumers are more socially and environmentally conscious than ever, with millennials being twice as likely to invest in companies that explicitly commit to social and/or environmental causes.

Companies should be explicit in defining the causes or missions they’re involved in, and actually follow through with those pledges. Millennials are extremely internet savvy and check that you’re actually doing what you said you’d do.

### **“Flux Commerce”:**

“As the lines between industries erode, how we sell and buy anything changes constantly, leading to a continual disruption of business models, distribution channels, consumer expectation and even innovation itself.”

Examples include a live theater in Spain that has patrons pay what they think the show deserved, at the end of the show. The company utilizes facial recognition technology to track smiles and laughter

Products are increasingly using non-standard sale and distribution models. The band Radiohead for instance has released several albums with a “pay what you want” system, and perhaps counter-intuitively saw immense financial success.

Companies are branching out, the notion of focusing on one market is becoming outdated as markets flow into one another. For instance Amazon

buying Whole Foods and allowing consumers to order what groceries they want online, and then pick them up in the store.

“As the lines once distinctly drawn between industries erode almost completely, and as business models shift from products being sold not as products but as a service or subscription, and as distribution methods are transformed to eliminate middlemen, winners in this new economy are increasingly those who embrace the fast-changing and increasingly blurred nature of commerce—those who welcome the “flux” and move with it.”

Companies can utilize flux commerce by branching out and combining business models and focusing on encouraging innovation.

### **“Protective Technology”:**

“As we increasingly rely on predictive technology that keeps us and our world safe and makes life more convenient, we must contend with the privacy trade-offs required to make it work. A generation of young consumers will expect technology to optimize every waking moment of their lives...[but] will they also lose the ability to handle more nuanced parts of having human relationships and turn to technology for those as well?”

Predictive technology may be used in the future to track the physical and mental health of consumers, utilizing such tech as facial recognition software. Monitoring by the state will become more ubiquitous. Technology like the Apple Watch that can record health vitals may be used to send such data to health-care providers, drones will be increasingly used for surveillance, finance information will become automated.

This will also result in rising tension between individual privacy rights and the interests of society at large.

Companies can capitalize on Protective Tech by being transparent, and otherwise acting as a role-model for responsibly using such technology.

# New Methods of Interaction Between Companies and Consumers

Reversible retail is changing the role of physical stores. Physical stores are becoming less common due to online shopping, but won't die out completely. Going forward atmosphere and customer experience will become the primary draw of physical locations. Book stores offer an environment that portrays a literary aesthetic, and offer spaces for customers to read.

Another trend is the shortening of content. As attention spans decrease headlines are becoming shorter and more attention grabbing. They often involve calls for direct participation by consumers, such as Twitter ad campaigns in which companies ask users to describe experiences related to their products.

Protective technologies, as stated in the previous chapter, will be used more often in marketing. The health benefits of a product will be emphasized, as will other features that claim to keep customers safer.



# Final Summary

“Trends are profits waiting to happen.”

Trendology is a growing field and the best way to stand out from the crowd is to find trends and predictions nobody else sees coming. This is easier said than done, but the usage of the “Haystack Method” and a diligent curiosity will help you see the patterns others do not.



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