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# Trend Seeking – a CrowdSourcing Model

## Abstract / Summary

Not always do statistical research models apply to the needs one can have. When the goal is to seek new trends, for example, the existing models do not apply, for a variety of reasons, being the most important one the fact that there is a creation, and not only a validation in the process, and creation cannot be evaluated by means and other statistical data, since one single person in a group of 100 may be the only one to see a particular trend.

This paper is about a new research model, based on crowdsourcing. It has been first designed to the edition of a book (Speculations and Trends 2010-2012, edited Dec 2009 by Vida Económica), and redesigned during the process. The paper aims to explain how the model was constructed and redesigned until its present version, since it is a new research method that will probably have adjustments and optimizations in the near future, either by the same author or by others, that are welcomed to mashup it to their needs.

The crowd is in this case a selected database, which is used to come up with the existing trends and later on in a filtering process, where the author takes also an important role. The first phase is to select a database that is big enough to have relevant qualitative data, and short enough to be treated. The initial process is based on a wide open question, with no limits on the form and dimension of the answers, not even sector ones. This allows a huge diversity of content, exactly what is needed in a case like this, something that would never be possible using traditional questions or other methods based on quantitative data. The limitations described by James Surowiecky in its book “The Wisdom of Crowds” (2005) apply to this particular part of the method.

The method described in the paper has a complex filtering system, done by iterations, where selected persons (by defined criteria) are contacted to comment previously mentioned trends. The author (which in other cases can be a project team) is supervising all the process and takes also part of some critical tasks of the filtering process, as well as a research on a very large number of them.

Regarding trends, there is a very special limitation that must be considered: time. One cannot work for long periods on the same trend seeking task, otherwise there is a risk they are

identified too late, and there is no time to market for the marketers to act on their strategies. Trends change in a very dynamical way and it's important to remain on an acceptable period of time on this kind of seeking tasks. This is obviously one of the most relevant considerations, when open questions are done to hundreds or thousands of people. The model addresses a way to work on this subject too, and ends with a proposal on how to segment and report the trends that were identified.

The paper has also a description of the limitations and further research (which already begun).

## **Keywords**

- Trends
- Crowdsourcing;
- Qualitative data;
- Model;
- Seeking, Filtering, researching

## **Introduction and Objectives**

In a world where markets change faster and faster, the ability to preview what will happen in the future would make an absolute difference and a vital factor not only for firms survival, but for its grow and evolution in a sustainable way.

Previsions can be established in some science fields, especially those where historical data can help on statistical treatment of some previous assumptions. But markets are not developing towards cycles of do-the-same-again, they are moving into a permanent set of innovations paths, absolutely impossible to preview or estimate. We all can guess based on experience and intuition, but what about a scientific approach of how will the markets move tomorrow, how will consumers act and react, what will be the new drives for marketing?

The answer is trends. Looking up for trends can help managers, executives, firms and marketers see where markets are moving to and prepare for that long way before. The main differences on trends regarding estimations, previsions or pure futurism, is that trends have began somewhere already, and it is based on that “early birds looking” that one can somehow define what will follow.

On the other hand not everything that has begun will be a trend. Most will be just short period fads that will not impact on market movements. Moreover, some will be local trends, important to local players but irrelevant to global markets. There is a big difference between one and the other and it's not just a question of scale (though that one is important too): its that global trends tend to influence the leader markets towards a direction where other trends show up. These are the most important trends.

I took the decision to work on these global trends, based on the following assumptions:

- There is no research method capable of treating trends, since the statistical models need quantitative data (normally historical one), which is not available yet;
- These trends are of the most importance to firms and marketers, and they cannot just rely on magazines of individual intuitive sources – or even a good set of sources, but that will never guarantee them to have a large spectrum of analysis.
- A new research model have to be created and implemented, which is, apart from the process result (trends) being the most important, a challenge itself.

The decision of creating a new research model was followed of a seeking process among existing ones that could be adapted to this one. The problem is that most models have one of the following approaches:

- Mathematical or statistical models that need data input to create an output;
- Empirical Model based on intuitions, deductions, experience or other data to create an approach that one cannot absolutely prove to be right, but may use as a good approximation.

Unfortunately, when wanting global trends, one cannot find global persons that have “global opinions”. Sure, some people travel a lot and know a set of important cultures, but they have only one vision, when it comes to resume. No one is diverse enough to give this intuitions, opinions and visions, and the risk of believing that a limited set of high-profiled and multicultural persons (such as global executives, political leaders, top marketers or best high school teachers) can achieve a global good result on which managers are companies can trust to prepare their own strategies based on, is absurd high.

I needed a research model that would unite a set of diverse and independent visions from a large variety of places in the world where different cultures, habits, levels of development, needs, political environments and all the other external contexts exist. Also I would need the most different persons in each of this different micro segmented markets. From housekeepers to executives, from taxi drivers to unemployed, from writers to feminists, from niche to mainstream...

Also I needed to get real qualitative data from these sources, not quantitative one. This is important, because it would be the only way to get real data out of them, and not asking them to evaluate data. It's an absolute different level of process. It's them who should say what is going to happen, not me. I should be a filter, as independent as possible, and creating the most possible validations among the sources to assure global trends.

I needed to create a cross-industry, cross-disciplinary, cross-country model that could – with a limited resource of time and money – result in an acceptable number and deepness of global trends, that could help marketers define the best strategies for the future. I will call them trends for the purpose of this paper, even if they are marketing Trends, in what means the further use of them. They are not only trends about marketing, but trends that all marketers should be aware of.

## Research Model & Method

Research Model and respective method will be described together since there is an iterative process I need to describe in this paper, so that one can understand the initial model and the differences (and its reasons) to the final version.

Considering the method needs I decided to use crowdsourcing – which is a trend by itself – as a basis for this model creation. From all possible solutions, it seemed the far better one, absolutely designed for the proposed goals.

The crowdsourcing has been best defined and contextualized by James Surowiecki [2005], in a book called “The Wisdom of Crowds”, that resumes his works on the subject and results in a very relevant conclusion:

The result from a crowdsource (if it is correctly done) is better than the result of the best answer of the most accurate person in that crowd. It means that not only the result is better than the average, but it is better than the specialists. If this applies generally, not to mention how this will affect trends, with a more relevant diversity than other subjects, where the asymmetry of information is greater.

For this to be true, there are four mandatory conditions to be fulfilled, the ones that characterize wise crowds:

- 1- Diversity of opinion;
- 2- Independence;
- 3- Decentralization;
- 4- Aggregation

I had to create a model based on these conditions to assure getting relevant and trustable data from the crowd. Before that, I have sought for available models.

As far as it is possible to know, there is only one model for trends crowdsourcing already existing, it's the one the big crowdsourcing platforms use for this purpose. These companies (such as trendwtaching.com) use large amount of people all around the globe (but mainly in Europe, India and United States) to come to a trends result, which they sell to the markets (to companies or individuals), in a set of possible solutions. The methods used by these companies – even if no academic data of them was possible to get from a research of this particular

subject done by me in this process – is based on permanent interviews/questionnaires, that are fulfilled by a large number of persons.

This may be a good method to validate trends (...). It is not a good one for trends identification. So, it would not be enough to use this kind of (also new) models. I had to go deeper and create a model that allowed people – let's call them trend seekers – to decide. Decide which themes to talk about. Decide how deep they go on each of them, how they present it and what is their own opinion about the sustainability of the trend I a global way. It had to allow trend seekers to answer to the most open possible question. The goal was to ask them about trends as wide open as possible, while explaining the purpose, the only limitations (they could not share or ask anyone else to assure the independency) and giving them a deadline.

I must say I developed the model on the way. I prepared a first version (a base one) and then adapted it over the way, optimizing as I saw the needs of it. I will present the first and the final version of it, and between both I will describe how the process was, step by step. This allows the understanding of main differences between the first draft and the final model.

### **Model First version** (draft used on kick off)

1. Create a database of a considerable number of people worldwide. The database should be greater than 200 persons, the approximate number of countries in the world, and the ideal would to be greater than 500.
2. Contact this people by email, asking them a wide open question about trends, explaining briefly the purpose, limitations and deadline. The email should be as small as possible, to ensure most people will read it, and should have a good topic also. The aim is to assure a ver good level of answers.
3. Assure to receive more than 50% of answers. It is only possible to contact this persons twice apart from the first email, as follows:
  - one email to the people that did not answer, 48H before deadline, to ask them for the answer, reminding deadline
  - a second time, just after the deadline, giving a new final deadline, one week after.
4. Should you have not assured point. Go back to one and enlarge the database, creating a second wave, adding the results of the second to the first. Continue doing these iterations



until the result is acceptable in the defined terms. Results (answers) that diverse more than X months one to another cannot be used in the same research, since trends have a perennial. X is a variable that depend on the type of trends you want to get as result. If they are trends for the next 1 to 4 years, X should be 4 months, if they are greater than 4 X should be from 8 to 12 months, depending on the trend perennial needed.

5. Consider also answers after the deadline, as they enter in a period you are still able to treat them;
6. Document in a datasheet the answers (number, mail, name) without its content.
7. Translate the answers in one language only, the one more convenient for you [this is not mandatory, just a way to turn the process easier to treat] and copy them all into a single document, segmented by issue (split the individual answers into issue-parts)
8. Maintain the original answers and the datasheet that resumes their income in a folder
9. Give each of the segment a title, based on content (examples: energy, astronomy, travel).
10. Eliminate what you are sure to be just speculations and highlight the one that lay in a grey zone, where you need more information.
11. Contact people that answered to the highlighted areas back and ask them the necessary questions and doubts, always with a deadline. Do yourself research on them. Update the central content file as you get the necessary information, eliminating crap.
12. For each of the segments do a semantic cleanup, remaining only with topics and relevant information. Aggregate them by sub-topics. Prepare a report, resuming the trends in a defined order (relevance for your business, number of answers, innovation level, etc) for each segment. Do the same type of order among subjects.

This was the beginning model. It was based on it that I started the work, July 2009. Immediately after begin I saw that a different approach had to be assured based on the initial database, because it is very easy to get big databases, but they are spam-oriented. Fortunately, I was able to see this before starting to kick out emails that never would be answered out there, creating both inefficiency and frustration. I needed to create a database that on the one hand was able to fulfill the wise crowd conditions and on the other could see the email as something as far away from spam as possible – something with value and interest.

I decided the best way to do this is not doing all of the time. So I passed 3 weeks sending out emails to shorts groups of persons that I have taken from all kinds of sources (specially online). First of all, I used my networks. Having at that time contact to 2000 persons via email

and 4000 via social media (thanks to a early bird LinkedIn entrance), I was able to resume shorts groups of persons with common languages and skills, and sent out emails to this groups (of 6 to 20 people each). The subject was equal (except for language), having very little non visible differences that helped me mark (and do Gmail email aggregation) them. I emailed around 800 of this personal networks, in a way to maximize diversity in all ways : sex, age, culture, social level, studies, professions and other skills I was able to have an idea of. I did this steps in n empirical way, since it seemed stupid to use a strict sub model to characterize persons, whereby I could not guarantee the evaluation was correct. After these groups, I started to look for other groups of people to address to, like high school teachers or journalists. Each day I emailed a set of 5 to 15 emails and updated the datasheet. The third step was done after this, where I saw that some professions, countries, markets, ages, etc were clearly under considered. I tried to get people in this ranges, looking for online niche based persons, like culinary forums, skaters events websites, blogs or online gambling platforms. In some cases I was able to get some individual emails out of the source to fulfill my datasheet needs, in some others I had to ask for the help of the sites and blogs masters, which in most ways did.

This was before Facebook and Twitter explosion (even if some Facebook contacts were used in the process): Presently, sources could be adapted to have more social network basis, still the principals are the same always: as less as spam oriented as possible, as more diverse as possible. Also one concern is that in social media there is a risk of contamination that has to be very controlled. One should never see answers from the others (independence is one of the conditions and it will not work if this is not assured). So Facebook, G+, Twitter or other platforms cad be used to get contacts, to remind, to link to somewhere where a question is, but comments or answers from network should never be allowed, or its just useless.

During the process I emailed around 2500 persons in more than 80 countries throughout the world. I used more persons from more developed countries (USA, Europe, Southeast Asia) than from others, and in each of the markets I did contact more o the high profiled persons than the other ones. I did this asymmetry on my own risk, even if I maintained the necessary diversity. The reason is that this asymmetry caused information richness, because statistically these individuals read more, travel more, discuss more and so do have “more to say”. If this does not compromise diversity, it should not be a problem, but an add-on on content. An information turbo compressor that helps getting more, maintaining the conditions.

The email had the most open question I could find, after some trials and discussions with colleagues and a short group of proactive trend seekers I had been working on in the past:

**“What are, in your opinion, the trends for the next years (2010-2012)?”**

Apart from wide open, the question was the end of the email (it had a brief contextualization paragraph and a deadline before) and had no limits in language, format or dimension. It was issued on 7 different languages (Portuguese, Spanish, English, German, French, Italian and Chinese). Fortunately I am able to understand all this languages, apart from Chinese, so I avoided a translation “industry”, but in some cases it may be necessary.

In the sort introduction I highlighted the importance of the independency and so asked everyone not to talk to someone else about the issue. Research could be done, but if trends came from third parties, they should be mentioned, to avoid cross-source referrals appearing many times, while the source was unique, a error that could have a consequence in the conclusions. While the short email was designed to be as familiar and cozy as possible (remember: this no spam), I forgot three important things on the first series, that I had ro correct later on:

a) Prize.

Some people asked me: what do I gain to giving you me time? This is not only a rather fair question, but a market one. Companies are offering prizes for people to show up at focus groups, or just to do a one shot questionnaire fulfillment. Why should I be different?

It was my option not to create incentives for the answering of the mentioned question. I answered personally to each one of them, explaining that incentives would create a fake number of answers of people that were answering just for the prize, creating an incorrect path of content. Also I promised to this people to share the results of the studies that were being prepared – and people really enjoyed both of this: the strictness to the content quality and the sharing of information. I decided to add this to the first mail later on, as I saw the importance (we know if some (let’s say more than 3) people

are complaining about something, they're just the top of the iceberg, most people will think the same and do nothing) of it.

b) Confidential

This was the second set of questions about the email people have received. They asked either for more information for the purpose of the data (which is not only fair but also reveals a certain detail of interest in the project and the data itself, something I considered rather positive) or for the guarantee of confidentiality. I did not include a guarantee of that right from the beginning, because I wanted the email to be a small shot of text, and not a text with guarantees like a law or something similar to that. It was quite obvious to me, as in any quest, the individual sources to main confidential. But I learned from this that not everything that seems obvious should remain unwritten. Some stuff is just too important for some people and we should maintain it, even if the initial email is a very little short bigger.

c) Scope

I assumed that if I did not put a scope people would understand that the trends should be about any subject at all – that was really the logic, I wanted even to understand which themes are more important for the people, before descending to individual trends. Most people understood this. Unfortunately, some didn't, and almost all of them were women. This is not a skill difference, it's just an asymmetry coming from the fact that women read a lot more fashion magazines and the word "trend" is too correlated to fashion, so when I did not mention the scope they assumed it was the usual buzz for trend – fashion trends. I was able to see this quiet fast and corrected on it the first days, mentioning it should be for all the themes (giving even some examples)

So the final mail should have a short presentation of me and my project, the purpose of the question, the independency issue (not to talk or share with someone else), the prize (sharing the final content) and guarantee of confidentiality. After this: the question, the deadline and a personal goodbye.

I designed the email long before I had a final version, one where the reader could see the goodbye without scrolling, with 2 paragraphs and the question in bold. It had around 500 characters.

I was able to get crap-off answers from 712 persons, after the one reminder and one insisting steps. I worked with these 712 persons.

I had an idea about the quantity and divergence of data I would receive, if everything was going well. I thought I had, at least. The fact is that I was completely surprised with the range and diversity, especially in the form. Apart from the obvious languages differences, there were emails with one or two words and others with pages of text, links and videos. Some were incisive and others were like romances of storytelling stuff where the content was really difficult to find. This is what happens when you ask something open with the largest scope possible. I have asked for it. I worked on it weeks, putting it all together in a unique file, full of different colors and segmented by themes, as described above. The file had almost 800 pages of diverse text, even if during the process a part of the process has been shortened.

The next task was working on the file, taking weight off it, without taking content. Also pure speculations that were not a trend yet were eliminated (the most obvious ones, on the first part of this sub-task). This is something very subjective to do, and if it is not easy to do it alone, it would be a tremendous job to do it within a group (I'll come to that later). This is the first part of the filtering process, as important as phase of data sourcing.

The idea – as it is described in the process - was that data sourcing came from the crowd and filtering came from the author (in my case, or from a project team in others). I strongly believe that the most important change in this subject on the last decades is that information was previously scarce and now is just about infinite and cheap, so the value moved from information sourcing to filtering. Today, the most important factor is to know what the correct information is and how can we get it on a time to market basis. So, I was pretty proud of the fact that I could get all the information from the crowd and then I was creating the value of the filtering.

I changed this during the process.

In this case, I did not change based on complains, comments or just any reaction from elsewhere. I decided on my own to put the standards higher, looking for additional guarantees on the diversity of points of view.

So, I decided that a part of the filtering was to be done also by the crowd. This would help me to take the best final decisions on what were speculations or trends, and among speculations (my book is called *Speculations and Trends*, so it can afford some speculations that have a certain degree of probability to get a trend further on (mostly they are local trends that may get global)) which could come in the sieve. I was excited with this new idea and redesigned the model on the way, sure to have found a new, much better method than before. From all the persons I was contacting on a daily basis (mostly Skype chatting, emailing or just messaging) a very good part of the them confirmed my new plan to be further better.

I decided to chose a large set of trends (around one third of all of them) where I have doubts, and emailed back some 130 people that had answered the first email. What I have done was choosing most participant people in the whole process and send them a quick quest about potential trends, where they could valuate, from 1 to 4, if those were, in their opinion, really trends. I had to do almost individual quests, because of the decision that no one would be asked on trends they had, on their own, commented in their email and also because I was testing the trends in average situations and in the most opposite situations possible as well. For example, If I had a potential trend coming from a housekeeper in Argentina and a Barman in Brasil, I would test it in executives or professor in the United States or Europe (average) or a skater in Amsterdam, a designer in Tokyo and a hotel manager in Indonesia (other extremes in local or profession, or social status, culture etc). I tried never to ask people similar to those who highlighted the potential trend in the first place, avoiding a “segment error”. I know that with this decision I took the risk higher, but I knew also the final decision was mine and I was aware of this risk: I would have a better idea of global trends versus local ones, and could decide at which level of risk I would want my project to work on. My reputation would be based on that later on.

Even if the quests were sent out in a way that could been treated statistically (I assured each potential trend to be in a minimum of 40 quests), they were not. They were not because they should not. Most people are not aware of most trends, especially niche ones, so this would be a mistake. In opposition to this, I worked on a scarce basis, believing that if no one would agree on a trend it would possibly not be one, but if I had some level 4 (which text was “I am sure this is a trend”), it probably would be one, even with 2 or 3 yes among 40 people. Further research would give me additional data.

I had to make a third email in some cases where I was still not sure, but this happened only in a set of 5 trends, sent back to another 30 persons.

This steps took another additional month to the process, but it helped a lot. It made the process better and helped concentrate on best trends (only 40% of this third were approved), where I could now make additional research on.

It is important to highlight the fact that even if the idea of allowing crowd to decide on a part of the filtering process is a very good one, it is still important that the final decision remains on a single person or a team that make final evaluations based on all data, plus additional research done. This happens because a cocktail of reasons: it is not possible (time, money, energy) to ask people things enough so that crowd would decide everything, neither are they sufficient informed about the project means enough, neither is the database good enough to this (in number and knowledge), etc. The crowd cannot, at least in this terms, be used in a blind process for everything. It can source data, it can give additional help on filtering, and that's it.

On the next step – research – I was able to use not only the traditional sources (libraries, Internet based websites, databases, magazines, universities researches, governments and NGO's data, etc) but an additional one: my crowd. This time, I “used” them in an individual way: contacting some of them to discuss the research and the trends, to understand other points of view. This was done mainly by Skype, using my networks free time. It's important to consider worlds time schedules differences to Greenwich's standards on this process. In this process I not only discussed trends I had previously had doubts on, but almost every single ones of them, while doing research on the same time in other sources. The results discussion made the process have permanent mutations, especially because in a large number of cases my network immediately identified “area specialists” to join the group. For example, shall have we been discussing sustainability among a short group of 4 people on skype, one of them will bring – sometimes in in real time – someone that is specialist in the area into the discussion. This made a content richness on the discussion of the results, sometimes with people and specialists from 3 different continents in real time.

After the research and discussion phase I prepared a “report” for each segment (which would turn into chapters of my book), including the trends, its conceptualization and explanation at the same time. In this phase I have – again – send individual paragraphs out to “my network” (which at this time was not any more my previous network, but a set of people from the crows

very interested on discussion and helping to get the most accurate final text) for opinions and optimizations. This was a dynamical work where the main text stayed as it was written, but lots of optimizations insights and corrections were included. The main difficulty in this part was already a translation problem. Since the original book was written in Portuguese (and later on translated to Spanish for the Spanish, Mexican and Argentina Market) I had to translate the paragraphs and translate insights back, which made the process a bit heavy and slow. Because of that I only have done this in some cases I wanted to be sure of. The translation problem that happened here is not a issue of my work : it will happen all the time, except if one report in a multi-language way, which will happen in very rare cases of multinational companies or organizations such as the European Commission or other similar to this.

One cannot forget, during all the trends seeking process – that trends for 2 or 3 years (as was this case) must be totally researched and reported within a short period of time: 3 to 4 months, otherwise the time to market actions of the marketers gets shorter and shorter.

In resume, the final model, written on a way to optimize usage, instead of a traditional academic description.

### **Final Model**

1. Create an objective of number of people to be in your crowd. They should never be less than 200.
2. Create a database of a considerable number of people worldwide. The database should be greater in such a number that point number one is achieved. The recommendation is to consider a number greater than 500, ideally around 1000.

Contact this people by email (traditional mail would be acceptable too, in some cases, if meaning less than 10% of the global database), asking them a wide open question about trends. The mail should have a short presentation of you and your project, the purpose of the question, the independency issue (not to talk or share with someone else), the prize (sharing the final content) and guarantee of confidentiality. After this, the question and deadline and a personal goodbye, being as short and personal as possible (ideally less than 600 chr).

Be aware that mail cannot be substituted by social media. Social media has mainly a one-to-many contact logic, or even a many-to-many - not a one-to-one. This would break any



independence logic. You could use social media messaging in some cases, but my advice is to remain mainly on email, at least for most of the crowd.

3. Emails Should be designed in opposition to the design of spam mails we all receive every day. It should be personal, short and not prize-looking. Do not use bcc, only to, and send mails to short groups of people with the same language (and other characteristics), trying that people do not know each other in each of the mails. A short group means a maximum of 12-15 people, even if 6-10 is a good solution. A perfect solution is individual mails where you can address a light personal tune, if you can deal with the number of answers (not tagged into micro segmented groups)
4. Assure to receive at least the planned (1) number of answers. It is only possible to contact this persons twice apart from the first email, as follows:
  - one email to the people that did not answer, 48H before deadline, to ask them for the answer, reminding deadline
  - a second time, just after the deadline, giving a new final deadline, one week after.
5. Should you have not assured point 4. Go back to one and enlarge the database, creating a second wave, adding the results of the second to the first. Continue doing these iterations until the result is acceptable in the defined terms. Results (answers) that diverse more than X months one to another cannot be used in the same research, since trends have a perennial. X is a variable that depend on the type of trends you want to get as result. If they are trends for the next 1 to 4 years, X should be 4 months, if they are greater than 4 X should be from 8 to 12 months, depending on the trend perennial needed.
6. Consider also answers after the deadline, as they enter in a period you are still able to treat them;
7. Document in a datasheet the answers (number, mail, name) with some keywords of the content.
8. Translate the answers in one language only, the one more convenient for you [this is not mandatory, just a way to turn the process easier to treat] and copy them all into a single document, segmented by issue (split the individual answers into issue-parts)
9. Maintain the original answers and the datasheet that resumes their income in a folder
10. Give each of the segments a title, based on content (examples: energy, astronomy, travel).
11. Eliminate what you are absolutely sure to be just pure speculations and highlight the one that lay in a zone, where you need more information, have doubts. This would represent typically 25%-40% of the trends

12. Prepare a master quest with all the potential trends, to be evaluated from a part of your crowd. Evaluation should be from 1 to 4, with the following titles or similar: "1-I am sure this is not a trend; 2- This seems not to be a trend; 3- This seems to be a trend; 4- I am sure this is a trend"
13. Divide the master quest in different versions of questionnaires, in such a way you can assure no one will receive quests about trends he has highlighted in the first place.
14. Select a sub-database of the ones that have answered to the first email, your dynamic project network. This sub-database should include mostly the most active members. Members that were fast answering, had most content, seemed more interested and had any other external signs of project or content interest.
15. Allocate questionnaires to groups of this sub-database, maximizing variety and oppositional profiles to the ones that came with those trends before.
16. Send out the emails, explaining the reason and giving a deadline. Highlight the fact each of them/group of them have been selected from the initial X persons because of the richness of the content, or interest etc. Assure them the quest would take 2-3 minutes to fulfill, which should be true. Allow them to use a html/csv/Excel file, or a link to an online personalized quest if you want to maximize fast feedback. Ask them permission to come back to personal discussion on some subjects later on, asking only for a negative answer if this would be the case.
17. Do the quests analysis carefully. There is a hidden asymmetry on the process, so you should not consider statistical treatments. A set of more than one "4" to any question will possibly reveal a trend is out there somehow. The most probable case is that you get a lot of "2", because most people are not aware of not common trends (probably the ones you have doubts on). This does not mean a part of them are not trends.
18. Do research based on initial data and questionnaires, and start a set of day-to-day conversations (chat, messaging, mail, etc) with your most accurate and active members. You can include now specialists that were not in the network before, and also start some discussions with small and controlled groups via social media (depending on the purpose of the reports) or any not one-to-one contact, such as groupware, company forums, intranets, etc.
19. For each of the segments do a semantic cleanup, remaining only with topics and relevant information based on all data filtered and discussed with either the crowd or sub segments of it (or third parties).

20. Aggregate them by sub-topics. Prepare a report, resuming the trends in a defined order (relevance for your business, number of answers, innovation level, etc) for each segment. Do the same type of order among subjects.
21. Come back to the crowd in a way you consider the best and share your results.

## Findings & Results

The findings were that a model adapted from the principles of crowdsourcing can actually be used to identify trends and later on filter them into some type of criteria scarcity. But how good were the results? I could answer based on book sales (achieved number one position on the Portuguese top of El Corte Inglés, the biggest Iberian Peninsula retailer). But this is not really a good way to measure the success of the process (sales are more correlation with author awareness, cover design and retailing facing).

After ending the “Speculations and Trends 2010-2012 (prepared from July to October 2009 and published in December that year) I made small questionnaires for my own curiosity. These were designed to understand how extend readers agreed these themes turned into trends themselves. The first was sent out to a part my network (70 answers), and a second to my readers (46 answers). The first groups agreed on 81% of the trends (hard or low believing), the second 59%. One year later I came back to the same readers (44 answers). The value raised from 59% to 76%.

It is very difficult to take conclusions out of this data, since it is normal that an important set of people are not aware of the trends, so one cannot really be sure of the degree of success. Even so, I believe this values, mainly the increase in one year on readers that did not take part of the process (and therefore are a perfect group for audits and tests), are good enough to agree the process came to good results.

## Limits

What are the limits of this process and what can be tested to ensure it works, as well as how can it be optimized? How good were the results?

Regarding the limits of this exploratory model: I noticed that one of the chapters (finance, economics and geopolitical environment) should be treated different, because there are too many variables most people misunderstand. If investors – that have access to most expensive and detailed levels of information – do market mistakes all the time, it's just pretentious to believe the crowd will know. This applies only to detailed trends in this area. They have not work always correct (around 50% correct, 25% totally incorrect and 25% in the middle of both), having a bad approach to reality. Fortunately people enjoyed them even so, because of the explanations and conceptualization of each of them, especially China (in my case), where 90% of trends were correct (it was mainly different in Europe and Middle East). Low detailed trends (such as “more transparency”, “guarantees before profitability”, etc) worked very well. It's curious that that chapter has been so good evaluated among readers (which who I talk all the time), even if a not acceptable number of trends turn out to just not happen, because of market dramatic mutations. I am not sure this is the only subject where it does not work properly: it is among the ones I worked on (which selection was made by the crowd). Maybe the financial and economical environment has so many variables we can only believe in day to day researches: Or maybe a good tool of crowdsourcing based on an online algorithm with daily inputs could help. But isn't that what wall Street, Nasdaq, Euronext and the companies that work around them (such as the rating companies or consultant ones) do? How could the crowd (that has independence as a value others don't) help?

One other important limitation is the crowd to act in a volunteer way. They did help me in a proactive way, but they did know this was done for a single author to write a book, which results they could have access to. How will the crowd act when they are told the trend seeking has a commercial goal, to help a particular company to adapt to its market. Will they be available to help? Will they want a different prize?

## Further Research

I invite every single own, academics and executives, marketeers or just students, to use the described models and adapt or optimize them in the way they choose. It would be helpful if any finding would be reported, because it could help everybody make a step ahead in the process.

There are two tests I will try to do on the model myself in the near future:

1. I am preparing a second book, also based on trends. These are absolutely different trends. These are Management Trends. Stuff that is being discussed on best campus over the world (mainly USA and Europe). I am adapting the previous model to this one, and the result will be rather different (even so, involving 200- 300 persons just for filtering). Apart from the project itself (called “Harvard Trends”) the aim was to see how the previous model could be adapted to a range of high skill level of trends, on which just a small niche of people is aware (the book will be logically an intent to distribute this kind of information). As I am writing this paper I am not sure of the final result of this project, aimed to be ready to go by the end of 2011.
2. I intend to prepare a new edition of Speculations and Trends during 2012, to be ready by the end of the year (Speculations and Trends 2013-2015). In this case I will try to make some improvements in some areas, trying this achieve better and faster results:
  - a) Include Japanese and Russian as possible languages. While a good part of India knows English, Russia and Japan are still less developed on the language (except on high level), and this limitation should be eliminated, if I could find volunteers for this.
  - b) Expand database from the 712 answers to 2000 crowd-active-members, maintaining the diversity on the various characteristics.
  - c) Work team based, instead of alone. I will try to get my two MBA classes in IPAM and EGP-UPBS to work on the project, even if only in one chapter each (risk-controlling), to see which are the challenges of group work in such a high-contact-level task.
  - d) Include area specialists for each of the chapters. Volunteers that do not source neither filter. They just help on final validations, giving better support on

explanations and highlighting the need to better researches on some individual trends.

One also important further research would be the to understand how the crowd cooperates when working for different goals, such as for university academic research, a company with commercial goals or a sector NGO.

## **Managerial Implications**

The theoretical model presented in the paper intends to describe a new insight to the practical of business management. It is obvious how this model can help companies, executives and marketers identify the trends that will conceptualize tomorrow's market, and therefore be an important tool for developed firms.

However, these models can be used – with light adaptations – to other purposes, where the content importance is mainly qualitative, using the crowd as drive.



## **Bibliography**

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