



Yoda is My Hero

By Kevin Kelly

Among the inventions of California, the think tank may be the most overlooked. Part research lab, part consulting racket, and part sandbox for bright, nerdy types, a think tank sells deep analysis of complex trends in politics, society, and technology. One of the most legendary think tanks is SRI, based in Menlo Park, California. Watts Wacker joined SRI in 1995 as a futurist; previously, he ran a global project for Yankelovich, another think tank, tracking the shifting values of consumers - as in, What do they want? Although he has a degree in cultural history, Wacker's formative education came from his three years with the Kenner toy company and from the two radio stations he operated in Texas.

Wired

: It says here on your card, "Resident Futurist." How does one become a resident futurist?

Wacker

: You become a futurist just by announcing that you are.

Umm, so what do you actually do?

My job is partly to be a provocateur. My role is to make sure that companies I consult for don't make sins of omission. When they try to define the boundaries for a strategy or a problem or a new product, my job is to make sure that they aren't setting them in a constricting layout and therefore limiting their flexibility and their opportunity.

Do you make predictions?

Five years ago, I predicted that Halloween would become the second biggest holiday in the country. As far as influence upon our psyche, it is now second only to Christmas.

So, how does a resident futurist go about making such forecasts?

I think any futurist who tells you they know what's going to happen is being a bit arrogant. Rather, it's really like being a good science fiction writer. There's a logic behind your story; it makes you nod your head and go, Yeah, I could see that. That could happen.

Then how do you come up with these persuasive "could-be" stories?

One of my favorite techniques is to use observational work. For instance, recently I've

bused tables at Taco Bells. I've driven the shuttle bus from Avis. I panhandle in the George Washington bus terminal - my record is US\$62.14 in one day.

And what do you learn from doing that?

I would call my observational work a tool for gaining social empathy, for perspectives other than my own.

What other methods do you use?

I've given 1,000 teenaged boys a camera with 100 pictures to take of their life. I then sort out what's going on with kids in general based on their visuals, not words.

And what did that tell you?

If you really want to understand what's happening with a kid, the only place you need to excavate is their room. Because it is an unbelievably on-the- surface sense of their personal mythology. Also interestingly, every teenaged boy took at least one picture of the same thing: somebody mooning.

Does your research point to any large-scale trends?

The last 500 years have been West to East, but we're going to have the initiative over the next 500 years coming East to West. We have a predisposition in Western culture for "just do it," to coin a phrase. Whereas, I think that part of the future will be built much more around "just be it."

Does that persuade you that the next century will be an Asian century rather than an American?

America is not going to be setting the pace of the world. But we do own the dissemination, OK? "Circle of Life," from the soundtrack of the Number One movie in '94, *The Lion King*, is an Eastern initiative. The source of trends is going to become East to West. But the infrastructure of trend dissemination is owned in America.

There's already a very big, powerful, dynamic place where East meets West. It's called Russia. And it's looking for a job, by the way.

I agree. That's a very possible 100-year scenario. I see the Sleeping Bear rising. It doesn't have to be Russia per se but perhaps the Balkans. But to tell you the truth, I think the pacesetter is not going to be within a corporate boundary.

Where else do you look for forecasts?

In language. About 25 percent of the English language is new - created in the last 20 years. Take the term *modularity*. A couple of decades ago it

was usually applied to a stereo, what my generation called components. Well, there is a new word for that today, it's called *peripheral*. The only ones who own the word *peripheral* are in the information industries. But, listen. How come there's no food peripherals? And what about travel peripherals? If you can own the vocabulary, you've got a head start on everybody.

As a futurist looking at long trends, do you think that the world's getting better or getting worse?

The previous generations embraced the value that "life is too short," right? In the next

generation, we're going to change that fundamentally to "life is too long."

Do you have any heroes?

Yes: Yoda. Yoda says [switching to amazing Yoda voice], "Try? Try not, do. There is no try." Every word Yoda said was sacred.

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