

Use Soft Trends to Influence the Future

There are certain things about the future that we simply can't change. Some are rather obvious. For instance, spring will always follow winter. New Year's Day will always be January 1, at least in many parts of the world. Those are chronological certainties.

There are other future certainties that have nothing to do with the calendar. For example, are the phones we use in the future going to be capable of doing more or less? Of course, they'll be able to do more. That's a certainty.

But what about those things that aren't quite so cast in stone? For instance, will it be colder tomorrow than today? No one can say for certain. Will the stock market rise or fall? Your guess is as good as mine.

The Definition of Soft Trends

Although events that lack certainty may be unnerving to some, I absolutely love them. I call them Soft Trends, and they are a central principle of the overall Anticipatory Organization Model.

Soft trends are future maybes: those events, developments and other things that may or may not take place.

As I mentioned earlier, one of the greatest appeals of Soft Trends is that they can be changed. They can be altered and, depending on what you know about them and how you use them, they are open to influence, leverage and ultimately, enormous opportunity.

Further, there are positive soft trends as well as negative Soft Trends—in so many words, those trends that you want to maintain and build on and those that you may wish to reverse.

For instance, one Soft Trend is the growing number of students furthering their education through online learning. That's certainly a good thing and a Soft Trend that you may like to nurture and possibly leverage.

By the same token, the number of obese people continues to increase—a Soft Trend, and a negative one at that. In looking to influence this soft trend, you'd likely investigate ways to try to reverse this disturbing health pattern.

Hard and Soft Assumptions

Another component to Soft Trends is the assumption that underlies them. On one hand, there are hard assumptions—defined, empirical data and information. Soft Trends supported by Hard Assumptions are more likely to happen.

For instance, rising health care costs in the United States is a Soft Trend, but one supported by hard assumptions—decades of data detailing steady increases in costs. That makes it more likely to continue in the future.

On the other hand, soft trends underscored by Soft Assumptions are less likely to occur. Moreover, treating them as though they offer greater certainty than they do can be a dangerous misstep.

For example, when the Affordable Care Act (ACA) was implemented, there was a Soft Assumption that there would be enough young people signing up to offset the higher costs of older participants. One problem: There was no comprehensive research in place to support that—one of many Soft Assumptions that had an adverse effect on the ACA's launch.

The Need to Carefully Identify Soft Trends

Paying attention to Soft Trends can unlock enormous opportunity for you and your organization.

But the caveat is first recognizing the difference between Soft Trends and Hard Trends, which are future certainties. The simplest explanation is, if you have to think about it, it's a Soft Trend. Hard trends are generally obvious at first glance.

Moreover, it's critical to separate soft trends that are driven by Soft Assumptions from those underscored by Hard Assumptions. Even though Soft Trends are never a future fact, they carry a far greater level of confidence when they are associated with Hard Assumptions. A Soft Trend with a Soft Assumption, on the other hand, could be much less of a sure thing.

You can see that Soft Trends offer enormous opportunity if you know how to identify them and with what level of confidence you can use them to your advantage. So, with that in mind, what Soft Trends can you pinpoint that will impact you, your organization or your entire industry?



About the Author:

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