

Nine trends for a world in flux

 By [Dion Chang](#)

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Just in case you've not heard it enough already, 2009 will be all about collaboration, social networks and the rise of the individual, not to mention location-based services, sustainability, changing value systems and spirituality.



1. **Collaboration:** the economic meltdown in 2008 has already proved to be the perfect incubator for this trend. Shrinking budgets and non-existent cash flows have forced people - and businesses - to form mutually beneficial relationships to weather the recession. Cross-branding became the buzzword in terms of marketing in 2008, but a jittery global economy has ensured that this trend is now viewed as a sensible opportunity, if not a necessity.

The airline industry, which has suffered sharp declines in passenger and cargo volumes (US\$4bn losses in the first three quarters of 2008), is calling it "industry consolidation". British Airways is currently in merger talks with Qantas, while continuing similar talks with Iberia, who in turn are in talking to American Airlines about a transatlantic alliance.

On the home front, many cash strapped families have already started collaborating by sharing homes or pooling resources. Extended families and single, or newly divorced, parents are living together to cut costs and assist with parenting children.

This trend echoes concepts such as the open source software movement in the IT industry, where sharing and collaborating is seen as a new way forward, rather than the traditional notion of territorial ownership, which today looks rather outdated and limiting.

2. **SNS as a mobilising force:** social network services such as MySpace, Facebook and Twitter are forging connections between people like never before. We are moving through the "honeymoon phase" of new media and we are beginning to grasp the true potential of this level of inter-connectivity. Individuals can discuss any topic that appeals to them, no matter how diverse their interests, with like-minded others. Out there, there is a group for everyone, and a forum for any discussion.

The scope of conversations that exist today is absolutely mind-boggling, ranging from anything as obscure as the toxic value of concentrated pine tree sap, to the comparative study of 1970's Nintendo consoles. On the one hand, there is this "nichification", and on the other hand, popular groups are gaining ground and actually becoming a force to be reckoned with.



Take for example the recent challenge put to Coca-Cola by someone with a big idea. (Remembering that Coca-Cola is a huge multinational corporation, so why would it listen to a single voice out there?)

But what Simon Berry (the big idea guy) did was start a Facebook group called "Let's talk to Coca-Cola about saving the world's children" and invited all his friends to join, who in turn invited all their friends and so on. The idea was to use Coca Cola's existing, and extensive, distribution lines to send out oral rehydration salts and other medicines, to the poorest parts of Africa, by dedicating one compartment in every 10 to saving a child's life.

How could Coca Cola possibly say no? So, what transpired was ColaLife - a website dedicated to expanding the Facebook group and encouraging suggestions as well as hands on involvement from members of the community.

In 2009 we will see the power of social network services increasing as people begin to realise that together, they can have a powerful positive impact.

3. **Geomapping:** virtually tagging our world. Google searching has revolutionised the way we interact with information. Filtered and optimised searches have made the access of information fast and easy. With the advent of Google Maps and mobile GPS technology, we are witnessing an all-new hybrid form of search that is 100% customizable, from mood to taste to hotel preference.

IFeelLondon, IFeelNewYork and IFeelToronto offer location-based searches according to the mood of the traveler. The best activities for someone feeling hung over would be vastly different from someone who was feeling energetic. Mood-based searches offer a more personal, curated experience of a city than any handbook available on the market could, satisfying a broader need for people to enjoy more personalised experiences.

Similarly, SeeYourHotel is a search by location service that allows users to view actual pictures of the hotel rooms and the surrounding area, as well as read reviews by previous guests (innkeepers take note: treat every guest as if they have come to do a review for the *New York Times*). EatBite, currently available in New York only, allows restaurant goers to search by location, price range, nearest landmark and food type - the ultimate customisable search. In that case, I would like to eat a pizza for no more than US\$15 as close as possible to the Empire State building...

4. **Closed system design:** we need a new way of living, it's clear. The old way simply does not work anymore. Waste continues to pile up in landfills, as the machines - that changed the world in the industrial revolution - continue to pour out wasteful, toxic products. The entire system needs to be rethought.

There is a solution, back at the drawing board.

William McDonough, long time eco-activist and architect, proposes remaking the way we make things entirely. McDonough and his partner, chemical engineer Michael Braungart, have developed a process of industrial design that effectively cuts waste out completely. The Cradle-to-Cradle system, or C2C (as opposed to the cradle-to-grave system) takes a biomimetic approach, which takes into account human industry and ecological processes. In this model, all raw materials are seen as nutrients, and just as in the life cycle of a plant, which dies and decomposes to become food for the next plants, all parts of the whole can be broken down and recycled into new parts.

In 2009, re-commerce will play a more significant role in small businesses, with more entrepreneurs beginning to realise the commercial value of recycling. Large corporate companies, mostly looking for ways to minimise waste and improve public opinion, will continue finding better ways of waste management.

McDonough Braungart Design Chemistry has worked on major projects for global companies such as Nike, Ford and Gap, as well as implemented several projects for the Chinese government. If they are listening, shouldn't we?

5. **The rise of the individual:** there has been a strong backlash to the ubiquitous and the mass-commoditised, especially in mature consumer markets worldwide. People increasingly want to feel special, not part of a blanket target

market that falls into a certain demographic. People are no longer a demographic; they are individuals, with individual tastes and specific preferences.

Whatever your industry, in order to reach them, you need to offer them increasingly personalised products or customised services, tailor-made to their needs.

Companies such as Nike have realised this, offering truly bespoke, DIY (design-it-yourself) sneakers, and so have remained one step ahead, even in the face of potentially back-breaking child labour allegations in the late '90s. Nike's earnings have increased from US\$6.4 billion in 1996 (when the accusations were first made), to US\$17 billion in 2007, so it must be doing something right.

The notion of "make something and then we'll sell it" is increasingly giving way to "let them design it and we'll produce it for them", offering people the choice that they have become accustomed to in other areas of their lives.

Self-expression is also a key factor to the individualistic paradigm, which signals a strong contrast to anti-globalisation and a shift away from the mass-marketed, cookie-cutter mentality that came with it. Increasingly, people will find more creative ways of expressing their individuality, especially when they are feeling particularly squeezed for cash.

6. **The consumer revolution:** the rise of the individual is also ensuring that there's a remarkable revolution underway. Consumers have evolved - rather quickly we might add - from passive consumers, to what Flux likes to call, "active aggressive" consumers, and the inspiration for this revolution is coming from the unlikeliest of sources.

Two seemingly opposing trends - the eco movement and interactive technology - are coming together to produce a very vocal and demanding consumer, and one that is difficult to categorise. The Internet and satellite TV have provided "armchair wisdom" for the global populace, while the blogosphere has provided a quick and effective outlet to vent their frustrations or displeasure. Add to that mix, growing awareness (or guilt) of environmental issues and you get a socially aware, part-time eco warrior with access to global communication.

It's a retailer's worst nightmare. These new consumers now demand not only brand participation but also bespoke services and complete corporate transparency. If you are able to personalise anything from your bed linen to your breakfast muesli online, why (they ask) are you not able to do the same in the offline world? This is known as the "change gap": the delay between advancing technologies and the corporate response to catching up with the changes that those technologies bring.

For retailers and corporate companies a good place to start would be to simply switch from a "here's my product, buy it" approach, to a "thank you so much for choosing my product", because consumers do have alternative choices - plenty of them.

7. **Cottage garden envy:** it's either a knock-on effect of the economic slump, or pressure from the green movement, but whichever way you look at it, everyone is discovering the horticulturalist within, and growing their own vegetables. The novices dabble with herbs, but the seasoned vegetable growers can tell you when it's suitable to plant pak choi and where to place the asparagus. The really trendy ones are embracing cottage gardens (where vegetables are planted in amongst flowers) as opposed to kitchen gardens (where you have a separate vegetable patch).

Either way, less disposable income will mean that, when having a dinner party, it will be quite acceptable for dinner guests to "bring a dish" - in fact, having discovered their horticultural talents, your guests will only be too happy to show off their sustainability skills.

Flux predicts that homegrown vegetables will become the status symbols - hence, cottage garden envy for those late trend adopters. Imported, out-of-season vegetables will become, quite literally, so very last season.

8. **Changing value systems:** a recent issue of *Fortune* magazine posed a question that is sure to strike fear in the

hearts of any luxury brand company. It asked, "Even after the global economy stabilizes, will anyone want [US]\$2000 handbags, or [US]\$5000 watches? Or is there a risk that 'luxury' will go the same way of yuppies and become a fad that many would prefer to forget?"

CEO of Yves Saint Laurent - Valerie Hermann - calls the current retail situation as "a crisis of values"... and Flux agrees. In the past year, consumer perception and mindset has changed radically. The era of bling, disposable fashion and conspicuous consumption has made way for cradle-to-cradle design systems, recycling and timeless (read not wasteful) design. This shift has made people redefine the concept of luxury: it is no longer something material, but rather an experience: preferably shared, and ideally with your nearest and dearest.

Corporate companies are also feeling the mood swing. Bill Gates set the ball rolling with his campaign for "creative capitalism": an attempt to stretch the reach of market forces so that more companies can benefit from doing work that makes more people better off. And the revolution has already started. If companies have spare cash to enter into sponsorship agreements, they now insist that it is linked to some form of CSI. It's no longer about simply slapping a logo onto everything. It's business with a heart.

Who knew big business had one?

9. **Micro-blogging meets meditation:** these days it seems more and more difficult to keep up with the constant flood of emails and SMSs and while we struggle to clear our in-boxes - and manage our second lives - there is a growing need to anchor one's self before being completely swept away by technology.

Virtual life, for many of us, has permeated through all the porous boundaries of our lives - online is the first place we look for anything, be it directions, telephone numbers or product information. When we get home, we switch on the television and zone out after a hard day's work; some of us even game.

These days we engage more with the screens (cellphone, computer, television) in front of us, than the people around us. But in the distance, subtle calls echo for a more holistic approach to life, as we sense the need to nourish our emotional and physical selves in an increasingly virtual reality. A gym session to alleviate stress no longer helps very much. Mindful practices such as meditation and yoga have become increasingly accepted as essential parts of our daily lives, and ancient traditional religions and religious practices such as Kabbalah have taken root in mainstream consciousness. These practices offer a sense of being connected to something more than just the Internet, as people strive to find more meaning in an increasingly disembodied world.

In 2009, people are looking for solid grounding amidst the torrential downpour of information in our virtual world.

ABOUT DION CHANG

The top nine trends for 2009 are issued by Dion Chang at Flux Trends. Go to www.fluxtrends.co.za for more trend information. Own *The 2009 Flux Trend Review* - an indispensable handbook covering the latest trends affecting our lives - published by Pan Macmillan and available at most bookstores nationwide.

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