

CRYSTAL BALL OR COMPASS?

The challenge of planning in unpredictable times

Marketing can be defined as the art, or a bit more humbly the knack, of giving people what they will want.

While that sounds simple enough, there are two familiar gatekeeper types blocking the way to marketing heaven.

Firstly, predicting anything is hard. Really hard. As a football know-nothing cravenly trying to fit in with colleagues, I turn to the BBC's Mark "Lawro" Lawrenson and friends' predictions to help fill the Euro 2020 bantz-shaped hole in my life. A quick glance reveals the disappointing result that, at 10 games in, Lawro is bottom of the heap of expert predictors, with a slightly less good track record than if he had handed over duty to a psychic sea cucumber, or rolled a three-sided die. In fact, of 160 total predictions so far, only 7 got it spot on. All this against a game with a very limited set of realistic outcomes and a modest number of variables (i.e. not much like real life).

Secondly, as we all know (but pretend we don't when the research goes our way) there is a pretty enormous chasm between what people say they will want and will do, and what actual behaviour turns out to be. A timely example would be attitudes towards vs. actual uptake of COVID vaccines. In a recent UK study, 53% of people who said they would definitely not get a jab have now done so, while of those claiming they were not likely to, or very unlikely to, a whopping 84%, in fact, had (happily).

FOCUSING ON WHERE WE NEED TO GO

Systemic unpredictability and flaky self-awareness. Together, they conspire against the success of what you can call “crystal ball” planning: the idea that we can cut through the volatility of events and hiddenness of human behaviour and make definitive statements and honestly say “the world is heading in this direction.”

But given that we do need to place bets on growth, what’s the alternative?

We think the answer is Compass Planning. Instead of trying vainly to anticipate what will happen, you focus on where you should go. Instead of second guessing what is going to change in human behaviour, you concentrate on the stuff that never really changes. Concentrating on our known fixed points, rather than chasing the unknowable variables.

There’s an old analogy to this in the world of moral philosophy. Do you side with the Utilitarians, who try to act according to what will do the most good to the most people? Or do you go with the Kantians, who think your best bet is to work out your fixed principles and stick with them regardless of what gets thrown at you? Life has generally taught that the latter wins, mainly because it favours acting based on some simple shorthand rules, rather than delaying decisions until you’ve vainly attempted to calculate all possible outcomes.

And if that all seems a bit lofty, you can see the spirit of our Compass Planning in the words of Jeff Bezos:

“I very frequently get the question: “What’s going to change in the next 10 years?” **I almost never get the question: “What’s not going to change in the next 10 years?”** And I submit to you that that second question is actually the more important of the two...”

At VCCP our Compass Planning methodology is helping clients navigate for growth by concentrating on what we can know, and ignoring the fruitless pursuit of what we can’t. We help clients uncover and take confidence in what won’t change:



GUIDING PRINCIPLES

Brand truths: from Cadbury to Nationwide, O2 to ComparetheMarket, Saga to Dominos, we help brands rediscover and recommit to what they've always done best, the story they can keep faith in regardless of what changes around them.

Human truths: technology changes, economies change, demographics change, but people are basically people. In times of surface volatility, we help clients return to the simple human ideas, needs and feelings that have always motivated us.

Market truths: our industry loves the idea of "unprecedented", but most of what passes for such is actually pretty precededented. We focus much more on market changes that have a history, that may have accelerated or intensified recently, but aren't wild swings away from what we've known.

With these principles, we're helping clients move confidently towards growth, not through the imaginary predictive power of the crystal ball, but the more trustworthy aid of the compass.

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