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## Visionary competence for long-term development of brands, products, and services: The trend receiver concept and its first applications at Audi



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### ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on the question who companies should talk with to be able to make complex long-term decisions, find vision and develop products and services that only come to market in a few years. Currently, there is room for improvement within the process of profiling and identifying the right conversation partners for studies on future customer expectations.

Therefore, twenty existing concepts such as lead users, early adopters, and cutting edgers were reviewed. A typology of the agents of the new is elaborated and based on literature, quantitative and qualitative research as well as practical experience, the trend receiver concept is developed. By the author's definition, a trend receiver is an individual who perceives and reflects changes and potentials of the new in a specific domain in a highly sensitive and differentiated way. Seventeen applications of this new concept at Audi (from 2009 to 2013) with over 300 trend receivers, contribute to an understanding of the value of this approach.

This paper discusses the characteristics of trend receivers and reflects on the tailor-made search process and search profiles necessary to identify individuals with such capabilities. In addition, it discusses how to organize the conversation process with trend receivers and how this novel approach can best contribute to vision finding, long-term decisions and brand, product and service development.

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### 1. Introduction

Are you considering giving up your job for something new – perhaps another industry or to start a company? Are you considering going abroad for some years? Or are you considering a large loan in order to buy a house? Are you even considering separating from your life partner?

When it comes to difficult decisions with long-term impact, you are unlikely to ask your Facebook friends to vote about your fate. But you might talk to some of your friends with life

experience and broad horizons; they know you and your behavior under different circumstances well, and are unbiased and honest. Ideally, these persons are open-minded and have a good feel for changes and new possibilities that might gain relevance for your life in the next years or decades. Thus, they might imagine how you would be doing under modified and still relatively unclear parameters.

You will never have certainty, but your friends' advice, arguments, and observations could be a valuable help in the process of taking decisions and making your next bold and considered moves.

Scaled to entrepreneurial topics and speculations about changing customer expectations, future lifestyles and appealing new products, the trend receiver approach I present here shows many similarities to the described situations.

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### 1.1. Uncertainties about changing customer expectations

Whom should you talk to if long-term decisions must be taken and products and services that come to market in some years need to be developed? With a market representative client sample, with trend gurus, with strategy consultants, with experts, and/or with innovators? Identifying the right individuals for conversations regarding future customer expectations has huge impact on the outcomes of research and may therefore influence important decisions and development processes positively or negatively.

At car manufacturers, for instance, the product development process from the decision on a new concept to market launch takes between five and seven years, after which the vehicle normally remains in production for around seven years (see Fig.1). Thus, models planned and developed in 2013 must still be attractive in 2025 (the time horizons vary much across different industries and “the temporal dimension is closely related to the area being considered”; Masini, 1993; Brier, 2005). While some crucial aspects of the planning process depend on good data analysis skills, there are several topics that somehow remain intangible. Some exemplary questions from the automotive industry are as follows:

- How might lifestyles, everyday mobility and ownership behavior change over the next decade? Which aspects of the concept of premium should be modified? Which products and services have the potential to attract modern, affluent target groups 10 years from now?
- What new technologies are likely to gain a foothold in everyday life? How should everyday mobility under conditions of autonomous driving look like?
- What designs and aesthetics are sensitive, courageous, and meaningful enough to have a strong likelihood of momentum into the 2020s and to help shape our next decade?
- What are sensitive and sensible branding and communication strategies for the next years?
- What might the roles of dealerships be if more and more people purchased their cars online?
- How does one combine new digital experiences with zest for intense and sensual experiences of materials, designs, and technologies as well as interest in personal contact and face-to-face meetings?

### 1.2. The need for external feedback beyond market-representative market research

To gain insights into and to understand customers' needs, behavior, and purchase reasons, a well-recruited sample of clients representing the given target group is a good option to address a wide range of topics. However, some questions remain, and these are difficult to answer – in the automotive business and many other industries, especially for those with longer planning and investment periods. This is primarily due to the anticipatory nature of long timelines to market relevance and the questions' complexity. Many topics overburden the average conventional market study participant.

But external input keeps being crucial to provide companies with a fresh, differentiated, unbiased and surprising view on signals of change and upcoming opportunities and threats. It can contribute substantially to the process of developing bright visions and detecting strategic paths.

### 1.3. Diverging from lead user workshops or more standardized approaches such as postmodern milieu surveys

One of the concepts that first comes to mind when thinking of special abilities of external participants in research projects is the *lead user method* (Hippel, 2006 etc.). This method's value and its contribution to innovation processes since its development in the 1980s are enormous. Nevertheless, literature reviews and conversations with the persons responsible for lead user projects – both on manufacturer and research institute/agency side – lead one to conclude that lead users are highly motivated and skilled at helping to modify and improve product functions and to help inventing new products (Hofmann, 2011a, pp. 84–85). While this is very helpful to gather ideas and to get valuable suggestions – examples and expert interviews point out that this happens mainly on the technical/functional side – lead user characteristics differ in several aspects from characteristics of persons with the kinds of abilities and experience that help one answer questions such as the ones I have mentioned. (I discuss these abilities in Section 4.1, where I explain the characteristics of trend receivers.)

While there are some overlaps with the profiles of trend receivers, it became clear that the focus of lead user projects varies from that of trend receiver projects. Further



Fig. 1. Uncertainties about changing customer expectations due to long lead times.

details on differences between several concepts will be discussed within the typology (as presented below) of the *agents of the new*, in which lead users belong to the group of inventors.

Another popular approach to select persons whose modernity is above the average is the *milieu indicator* (Sigma Milieus, 2013). For instance, the milieu indicator offered by Sigma is used widely in Germany, mainly to quantify lifestyle clusters in the consumer population. But this tool can also be used to identify persons that belong to a certain milieu. By filtering some integrants of the *postmodern* or *upper liberal* milieu, a somehow more open-minded and trend-affinitive sample can be gathered.

While the lead user concept is considered a great tool, albeit one with a different focus, the milieu indicator is perceived as a good quantitative tool, yet one that is far too general to identify a qualitative sample of conversation partners for long-term decision processes and an understanding of changing customer expectations.

A first view on these popular concepts shows the necessity of a deeper look at existing alternatives. Therefore, I have reviewed 20 persona concepts around *the new* (see Section 3.1).

#### 1.4. Research questions

The here presented research was based within a private-academic cooperation framework between Audi and the University of Erlangen-Nuremberg. Non-satisfying experiences with different sampling approaches that Audi's market and trend research department had made, encouraged the assumption that the identification of participants for studies related to future products and customer expectations offered large potential for optimization of the existing methods.

Reflection on this topic has led me to three research questions:

1. What kinds of people should one discuss future concepts and topics with?
2. How does one find these people?
3. How does one organize the conversations with such individuals?

These questions were addressed using Audi as a research vehicle, although in my view, the project's results are not limited to the automotive industry at all.

## 2. Research process

### 2.1. The gap to bridge from the perspective of practice (with Audi as a starting point)

From the perspective of Audi's brand strategy, and its market and trend research department (in 2007), there were three basic ways of developing input for long-term decisions, complex future topics, and new concepts coming to market five to 10 years ahead: 1) Gaining data and insights by conventional market research and representative client samples. 2) Trend research or foresight studies of different kinds (which were not primarily based on interviews, although they sometimes integrate conversations with a small number of experts). 3) Conversations with some market research and trend experts as well as some first attempts to talk to 'special customers' with a more modern or creative approach; this

included focus groups with clients belonging to the *postmodern milieu* selected via the *milieu screener*, which was seen as a unsatisfying approach, because it turned out that participants were too rooted in the present and their particular circumstances and did not have broader, more diverse, or visionary reflection capabilities or perspectives.

Combining insight and foresight processes in a smarter way was considered an important field for improvement – for Audi as well as for strategic practices in other ventures. Thus figuring out how to identify the right persons for studies on possible future lifestyles, changing customer expectations, and strategic implications was perceived as a relevant task for market and trend research as well as insight and foresight processes and practices.

### 2.2. The gap to bridge from a theoretical perspective

Much (partly quite popular) literature exists on innovation and diffusion processes and persons involved in these processes, such as early adopters, influentials, or people that become important in movements or societal shifts (Gladwell, 2002; Rogers, 2003; Keller and Berry, 2003; Berger and Heath, 2007; Dodds, 2007 etc.). Much research has also been done on lead user participation in innovation projects (Lilien et al., 2002; Eisenberg, 2011; Schuhmacher and Kuester, 2012; Vernet and Hamdi-Kidar, 2013 etc.). Broadening the view, there is much literature related to creativity or *the new*, for instance, in the fine arts (Groys, 1992; Barck, 2010). Furthermore, several scholars (Hoffmann et al., 2010; Ozer, 2009; Gruner and Homburg, 2000) focus on the evaluation of new products.

Generally speaking, concepts concerning 'persons around the new' on the one hand derive from the research field of innovation management and business and, on the other hand, derive from societal and cultural research.

The above-mentioned necessity to combine insight and foresight processes and therefore identify the right persons calls for an open look to the variety of 'characteristics tied to the new,' which can be found in different disciplines. The gap to bridge relates to the question how far the given persona concepts, descriptions of characteristics, and identification methods fulfill this necessity for visionary competence, and how some aspects of these concepts might be combined in new ways to better meet this demand.

By describing a new approach of profiling and identifying persons disposing of visionary competence the here presented research refers to crucial foresight fields and tasks discussed by several scholars. For instance it relates to the "three roles", "corporate foresight should play to maximize the innovation capacity of a firm" (Rohrbeck and Gemünden, 2011, p. 231). This is the case as Trend Receiver projects can foster foresight activities such as "vision creation or the identification of new business models" (part of the "strategist role"), the observation of changing and new customer needs (part of the "initiator role") and challenging and discussing the product and service concepts presented by the innovators (part of the "opponent role"). Also, the here presented research refers to the discussion and concept of "major fields of corporate foresight", such as the field of "future customer needs" and "prospective evaluation of innovations" (Ruff, 2006). Moreover, by reflecting on Audi case studies, this research may conduce to the discussion of processes,



Fig. 2. Research parts and structure.

acceptance and organizational structures of corporate foresight within companies (e. g. [Andriopoulos and Gotsi, 2005](#); [Duin and Hartigh, 2009](#)).

### 2.3. Research design

The research process contained four parts: 1) a literature review, 2) 34 qualitative expert interviews, 3) a preliminary quantitative survey, and 4) the integration and further development of the newly developed approaches along 17 Audi research projects (see [Fig.2](#)).

Because the project was based in cooperation between Audi and the University of Erlangen-Nuremberg, there was a clear will to develop and shape a method and process that would apply in the concrete research practice of Audi's market and trend research. This provided the opportunity to apply the newly gained outcomes from theoretical research and to start first attempts in upcoming Audi projects. Thus, from 2009 to 2013, 17 *trend receiver* projects have been realized, with improvements in the process. Identifying and observing concrete persons has helped to learn more about *trend receiver* criteria and practical implications of the search process and ways of organizing the conversations. I describe these learnings in [Section 2.4](#), concerning the Audi case studies.

### 2.4. Literature review

The literature review consisted of an analysis of existing theories regarding trends and innovations as well as motives and values, and an analysis of persona concepts and characteristics of 'persons involved with the new.'

To understand the general and well-known usage patterns of the term *trend*, I reviewed some popular books in the field from [Naisbitt \(1984\)](#), [Koschnik \(1987\)](#) or [Horx and Wippermann \(1996; Horx et al., 2007\)](#). Among this basic literature, the theories and thoughts of [Liebl and Schwarz](#) around *the new*, normalization, and paradoxes became a central point of reference ([Liebl, 2000; Liebl and Schwarz, 2010](#)). Another important point of reference was [Ullrich's](#) research on contemporary consumer culture and cue management and on new roles of liberal arts in the development and communication of products and brands ([Ullrich, 2006; Ullrich, 2013](#)).

To detect interdependencies between change and continuities, I have combined trend and innovation theories with research on motives, values, and consumer insights. Referring

to concepts from the motivation psychology of [Heckhausen and Heckhausen \(2009\)](#), [Reiss \(2009\)](#), and [Karmasin \(2004\)](#) as well as consumer insight and value research by [Föll \(2007\)](#) and [Baker and Inglehart \(2000\)](#), motive and value sets are conceived as *fluid paradigms*: On the one hand, they act as stabilizers in the stream of changes in the technical, economical, social, legal, aesthetical, etc. world. Partly new products and services only serve ancient wishes and motives in a modified manner. On the other hand, motive and value sets are not fixed; cultural change is manifested in the frequently subtle changes in motive and value sets. This partly comes from the amended situations and circumstances that new generations grow up in – as [Heckhausen](#) argues, motivation is a product of person and situation ([Heckhausen and Heckhausen, 2009, p. 3](#)).

New lifestyles and consumer behavior result from an interplay of economic, political, socio-demographic, or technical developments in the flexible framework (or fluid paradigm) of motive and value sets. It is neither totally new nor completely different, nor is it only 'new wine in old wineskins.'

Thus having a good – not necessarily conscious – feel for the combination of continuities and changes is part of the 'visionary competence' that characterizes *trend receivers*.

I then carried over this understanding of *the new*, and changes and continuities in individual and collective behavior to a broad reflection on the various existing concepts related to persons involved in invention, diffusion, and normalization processes. A closer look at 20 existing concepts from different academic fields led to a typology of the 'agents of the new' led me to three overarching categories:

1. Inventors, a cluster of types of persons who think up, devise, and design new ideas, things or ways of behavior – they 'put the new into the world.' Concepts such as von Hippel's lead user approach ([Hippel, 2006; Hippel et al., 2009](#)), creative individuals, the avant-garde ([Barck, 2010](#)), or trendsetter and coolfarmer as described by [Gloor and Cooper \(2007\)](#) belong in this category.
2. Multipliers, a cluster of types of persons who spread the new – i.e. a product or image – into the world. The primary reference was [Rogers' Diffusion of Innovations](#) and the noted types of early adopter and opinion leader ([Rogers, 2003; Katz et al. 2005](#)). The concept of



influentials (Keller and Berry, 2003; Dodds, 2007), Gladwell's descriptions of salesmen and connectors (Gladwell, 2002), and clustering approaches such as Sigma's milieu indicator (Sigma Milieus, 2013) or that of Sociovision (07.07.2013) belong in this category.

3. Trend observers, a cluster of persona concepts that share a focus on invention, diffusion, and normalization processes. Experts, trend researchers, and trend scouts frequently belong to this category, as well as alphas (described in Zandl and Leonard's, 1992 *Targetting the Trendsetting Consumer*), coolhunter (in the sense of Gloor and Cooper, 2007), cutting edger (as conceived by de Panafieu Cosight, 2010) and Maven, and the third of Gladwell's tipping point types (Gladwell, 2002). A newer and very interesting concept is the one of emergent nature consumers (Hoffman et al., 2010), which shows several overlaps with the *trend receiver* approach.

Building on this research, the *trend receiver* concept has been conceived and *trend receiver* characteristics have been described. For this, differences, proximities, and overlaps with other concepts in the field of the 'agents of the new' have been analyzed via the above-mentioned literature. I have argued why the *trend receiver* concept fulfils the aims of identifying the best possible participants in the above-mentioned surveys on future topics and concepts.

While this part of the research process analyzed theories and concepts related to research question 1, the next part was dedicated to research question 2. Therefore, sampling theories and methods (Merkens, 2004; Meyer and Reutterer, 2009; Schreier, 2007) have been considered in relation to their applicability for finding concrete persons that meet *trend receiver* characteristics. Among different sources, the findings of Prügl (2006) have become an important point of reference, because these results show that pyramiding offers significant advantages over screening, especially when the characteristic and the people one is looking for are seldom and heterogeneously distributed in the population and well-connected. This is normally the case with *trend receivers*.

### 2.5. Expert interviews on skills and characteristics of the yet-to-be-defined profile

The first part of the research process was a series of 34 qualitative interviews with Audi executives from different business fields and several countries, and with external experts in trend research, innovation management, and strategy planning (Hofmann, 2011a, pp. 23–37). These interviews provided insights into the necessities of research projects and studies related to future concepts within a company such as Audi, as well as thoughts and experiences regarding the abilities and biographical features of people perceived as appropriate to participate in these future-related projects and studies.

Observations, experiences, and thoughts that came up in these interviews later influenced the *trend receiver* profiles and patterns searched for in the Audi *trend receiver* studies (as described in Section 2.4) as well as the definition and general description of *trend receivers* embedded in the typology of 'the agents of the new' (see Section 3.1).

### 2.6. Preliminary quantitative survey

One research element was a quantitative survey of perceptions of the design of upcoming and very modern cars, houses, and table lamps compared to models that had been established in the market over the last years (Hofmann, 2011a, pp. 37–74). In an online survey of 30 min per participant 800 people on average as well as 480 immigrants and 120 male homosexuals (this was to test the hypothesis that well-integrated members of minorities are more modern than the average) provided their opinions. Based on a wide socio-demographic questionnaire, a cluster analysis was done in order to identify the characteristics of the persons belonging to the most modern cluster. (Characteristics that turned out to correlate highly with this *modernity cluster* were: migrant background + male + university degree; reading of art and design literature; stay abroad of at least one year; homosexual + university degree; high education level of the mother, etc.).

The results of this survey were applied in the first Audi *trend receiver* project (in a car clinic in 2009; Hofmann, 2011a, pp. 125–137): A *trend receiver* screener that had been developed for this study served to screen 12 *trend receivers* in a first attempt to create a complement to the market-representative cluster participating in this survey. This screener used some of the characteristics that had turned out to correlate highest with the mentioned *modernity cluster*. Participants had to rank high on a 'cultural capital indicator' (Bourdieu, 1987) that examined knowledge about contemporary artists, designers, architects, and international politicians.

The results of this screening process was fair, but still far from what had been hoped for by means of this new approach (Hofmann, 2011a, pp. 47–49). As in the following studies, qualitative search profiles, in combination with pyramiding processes, proved far superior in quality and efficiency in following Audi studies (described in detail below), and the development of a standardized *trend receiver* screener built by an item battery or similar ways was put on hold.

### 2.7. Case studies: experiences from practice at Audi

#### 2.7.1. Audi City

In 2009 to 2010, Audi started planning a new inner-city dealership and flagship store concept that would become the first of its kind in the automotive industry and was going to set new standards in several aspects. For instance, almost all walls would consist of huge cinema-like screens that could be used to show, among others, films and other pictures of the complete Audi model range, in real-car size, which would allow customers to configure cars and see it in movement in a never-seen-before screen size and audiovisual quality. In several aspects, physical elements such as materials and color palettes to select from would interplay and connect with the digital possibilities of these huge screens in new ways.

In times in which Audi was expanding its model range from year to year, the plan was that Audi City should become an inner-city brand presence and dealership with only one physical showcase car per location. It should become a complement to huge dealerships at city outskirts. Instead of

seeing a selection of physical cars, customers would be able to choose from the whole model range and to configure their car out of thousands of existing configuration options – all digitally. The hypothesis was that, at least among a significant section of affluent urban car buyers, a new perception and purchase behavior would be evolving or might be instigated. These people would buy or at least enter the buying process by means of the digital experience and the new atmosphere and staff concept provided by Audi City.

Because the project required significant investments for rollout and for a growing number of Audi City presences around the globe, Audi's board asked for a study that would both allow it to better understand customer perceptions and acceptance as well as to enhance the concept development and decisions related to different aspects of the project by external thoughts and observations.

Thus, a study was designed and realized in a mock-up space built in a hall in Ingolstadt in order to develop and experiment the space and to show it to decision-makers. The study would address several topics: general perception of the Audi City concept; potentials of the concept and of the innovative sales approach; implications for brand image; acceptance/willingness to purchase among customers; further usage potentials of the space beyond brand and sales aspects for different event types; potentials for new interpretations of branded spaces/flagship stores and automotive retail; ideas to improve the concept; processes and customer–staff interaction; architectural and other aesthetical aspects; positioning of the space in different metropolitan contexts; possible roles of the space some years later, when the size of home screens might have developed further, etc.

Whom to talk to? As the company wanted to gain a better feel for the impact Audi City might have on clients, a sample of 30 market representative clients (new car buyers in different car segments, mainly clients or potential clients of Audi or its competitors) was invited. At the same time, owing to the novelty of the concept, and the necessity to have conversation partners able to imagine how it might develop over the course of the following years and how the concept might be enriched and fostered, Audi wanted to go beyond this market representative client sample and to have conversations with visionary yet realistic persons. So the decision was taken to search for 30 *trend receivers* that would be specifically selected to this end.

The third group was selected retail experts (responsible for inner-city fashion and jewelry brands, shop window designers, or shop interaction designers). The intention for this was to learn from experienced practitioners about a field of inner-city retail, which was in many aspects quite new for Audi. While the market representative clients came from Germany, almost half of the *trend receivers* and retail experts were German, while the others were from the UK, Switzerland, the U.S., and China. The relatively high number of 30 *trend receivers* was perceived as reasonable, because different countries with varying service and dealership patterns and perceptions were integrated in the sample. Although there was no country quota (representativeness was not a goal), visionary competence was a requirement, and it seemed desirable to have at least six to eight persons each from Europe (in this study the majority with 16 participants), the U.S., and China so as to gain a broader view.

The *trend receivers* were recruited by a two page search profile that combined automotive purchase experience with abilities such as self-observation, understanding of mindsets and motives, curiosity, openness, a broad perception and awareness scope, a feel for weak signals and time horizons, observation skills regarding purchasing behavior changes, esthetic competence, internationality, and strong communication skills.

The recruitment was done by seven intermediary persons that were chosen by means of two criteria: 1) A strong understanding of the visionary competence described in the search profile, implying proximity to the search profile and *trend receiver* characteristics in the intermediary person, and 2) A strong network among the kinds of persons one is looking for.

There was a variety among the intermediary persons: among them persons with different backgrounds, such as the managing partner of an international innovation and design consultancy, the former vice president of innovation of a global jewelry company, a senior researcher of an HR consultancy, a well-connected student with strong judgment abilities, and a sculptor with a large network. The intermediary persons compiled a proposal list, with some assuming a smaller recruiting mandate (a proposal list of two or three persons) and others assuming a larger one (a list of five to 10 persons).

From these proposal lists, the 30 invited *trend receivers* were chosen by Audi's market and trend research department together with the Audi City project team. Aiming for diverse perceptions and different approaches and perspectives, the invited trend receivers were from a variety of professions and occupations: entrepreneurs with ventures of different scales and from different industries, executives in strategic positions (from major telecommunication, FMCG, travel or real estate companies), consultants, a stage director, an art theorist and author on consumption topics, a sculptor, a publisher, and an agency owner.

Walking through the mock-up space, the various aspects of the concept, architecture, atmosphere, the content to be shown on the screens, the processes and staff characteristics, etc. of Audi City were discussed. Each *trend receiver* interview took around two hours. Besides the trend receiver, a representative from the research institute that organized the study as well as one or two persons from Audi that were involved in the planning and development of Audi City also attended.

How did the *trend receivers* contribute? The classic clients were primarily impressed by the technical possibilities and atmosphere, but only a small part of them could imagine buying a car there. In comparison, *trend receivers* were less impressed, but immediately started imagining how purchasing processes and other experiences might or should happen within Audi City. They could well imagine buying new cars there and contributed with concrete suggestions how to link it to other service offerings (e.g. new ways to organize test drives, etc.). They made precise suggestions how to improve the space and how to shape its character. Many offered different statements related to good locations in specific metropolitan areas where Audi City might play an interesting role in the urban context. Some of them had surprising thoughts about changing inner-city lifestyle paradigms and how to interact

with such new potentials. This included suggestions for which non-Audi purposes the space might also be used.

Compared to the conversations with the market-representative clients, the *trend receiver* conversations were allowed to go far deeper into the different aspects, details, potentials, and limits of Audi City, both for brand image and sales space and processes. This included the more intangible aspects of emotions evoked by the atmosphere and esthetics. Being used to influence or decide projects by themselves and to develop them over the course of months and years (be it business or art projects), the invited individuals easily shifted between a client perspective, an observer perspective, and a consultant perspective. This allowed them to explain well how they might use Audi City, which emotions were evoked by the different parts, Audi City's atmosphere and esthetics, and what would have to be done to further convince them and other clients.

There were some overlaps with some retail experts. The main difference was that the conversations with the experts focused more on their professional retail fields, for instance, with varying customer flows on different days, or the question how the facade or front window might ideally be used. By comparison, the *trend receivers* were more distant from the retail business, and the conversations with them were more based on automotive customer expectations and how Audi City might influence car and mobility services and sales.

The statements, ideas, observations, arguments, and some quotations from the *trend receiver* conversations helped shape

the project in many details. Many project team members not only participated in the *trend receiver* conversations, which allowed fairly direct input transfers, but also read the transcripts of other conversations they had missed. The openness to the *trend receiver* thoughts and suggestions among the project team was significantly higher than the openness to the statements of the conventional clients, although the former were often more skeptical and challenging. The differentiated feedback of the *trend receiver* conversations and the report's credibility also moved the project forward and helped carry it through some decisive committee meetings.

Audi developed the new showroom and sales space concept that had premiered in July 2012 during the London Olympics. Next steps in the global rollout were Audi City Beijing in January 2013 and Audi City Berlin in February 2014. The concept is being rolled out to further locations. Some parts from Audi City are also being integrated into other dealership formats and new sales, service, and marketing processes, albeit new screen concepts in classical dealerships, or configuration or CRM processes. (See Fig.3).

### 2.7.2. Blank canvas car project

Another project was dedicated to a yet-to-be-defined car that would come to the market in 2020. In this case, it was a blank canvas situation, since very few parameters (the price level and the market launch) were set. Many topics – such as the car's character, architecture, design, engine, fuel system, interior space, multimedia systems and interfaces – would



Fig. 3. Audi City.



be discussed with *trend receivers*, since a concept that was both visionary and realistic would be developed. It was decided to do this in three workshops – in Munich in December 2012, followed by the same format in Beijing in February 2013 and in San Francisco in March 2013. Eight *trend receivers* per workshop would be invited to imagine the future (auto-)mobility situations in 2020, to integrate their feelings and perceptions of new or stable necessities and car aspects, and to define the kind of car they would like to possess or use in seven years.

The participants were identified by a tailor-made search profile, combining car usage and possession criteria with further abilities that sought to describe the visionary competence sought in this project. Based on this profile, the 24 participants were identified by means of pyramiding processes, partly using Audi's given networks of previous trend receiver studies, some new nonprofessional intermediary persons, and search agents.

Who were they? For instance, in the Munich workshop, there was an entrepreneur and investor from Vienna, a startup entrepreneur from Munich, a head of innovation of a technology firm from Munich, an author and former managing partner of a trend agency from Hamburg, a creative director from Berlin, the CMO of an international tourism company from Zurich, a partner in a strategy consultancy from Munich, and a brand executive from an international jewelry company from Zurich. The age range was from 35 to 55, with the majority being around 45. The age range in San Francisco was similar, and Beijing's was somewhat younger than Munich's. In San Francisco, the professions varied from entrepreneurs and startup entrepreneurs, people in real estate, public administration, to product design; in Beijing it varied from investors, entrepreneurs, a journalist, an artist, to an architect. Among the characteristics noticeable in these workshops was how the participants were both open-minded and down-to-earth.

The workshops were marked by intensive exchanges between the trend receivers and the Audi designers, engineers, and strategists that had started working on this new project only weeks before. This enabled a very direct understanding of the statements and workshop results by the people working on the project (see also Rohrbeck, 2012). The idea with this research setting was to start a long-term conversation that

would accompany the whole development process from this early stage through to the later phases of possibly innovative sales processes and communication measures. In this way, the *trend receivers* would act as long-term sparring partners, as the project's "patronizing aunts and uncles." Ideally, the participants of the 2012/2013 workshops would even participate the launch ceremonies in 2020. (See Fig.4).

2.7.3. Seventeen trend receiver projects between 2009 and 2013

At a car manufacturer such as 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. This leads to several research questions and situations where the *trend receiver* approach comes into play.

Between the first study experiment in June 2009 and December 2013, Audi's market and trend research department has conducted 17 trend receiver projects, with ca. 300 persons invited to participate in these conversations on future topics and products.

*Trend receivers* have been invited to seven car clinics where they saw prototypes of new Audi models. These clinic surveys' primary focus has been on so-called concept models – car prototypes at a very early stage of the development process and around five or more years away from possible market launch.

Besides research projects related to future car models, the conversations with trend receivers contained several other topics. In 2009, 20 *trend receivers* were invited to discuss future meanings of *premium* and future expectations of clients in the 2020s concerning aspects such as sustainability, design language, and mobility in general.

*Trend receiver* conversations have also been held on the topic of lightness, in order to understand the diverse dimensions of this phenomenon. So in 2012, the topic was discussed to understand the potential this topic might provide for Audi in order to connect light-weight auto construction with the other dimensions implied by the topic; for instance, aesthetical lightness conveyed by Audi's exterior design and the appeal of lightness in the brand and communication messages.

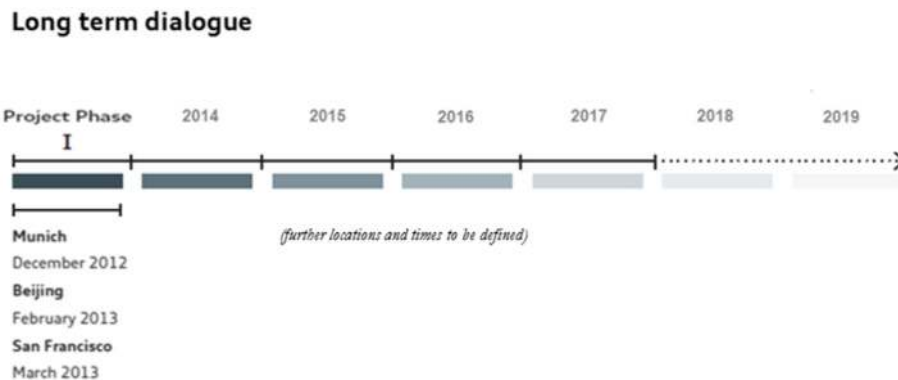


Fig. 4. Exemplary dialog process accompanying different phases of the development process.



Among other projects in 2013, 32 trend receivers from Germany, Austria, China, and the U.S. participated in a study addressing questions related to the future roles of brands and branding – generally, and specifically the Audi brand. Another study in Germany, the U.S. and China in 2013 with 30 participants addressed lifestyles and everyday mobility in 2025.

#### 2.7.4. Key contributions for decision and development processes

As Audi representatives of various strategy, engineering, and design departments commented (partly documented in internal protocols, partly indicated by Audi communication material) (Reil, 2013 in Audi Encounter Magazine), the trend receiver method has contributed to decision and development processes in many ways. (Statement of Mark Ebert, head of market and trend research since 2012: “Trend receiver studies have become an indispensable tool which has achieved a high level of appreciation in the company. It provides high quality thoughts, insights and observations at reasonable expenditures. The trend receivers we talk to are fresh and bright minds. It’s far from panel recruitment and they are no geeks.” 03. 03. 2014).

Audi is profiting from:

- an improved knowledge base for strategic decisions, as arguments and observations go far beyond conventional market research outcomes and widen company-internal discussions
- a honed and precisely articulated reflection on sometimes subtle design and branding topics
- direct trend transfer, as trend-savvy persons respond directly to concrete questions, combining broad and surprising perceptions with involvement as customers and common sense (instead of the typical difficulties of trend transfer processes resulting from the sometimes hard-to-cover-distance of general trend observations and concrete measures regarding product, sales, or communication)
- the possibility to discuss complex and partly abstract topics that were previously only discussed with single experts
- a noticeable share of *trend receiver* statements in final reporting presented to the decisive committees of the company
- special value provided by the combination of projection skills and customer experience.

#### 2.7.5. Observations

Along the different Audi projects, people from a wide range of job backgrounds have participated. Indeed, no single job profile can clearly encapsulate a *trend receiver*’s abilities, since these depend on each person’s individual experience.

Some professions are more likely indicative of *trend receivers*: entrepreneurs, people in business development; interim managers; head purchasers or product line planners at department stores; city planners; consultants; analysts; investment bankers; architects; publishers, journalists, or media specialists; scientists, creative individuals and producers of cultural artifacts. Professions can only be an indication; owing to the many criteria, there are only a few *trend receivers* in each professional field.

A general learning is that many *trend receivers* combine creative activities with a good integration into value chains.

So “link to art & link to business” is a catchphrase that matches for many *trend receivers*. Also, they have good access to influential people and knowledge of resource flows.

While in the first projects there were stronger ties to conventional market research processes, and *trend receiver* focus groups were done, importantly, in the case of *trend receiver* surveys, one-on-one conversations and sometimes workshop situations are recommended. While the market research field shows some connections, it is important to think more independently than these classical methods and ways of study planning.

Another learning was that recruiting works best via a varying set of intermediary persons. A good average is three *trend receivers* per intermediary person. Thus, for a selection of 10 to 15 trend receivers, three to five intermediaries may be a good choice. In some cases *trend receivers* from previous projects can become intermediary persons and propose possible trend receivers, because many of them are quite well connected.

A central observation is that good intermediaries are key to realizing trend receiver projects with both high quality and high efficiency.

#### 2.7.6. Check whether or not trend receivers are needed

*Trend receiver* projects have become well-accepted and partly almost popular at Audi. It is therefore crucial to check at the outset, i.e. when the request for a *trend receiver* project arises in the company, whether a matter really demands *trend receiver* abilities or whether a market-representative study is not more appropriate. Not every new product or invention calls for *trend receivers*. If a vision is needed or a decision extends far into the future, or a product or service has such a high novelty level that market conditions are likely to change and, therefore, special capabilities and the abilities to abstract and imagine are needed. So, if, owing to the timescale involved and matters’ complexity, the average consumer is overtaxed by them, *trend receivers* are needed.

### 3. Results: the *trend receiver* concept as a new approach to find conversation partners for studies on visions and future products and services

#### 3.1. Key findings concerning research question 1: who? What kind of people should we discuss future products and topics with?

##### 3.1.1. Typology of the agents of the new: trend receiver as a new concept

Invention, diffusion, and normalization processes are complex matters that involve several kinds of persons. In these processes, some people have competitive advantages. Clustering 20 existing persona concepts around *the new* has resulted in a three-cluster typology (See Fig.5): first, inventors (those who create the new), second, multipliers (those who distribute the new), and trend observers (those who perceive and reflect on these processes of invention, diffusion, and normalization). A 40 page long detailed analysis and comparison of these concepts is presented in my PhD thesis (Hofmann, 2011a pp. 70–109).

As conversation partners for future products and topics, good trend observers are better suited than inventors and multipliers. This is because inventors concentrate on

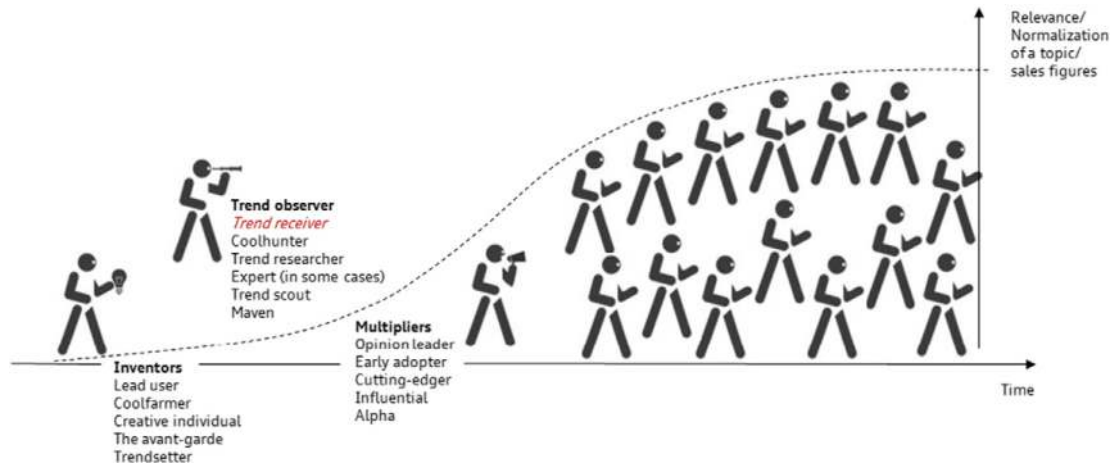


Fig. 5. Persona concepts 'around the new'.

creating, changing, and making new combinations. In this way, they also 'plant' many things that may never become relevant to a major user group – only a small percentage of inventions are successful.

On the other hand, multipliers are too focused on acquiring or adapting something at an early stage, and this often happens only when it has already become apparent that something would become a successful product or service later on (Rogers, 2013). Thus, they are tied to the present and are not sufficiently future-oriented.

The *trend receiver* concept belongs to the trend observer cluster. The identification of *trend receivers* must be tailor-made for a topic and context. Elaborating a new *trend receiver* profile for a topic and, therefore, reflecting anew means accepting and dealing with every new topic's complexity. This enables a fit that a one-size-fits-it-all concept could never provide.

### 3.1.2. What is a trend receiver?

Definition: *Trend receivers* are individuals who perceive changes and potentials of the new in a specific domain in a highly sensitive and differentiated way.

They have connections in many contexts and have discerning views of what drives people and what aspects are undergoing change. The ability to imagine and project respectively their visionary competence results from a combination of characteristics: everyday experience in a certain context (in the consumer arena, with a given product or service), curiosity, open-mindedness, the ability to observe and recognize patterns, life experience, network, and intuition.

### 3.1.3. A combination of experience and openness

Typical for *trend receivers* is an empathetic talent, insights into human nature and an understanding of people's values and motives in specific circumstances. In the context of marketing, this means disposing of target groups and customer expectations. Acute perception and the insider knowledge of persons participating in a certain context enable *trend receivers* to have a good understanding of the patterns that govern this context. For this, own preferences and emotions are a good point of reference, but *trend receivers* also have strong self-awareness and the

ability to abstract from themselves. They are interested in a wide range of persons and attitudes and by respecting different personalities, situations, and thought and feeling structures, they are good at handling opposite positions and seeming contradictions without lapsing into relativism.

Thus, familiarity with diverse contexts, and the frequent presence of a fairly multipolar identity structure provides them with high mental agility and continuously opens new fields of observation and reflection. *Trend receivers* want to comprehend interdependencies and patterns. Their wish to see clearly is linked to the interest in new influences and dynamics of change. Curiosity, fine antennae, and multiple interests allow *trend receivers* to not only understand current structures, but also perceive and filter small signals. They have enormous curiosity and heterogeneity, and can extract what is relevant from the maelstrom of new information and ideas. In *trend receiver*, both words are operative: the antennae for dynamics and new topics and, at the same time, the ability to receive, filter, process, contemplate, and classify newly obtained information.

When estimating which potential something new might have in the mainstream and how long normalization and diffusion processes might take, *trend receivers* often benefit from the fact that they are experienced observers of developments of people, behaviors, businesses, or new technical applications. Through these observations, they have developed a strong intuition for surprising influences and factors that enable success or failure over time. Thus, *trend receivers* for multiple topics are at least 30 years old and are often over 35 or 40; this affords them a stronger feel for the dynamics and inertia of changes and diffusion and normalization processes.

*Trend receivers'* visionary competences can be condensed into the combination of experience and openness: the ability to recognize paradigms and to combine them with perceived new impulses and dynamics of change. These characteristics help them to project realistic opportunities and to detect potentials of the new.

### 3.1.4. Lay trend researchers

An important aspect of the *trend receiver* concept is that *trend receivers* normally are not full-time *trend receivers* and

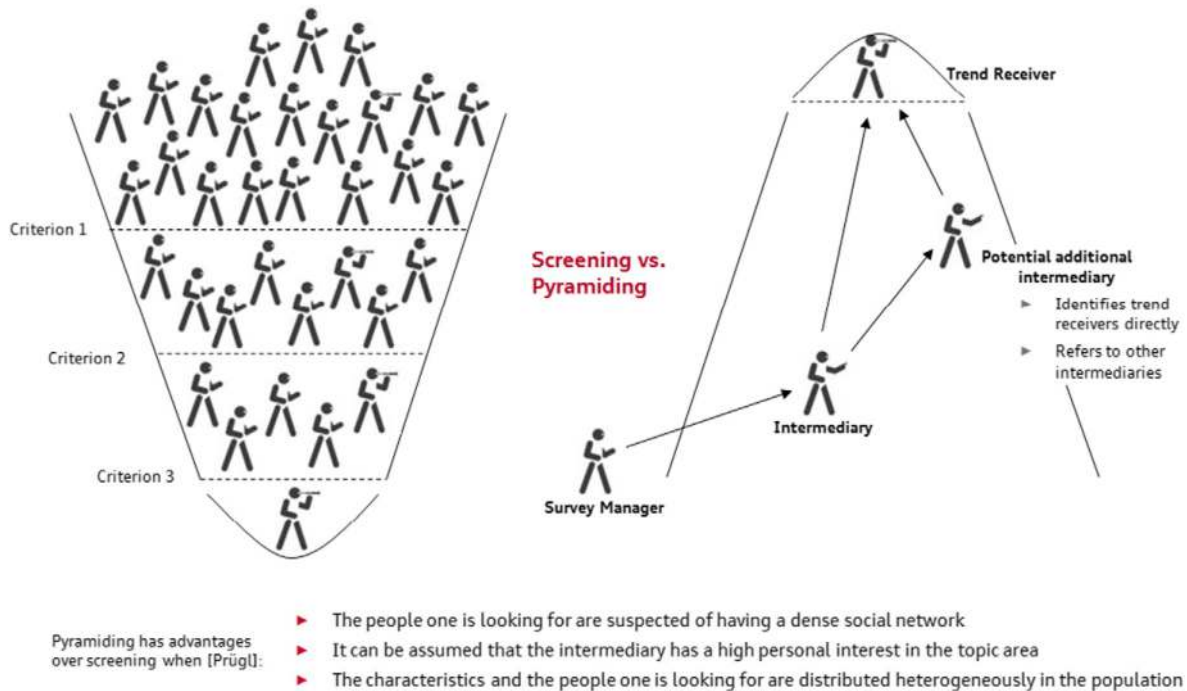


Fig. 6. Comparison of screening und pyramiding processes.

that their incomes do not depend on the topic they are asked about. Their insights are frequently different from the comprehension of an expert. *Trend receivers* collect insights relating to patterns and transformation dynamics within a given context along the way. They casually observe their acquaintances or colleagues. Thus they act as ‘lay trend researchers.’

### 3.1.5. The trend receiver pattern

Although *trend receiver* competence is context-specific and depends on the given topic and questions, some general elements appear in all cases and result in a *trend receiver* pattern.

1. Context experience: This person must have a deep understanding of the environment in question as well as the motives and values of the people in it. For this understanding, this person's preferences and emotions provide a good point of reference. In the consumer arena, this means that such a person is a user of or at least has good usage experience with a certain product or service, so that his or her experience is grounded and concrete.
2. Self-abstraction: While using their preferences and emotions as a point of reference, *trend receivers* are also highly self-aware and have the ability to ‘abstract from themselves.’ They are interested in a variety of people and perspectives, and have learnt to deal with and understand paradoxes without lapsing into relativism.
3. Curiosity, heterogeneity, and open-mindedness: *Trend receivers* want to understand causes and interdependencies, and this wish to see clearer implies a high level of curiosity and open-mindedness. Their fine antennae

permit them to both understand a context's structures and to perceive weak signals and dynamics of change.

4. Selection competence: In the ocean of new information and new offers, the ability to filter and to feel which structures, motives and values remain stable – and the extent to which new behaviors might emerge – becomes critical.

### 3.2. Key findings concerning research question 2: how does one find these individuals?

The classical approach to finding adequate persons would be to define some clear criteria and to screen for persons that fulfill these requests. This is not the best way to find *trend receivers*, for two reasons: First, their skills can hardly be fitted into clear criteria suitable for conventional search processes and item batteries. Characteristics such as having lived abroad, high income, or a specific occupation may correlate with *trend receiver* abilities, but they are only indications that there is a higher chance of finding the right persons. Also, even more sophisticated screeners such as the milieu indicator or lead user item scale (Hoffman et al., 2010, p. 857) don't have the necessary distinction capacity to get sensitive high-caliber conversation partners to discuss strategic and important topics.

Second, the search process is simply more efficient by pyramiding, as the conditions described by Prügl are fulfilled in the case of *trend receivers*: The desired characteristics are seldom found and are heterogeneously distributed, and these individuals as well as the intermediaries are highly connected (Prügl, 2006; Hippel et al., 2009; see also Fig.6).

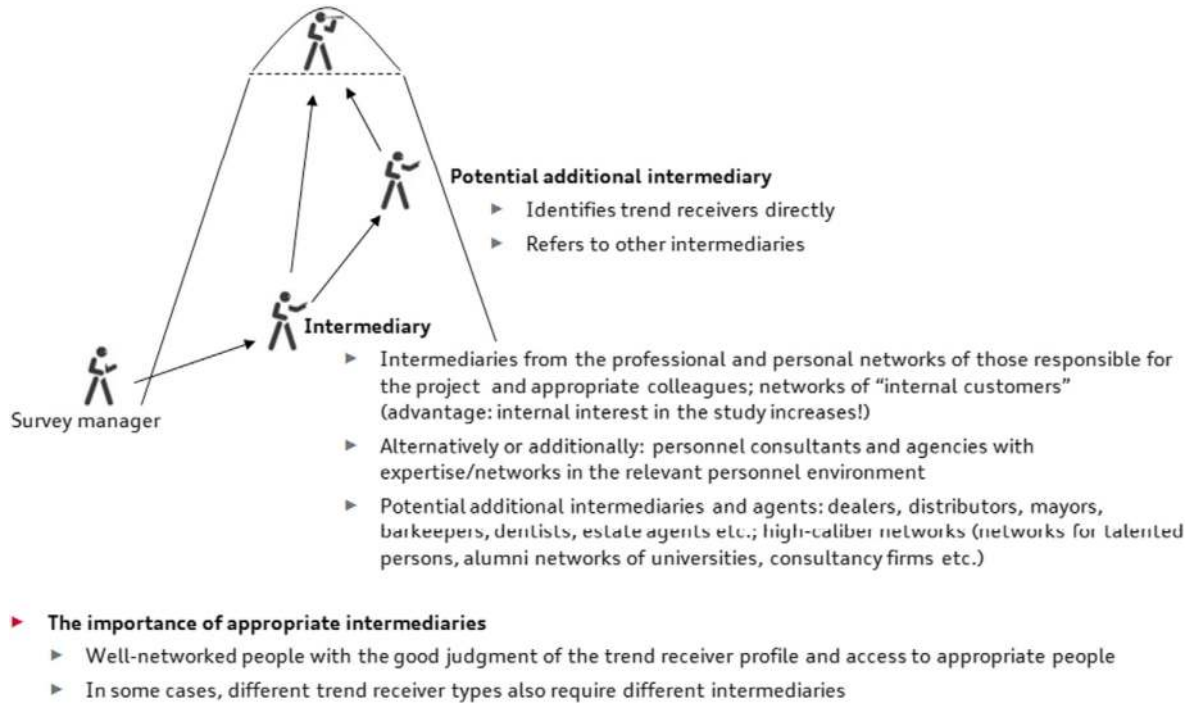


Fig. 7. Identification of trend receivers by pyramiding.

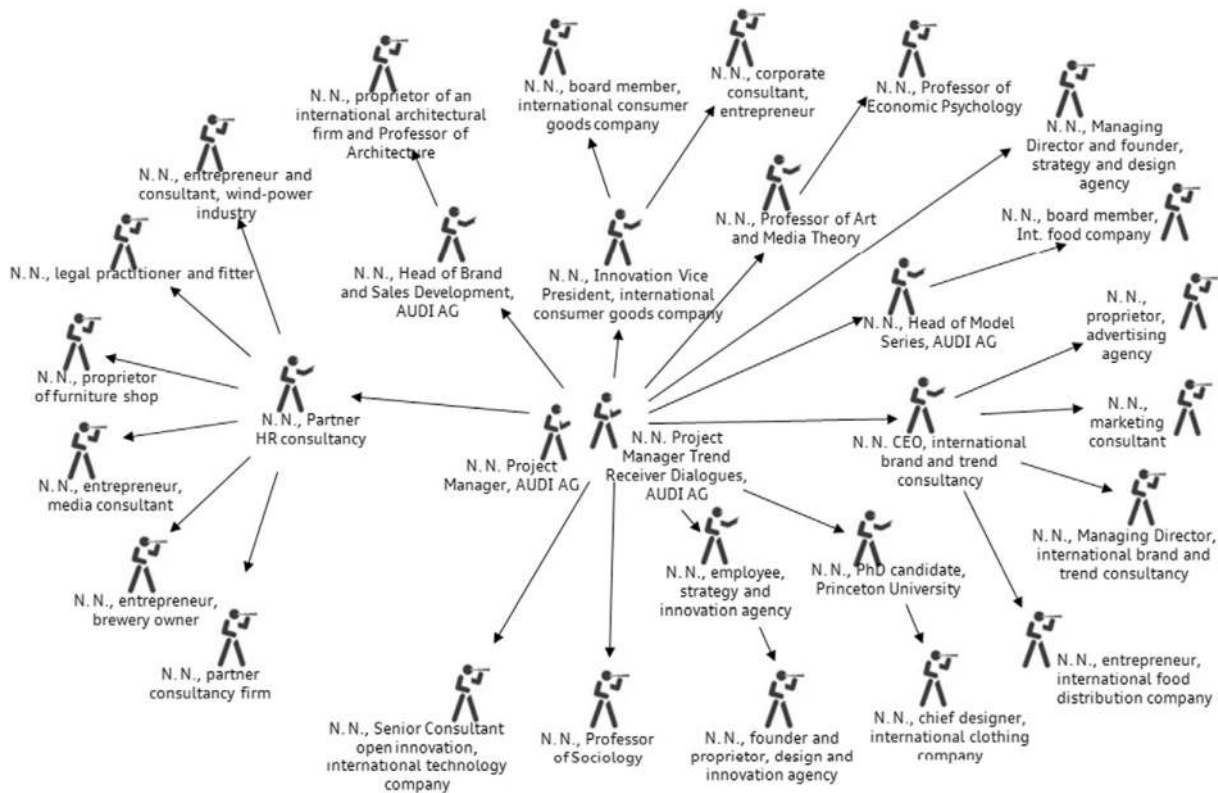


Fig. 8. Search process within an Audi study: at the center the project managers – they are starting point of the pyramiding processes and contact the intermediaries; trend receivers (symbolized with a telescope) at the outside.





Fig. 9. Stages of trend receiver projects.

### 3.2.1. Identifying trend receivers by tailor-made search profiles and pyramiding

It is much more efficient to identify trend receivers by pyramiding than screening processes (Prügl, 2006; Poetz and Prügl, 2010). “Pyramiding is a search process based upon the idea that people with a strong interest in a topic or field tend to know people more expert than themselves” (Hippel et al., 2009, p. 1397).

As a basis for the pyramiding process, a tailor-made *trend receiver* search profile must be elaborated. This search profile (in the mentioned Audi case studies, it was generally two pages long) can be provided to appropriate intermediaries. These connectors must fulfill two criteria: First, they should be able to understand the search profile cognitively and intuitively, second, they should have access to the desired types of people through their networks (see Fig.7).

Several connectors in the *trend receiver* search process of the mentioned Audi case studies commented that when they read the profile, some contacts in their network with a potentially high fit immediately came to mind, as if in an ‘inner film.’ Even well-connected people generally only know a limited number of potential candidates – often two to five persons in their wider circle of acquaintances (Hofmann, 2011b, p. 23).

It is therefore desirable to have a variety of good intermediaries. Searching in different networks for the most adequate persons also helps increase heterogeneity in the *trend receiver* sample. In this way, those responsible for a project can choose the sample of conversation partners from a batch of appropriate candidates.

### 3.2.2. Similarity to headhunting activities

The process shows some similarities with the practices of headhunters, who also seek to cherry-pick the best possible candidates by contacting good intermediary persons (Hofmann, 2010). Although this should not be the only or primary source of candidates, getting help from professional HR consultants can be a good complement (see Fig.8).

### 3.3. Key findings concerning research question 3: how does one organize the conversation?

A key term in the conversation with *trend receivers* is *premium treatment*. It is crucial to demonstrate the company's clear will to learn more from the observations, perceptions, and perspectives of the individuals participating in this exchange about future concepts, and to explicitly and strongly value their arguments. For the participants, these studies should provide insights into interesting

strategic questions and topics, and the research projects should be of mutual benefit. *Premium treatment* implies a personal and appreciating contact and sincere openness to views, arguments, and possible criticism. Each *trend receiver* conversation (or workshop or other format) should be prepared individually and the outline and setup of the conversation (or workshop or other format) should be tailor-made. Finally, *trend receiver* studies and contacts to *trend receivers* should not be used for advertisement purposes.

On the side of the moderators or interviewers a high-level of conversational skills as well as deep comprehension of the questions and topics is crucial. The task is to have dialogs and discussions on eye level and to follow the flow of thoughts and insights that evolve along the conversations. Thus obviously one can't stick to a guideline although it is necessary to prepare oneself and the questions for the conversation (or workshop). It is essential that the moderators or interviewers are able to challenge the *trend receivers* and to contradict and instigate. Ideally more than one person lead the *trend receiver* conversation.

For *trend receiver* projects processuality is a central element (see also Section 4.2 concerning reflective judgment). This means to learn from one *trend receiver* conversation to the next and to take up a thread again – with the same or another *trend receiver*. It implies new and surprising directions, frequently demands further research and sometimes brings up new questions or leads to new persons to talk to.

It is very helpful if persons responsible on company side drive or at least participate in these processes (instead of completely outsourcing it to an agency). Like this they learn directly and are much better able to transfer the outcomes into the companies and to help applying them.

## 4. Conclusion

### 4.1. General steps in trend receiver projects and its contribution to vision finding, long-term decisions as well as brand, product, and service development

Both in personal life (going back to the personal questions I mentioned earlier: “are you considering giving up your job for something new?” or “are you considering going abroad for some years?” or “are you considering a large loan to buy a house?”) and in organizations, long-term decisions and development processes call for good advice, observations, and arguments. In terms of intangibles such as changing market conditions and customer expectations, the perceived uncertainty frequently leads to the following options:

- quantitative market research in order to rely on the questionnaires filled out by hundreds or thousands, and the statistic consistency arising from this or other forms of analysis of gathered client data
- qualitative market research with a sample of persons representing the target group
- hiring business consultants
- consultancy by trend agencies
- lectures by “trend gurus”
- advice from individuals in the personal environment, such as close friends (as the cliché goes, when a board member asks his wife).

Although each of these options can make much sense, following this research and the *trend receiver* concept, is helpful to optimize the process of gaining useful statements and insights by asking the question *whom should one talk to?* as well as the resulting questions, *how does one find these individuals?* and *how does one organize conversations with these individuals?* (See Fig.9).

The *trend receiver* concept can open new ways to do this, as first practice applications have shown, especially in the consumer arena, where visionary competence is helpful to deal with intangibles such as changing customer expectations. While established approaches such as the *lead user* concept can be very helpful to gather ideas and inventions, the *trend receiver* concept focuses on individuals who perceive changes and potentials of *the new* in a specific area in highly sensitive and differentiated ways. These persons' characteristics diverge in many aspects from both the profiles of an inventor and a multiplier.

In epistemological terms this qualitative approach refers to Immanuel Kant's reflective judgment (see below). Although criteria of trend receivers and descriptions from realized projects are presented, this method of course depends more than standardized screeners (e.g. based on item scales) on situationally and anew applied reflection and interpersonal judgment skills of the involved and responsible persons (see an exemplary skills description in Hofmann, 2011a, p. 175).

#### 4.1.1. Direct trend transfer by combining insight and foresight processes

Practitioners are normally confronted with the task to draw trend information from internal or external foresight and research projects, literature, conferences, etc. and to make this trend information useful and applicable for the company. They have to answer the basic questions: “and now: what does that mean for our strategy, brand, products, services, communication or company structure and processes?” or “how can we use these new influences and potentials?”. It becomes crucial to find or enable concrete applications of the gathered information in the company and to influence actual measures. Thus, the persons involved obtain the task to build ‘bridges into practice’. (A typical practice in many industries is the discussion of megatrends and the attempt to relate them to the company).

Conversations with trend receivers can be a helpful alternative or complement to this process: The tailored identification of *trend receivers* based on given concrete questions can provide a very direct transfer through these highly skilled and well-informed persons. These persons have already received ample trend information prior to the given project and questions. Thus they processed and integrated the

information they received and the observations they made (both information and observations from their particular environment and more general trend knowledge).

Then their context experience – in the consumer arena this means a good usage experience with a certain product or service – works like a catalyst that relates the knowledge and observations to the concrete questions. It somehow concretizes the received trend information and it provides tangible answers. This is why for a given topic the trend receiver conversations can be a new and practical approach by integrating both foresight and insight research aspects.

From a theoretical perspective this research presents a new approach to the challenge of fulfilling the necessity for visionary competence, that is needed in studies on changing customer expectations, vision finding and for long-term decision and development processes. It offers a new concept of characteristics of the ‘right’ conversation partners as well as a new technique for the identification processes of these persons. For this a general definition and four general criteria of *trend receivers* are introduced while at the same time promoting tailor-made search profiles and tailor-made identification and conversation processes. These processes are concretized by Audi case studies. Thus the *trend receiver* concept offers a further methodological ‘brick’ for innovation, trend and strategy research and a complement of existing approaches.

There are several possible starting points for further research. For example research is needed that discusses similarities and discrepancies of varying *trend receiver* profiles for different project tasks – across and within different companies and industries (or further entities with strategic planning and necessity to reflect on changing values and expectations such as city or state governments).

Also, many developments under the moniker *big data* will provide new opportunities in foresight, consumer, market, and trend research. This might foster the need for a special skill set of intuitional, observational, and rational skills that mark *trend receivers*. It might be interesting for further research as well as practical applications to discuss and experiment how visionary competence can be applied as a complement of new data analysis approaches.

Moreover, if Larry Page from Google is right, companies have to do long-term bets from time to time or otherwise they won't be able to survive (Schulz, 2014). For companies following this conviction it might be interesting to discuss these bets or ‘moonshots’ (or in innovation management speech ‘disruptive innovations’) with *trend receivers*. This might help to concretize the vision and to imagine how the ideated product, service or business model might work in everyday life some years from now. In addition to several other options of research and analysis conversations with trend receivers might be helpful to sift out the right long-term bets – and later to help winning them.

#### 4.2. Arguing the case for a tailor-made study design and nonstandardized search profiles and processes: Immanuel Kant's reflective judgment as epistemological basis

What is the basis for the determination of the *trend receiver* criteria – the search profile, the selection of the intermediaries, and the chosen *trend receivers*? To what extent are these determination and selection processes subjective

or even arbitrary? These questions lead me to discuss the epistemological basis of the *trend receiver* approach. The *trend receiver* concept clearly refers to Kant's concept of reflective judgment (Kant, 1963).

In his *Critique of Judgment*, Kant distinguishes between determinate and reflective judgment (Kant, 1963, p. 33–34). He understands judgment as the ability to subsume a particular under a universal. If the universal (the rule or principle) is given, he calls the judgment *determinate judgment*. In contrast, if only the particular is given and the general/universal must be found, judgment is *reflective*.

The success of reflective judgment can only be detected ex post (that is, in the future): if successful, the leading idea proves to be congruent with then evident empiric regularities respectively nature. So thinking and acting prospectively the task of reflective judgment implies the conviction or assumption that nature is going to be congruent with the idea. Whether or not this proves to be right is at first not known. It requires a “guiding anticipation of success” that can only be proven later on. This anticipation is inherently abstract (Kulenkampff, 1978, p. 37).

The *trend receiver* identification process refers to reflective judgment, because the task is one of an unsecure resolvability, requiring “guiding anticipation of success.” Based on the conviction that there are individuals who are much more qualified than others to bring up consistent (and surprising) observations and arguments and to discuss possible and likely future developments, search profiles are written in order to find these – as yet unknown – qualified individuals. So the search profile is a makeshift collection of criteria that can only be verified later, when one meets real persons that understand and utilize relevant signals of change and thus future potentials. The ‘rightness’ of the selected individuals and thus that of the search criteria as well as the chosen intermediary persons can only be verified in the future, when it has become clear whether or not specific statements were beneficial.

However, this should not be perceived as a defect. In fact, working with makeshift criteria is a natural part of foresight and trend research activities. It is in the nature of future that it is unclear and formed by new constellations; it can be described only in a limited and provisional way by current terms and categories. *Trend receiving* is by definition a process of reflective judgment. It is somehow a process of ‘writing something in the fog’ or ‘constructing a guiding star.’ Carrying on the reflection process and readjusting the interim findings gradually helps one to see clearer and to become orientated about what should be done in order to use potentials of the new and to participate in shaping the future.

In epistemological terms, the *trend receiver* identification process is thus more liberal arts-oriented and requires reflective judgment as well as individual research and reflection efforts for every new project or study. For this, a qualitative *trend receiver* description, in combination with pyramiding, generally seems to be the most effective and efficient way. Considering the research questions and given context, it calls for the conceptualization of a tailor-made search process and research design. This gives one access to *trend receivers* and their visionary competence, which may contribute significantly to the long-term development of brands, products and services.

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