For a full list of related titles, and for other reviews that we do not have space to print, visit our website www.theidm.com or phone the IDM on 020 8614 0274

Book Review

Journal of Direct, Data and Digital Marketing Practice (2010) **11**, 262–263. doi:10.1057/dddmp.2009.43

Future files: The 5 trends that will shape the next 50 years

Richard Watson

Nicholas Brealey Publishing, 2008; softback; £12.99; 291pp; ISBN: 978-1-85788-514-9

Valuable source material

Not exactly a must-read book for direct marketers in particular, nor indeed a gripping unputdownable yarn for the general reader — but perhaps a valuable collection of source material for anyone who wants to ponder the direction(s) in which the world may be heading. The implications for marketing of any one of the trends discussed here are potentially enormous, but the reader must ponder and work them out for him or herself.

The author starts with a brief summary of the five most important trends for the next 50 years: ageing; the eastward power shift (cf. the Opinion Piece by Sir Martin Sorrell in Vol. 9, No. 1); global connectivity; GRIN (Genetics, Robotics, internet and Nanotechnology); and the environment.

Subject matter

There then follow 12 chapters: Society and Culture; Science and Technology; Government and Politics; Media and Entertainment; Money and Financial Services; Automotive and Transport; Food and Drink; Retail and Shopping; Healthcare and Medicine; Travel and Tourism; Work and Business; Conclusions. Followed by a piece that the author presumably didn't want to call Chapter 13 — five things that won't change over the next 50 years.

Where and whither

Each chapter is preceded by a summary of the five most important trends for the subject matter of that chapter. There then follows, in each case, a description of where the world is at now, followed by a discussion of the directions in which it might be moving, and the possible longer-term consequences of such movement.

Only careful extrapolation ...

The author is careful, for the most part, to avoid hard predictions of the future: he states that it is his aim to 'reinterpret the present' to 'show familiar things in a new light and unfamiliar things with greater clarity'. On the whole he is successful in this: where he chooses to extrapolate what he sees as a current trend into the future, he is quick to point out the dangers of such an exercise, and the possibilities of counter-trends, or reactions.

... with some exceptions

There are exceptions to this careful approach, and they can be irritating. Thus we are told bluntly that 'computers will eventually become more intelligent than people', but nowhere is there an attempt to define 'intelligence'. And on the very next page we are told that not

only might we download human intelligence into a machine but we might add 'human consciousness too'. Again, no recognition that philosophers and physiologists (to name only two disciplines) have struggled in vain to define human consciousness — or even to be certain that such a thing exists.

AI and Alan Turing

Later on (p. 42) there is a brief reference to work on Artificial Intelligence (AI), and mention of the (in)famous Turing test, together with a recognition that it may possibly never be passed. (To which I would add that although passing the Turing test would be an enormous stride in robotics, it would prove absolutely nothing about intelligence — unless we first define intelligence (as Turing did) as ability to pass the Turing test, this being a definition I, for one, would not accept, even though I can't offer a better one.)

Impressive quantities of material

I suppose the difficulty here is that the book is grounded throughout in factual material — what is being done now, and where — followed by a deal of intelligent, but fairly superficial, speculation on where this might lead and what the consequential problems are for the world. Given the impressive amount of material that has been gathered from 'a myriad of newspapers, magazines, reports and websites', there isn't much room left, within the scope of a fairly hefty book, for profound thoughts on the meaning of life, the universe, and everything.

Yet it is precisely such thoughts that should be stirred, and fertilized, by this potpourri. And along the way there is room too for thought on how some of the more certain trends we can observe, even over the next 5 years never mind the next 50, might impact on marketing.

Don't try to read this book straight through — it would cause you severe mental indigestion. Pick and mix if you must, or just take a few pages at a time.

Robin Fairlie