

trenDNA: Understanding Populations Better Than They Understand Themselves

Darrell Mann¹, Viktoria Zinner²

¹CEO and Technical Director, Systematic Innovation Ltd, UK

²Consultancy Innovation Management, Zinner e.U., Austria

Abstract

TRIZ represents a comprehensive set of tools, methods and philosophies for generating breakthrough solutions. In addition, the ideality concept assists by defining good problems. In general terms, we know that everything evolves towards an Ideal Final Result destination. However, the traditional TRIZ toolkit is largely incapable of dealing with the inherent complexities of understanding specific customer behaviour, particularly in a world which is rapidly transitioning from tangible to intangible dominated customer drivers. A 10 year programme of research to fill in this gap in the innovation story has resulted in the development of the trenDNA methodology. The trenDNA methods are designed to permit a better understanding of population and consumption behaviour. Thus the method is designed to not just deliver innovative ideas and solutions but also to create customer-orientated marketing concepts. Currently, we are moving from an industrial society into a knowledge and communication society, influencing and changing our desires and behaviour, and also our markets. trenDNA gives answers to questions such as "Where can I innovate?" and "How can the product or service be developed so that it is able to successfully sustain the changes of society?". These are questions which are already on the top of the priority list for many companies and becoming more and more important for many leaders.

trenDNA operates at a five intertwined levels. The core level involves the elements of customer need which may be thought of as 'absolutes'. These factors lie at the heart of the TRIZ methodology: Function and Perfection. Any innovation attempt that fails to deliver the required functions (both tangible and intangible) and at a level of ideality greater than currently available solutions, is bound to fail. trenDNA adds four more layers beyond these 'absolutes'. They are of a descending degree of specificity, intended to help users to take into account the progressively broader range of factors that may come to influence customer behaviour. The second trenDNA level concerns 'inevitables' and comprises analyses of generations and thinking styles. It is the level that effectively defines the DNA of consumer and market trends. The research suggests all trends emerge from these generational and thinking styles. In the book version of trenDNA are the top 160 consumer and market trends for a given geographical region (at this point in time we have US, UK and German-speaking regions, with Australia, Brazil, India and China research programmes rapidly coming to their completion). Each of these trends has been related back to the underpinning DNA. The importance of this connection is that in addition to being able to use the current trends to define the positioning of new products and services, it is also possible to make objective predictions about trends that have not appeared yet. Consequently, the trend cards and underpinning DNA have been shown to deliver a significant leap forward in the ability of organisations to increase their innovation success rate. Most traditional innovation attempts fail because of a failure to understand the prevailing needs of the customer. Customers – whether B2B or B2C – are inherently complex creatures, and as such successful innovation has largely been achieved by trial and error. Few organisations are able to succeed sustainably at the innovation job. One of the main reasons for this high level of failure is an inability to understand how strategies that worked in one scenario can very easily completely fail in another.

The route to breakthrough innovation almost invariably involves the idea of "thinking outside the box". The question in many organisations is "In which direction should we be looking?" trenDNA is designed to provide objective, repeatable answers – partly through the trend cards, but ultimately through the contradictions between trends. This may just be the single most critical insight from all of the trenDNA research; almost every large organisation already spends significant resources collecting trend information, but rarely does this information lead to breakthrough solutions. We have found that it is not so much the trends themselves as the conflicts between trends that direct and determine innovation success.

Another important consequence of dealing with complex systems is that linear, sequential processes are rarely the best way of getting to a solution to an innovation challenge. That said, many problem solvers (and corporate cultures) expect to work through a structured process. The trenDNA research has devoted a significant amount of research time to resolving this structured-unstructured conflict. The trenDNA-journey starts with the overview of the process of project definition and leads into a six-step circle. Within this circular process are two inner circles. The first is a place for recording solution 'clues' and the second, central circle, a place where the clues are transformed into solution concepts. Each of the six steps is designed to allow users to generate as many clues and opportunities as possible. As consistent with any complex system, our chances of success are highest when we are able to gather and combine as many clues as possible.

In many ways this approach is the polar opposite to that recommended by many classical TRIZ experts. For example, the ARIZ process demands that users work through a strict sequence of steps such that 'the answer' is revealed in the final step. In the six step trenDNA process, we go so far as instructing users who prefer not to work in a sequential manner to 'roll a dice'. In years of developing and validating the robustness of the process, we have determined virtually no correlation between sequence and success. trenDNA is a structured process, but for complex systems, 'structured' does not mean the same as 'sequential'.

One step of the trenDNA process involves use of the 160 cards, each describing one trend. These cards can be seen as a series of signposts in an innovation project. On the back of each card the trend is analyzed through connections and contradictions to other trends. Herein, very often, lies the biggest innovation potential: breakthroughs happen when an innovation resolves one or more trend conflicts. Users can find relevant conflicts through a variety of means. The simplest involves selecting a single trend known to be important in a given customer scenario and looking (on the back of the card) for the trends that are in conflict. The more scientific approach to identifying the trend conflicts involves mapping the relationships between multiple trends.

trenDNA supports the process to discover 'white spaces', to gain a better understanding about the society and consumer behaviours in order to meet customers' requirements, needs and wants, and to find the most appropriate solution to a given innovation challenge. The methods and strategies of trenDNA describe in a structured way how companies can create systematically breakthrough innovations. In practice, the methods are normally explained through workshops and applied to practical examples. The team works on a specific problem, generating systematically innovative ideas that correspond to tangible and intangible customers' needs and wants. trenDNA 'opens new doors' for companies especially in the area of product development and marketing. While the tools of Systematic Innovation have been traditionally used for technical questions, nowadays they are increasingly used for business as well.

Keywords

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Contact

Darrell Mann

Systematic Innovation Ltd

Address: 5a, Yeo-Bank Business Park, Kenn Road, Clevedon, BS21 6UW, UK

Phone: +44 (1275) 337500

E-mail: darrell.mann@systematic-innovation.com

Viktorija Zinner

Zinner e.U.

Address: Niederdorf 91, 8611 St. Katharein/Laming, Austria

Mobile: +43 (0) 664 1326966

E-mail: viktorija@zinner.cc