

The future is largely free...

 By [Dion Chang](#)

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From free stuff to permission based marketing, people power, techno stress, the redundancy of human contact and the need for reflective thought... It's all there in trend watcher, Dion Chang's eight trends for 2008.



1. The prospect of a FREE LUNCH

Humans are a species obsessed with ownership, so it is quite significant - not to mention surprising - that there is a very strong trend towards giving things away for free. The trend is already establishing itself in the media where news is now being distributed for free, and not just online. The *Citizen Metro* is handed out, at no cost, to commuters on busses, much like they do to subway commuters in Europe and *The Times* is delivered for free, as an added value to all subscribers of *The Sunday Times*.

The open source movement in technology is also underway, and will have huge benefits for start up businesses. Google has already launched Google Docs (a web based alternative to Microsoft's Office package) to compliment their free email service Gmail Webmail. Blyk is an invite-only cell phone service in the UK that is offering 16 to 24 year olds 217 free SMSs and 43 minutes of free talk time per month, in exchange for receiving six advertisements a day.

Bands like Radiohead launched their new CD online, and simply asked people to pay what they thought the music was worth. Not quite free, but a radical step that shook the music industry earlier this year. Make no mistake, all of the companies launching these "free initiatives" are still able to draw revenue from an alternate source within their structures (eg: Radiohead would still make huge profits from touring and selling merchandise), but the move to give away some part of the financial pie is nonetheless a remarkable trend.

2. PERMISSION BASED MARKETING: Don't call me, I'll call you

The increase in advertising spam via your cell phone, email and internet has produced a very real resistance movement in consumers.

There is a growing backlash to unsolicited advertising, and marketers are taking note. It is no longer effective, or wise, to use an indiscriminate approach to reaching your target market. Results are showing that it is becoming more effective to speak directly to the people who really want to hear about your product, or provide customers with an edited package of “information clusters” that eliminate excessive spam. Location based marketing systems like Blue Tooth in focused environments like university campuses and shopping malls are reaping the rewards of speaking to a crowd who elect to listen to what you have to say.

On the flipside, businesses are able to extract even more precise data about their customers' spending habits. Permission based marketing may seem too radical, or narrow, in its approach for some companies, but it is a concept that cannot be ignored in this age of information overload.

3. The reawakening of CIVIL SOCIETY

Communities are beginning to rediscover the effect of “people power”. Many writers and social commentators have wondered what has happened to the community spirit that brought about civil rights movements like the 1976 Soweto uprisings. While the younger generation now defines “the struggle” as being put on a waiting list for the new iPod, there are pockets of communities banding together to make a difference.

We see this in the uprisings in Khutsong where the community has taken a very vocal and visible stand against a unilateral government decision to transfer the municipality to another province, as well as in civil protests in other communities that are fed up with lack of service delivery. The launch of Prime Media's Crime Line not only involves the community in the fight against crime, but also assists the police with tip offs. It has already shown remarkable results.

The trend is a welcome reminder that change can be affected, as long as communities work together.

4. OUR DOUBLE LIVES: The impact of living in the virtual world that we have created

We all agree that technology has made our lives easier, but now a lot of people are asking the question, ‘Has it really made our lives better?’

Alarm bells started ringing a while back when doctors witnessed the rise in child obesity, brought about by an increasingly sedentary lifestyle that computers and computer games invite. Parents are battling to drag their children away from their Play Stations, computer games and the social networking world that has become the norm for many young people, and psychologists are warning of the dangers of living in a virtual world.

Communication via SMS and social network services like Facebook are what Flux identifies as ‘mezzanine levels of communication’. They are becoming dangerous buffer zones to reality. In young children, social skills development is affected, while many young adults are developing other personas - vastly different from whom they really are - in cyberspace. Even in business it has also become increasingly common to communicate for months with someone without physically meeting or even speaking to them. Normal human interaction, crucial to social dynamics, is slowly being done away with.

5. TECHNOLOGY FATIGUE... and the rise of the resistance movement

Some call it technology overload, we call it technology fatigue. Blink, and you discover that you're one or two upgrades behind - yet again! Your new cell phone/laptop/car is constantly being made redundant by the latest, new and improved, must-have model. It is a vicious cycle, and we are caught in the eye of the storm. We upgrade blindly without considering why. Most of us don't use half the operating systems we have on our computers or phones, and yet we are continually driven by the fear of being left behind.

Without realizing it we have become so dependent on machines that we find ourselves living in a B-Grade science fiction horror movie, where the machines control us, while we naively assume that we remain in control.

There is a small but growing resistance movement of people who are trying to claim their lives back... Are you ready to step away from the machines?

6. STEALTH BOMBER STATUS: Playing hard to get has its rewards

It's telling that email is now considered to be one of the primary causes of stress in the 21st century. Email is one of the most brilliant inventions of our time, but it comes at a price: it's a treadmill we are never allowed to get off, and the people who believed that Blackberrys would simply enhance email accessibility, are quick to discover the real reason why they are nicknamed 'Crackberrys'.

Email and cell phone technology has ensured that we are contactable 24/7, but is it really necessary - or wise? The benefits are obvious, but the side effects are only now beginning to surface. Reflective thought, and the time to make considered decisions, is becoming a luxury. We make decisions on the run, and we accept this as a way of life. However, the less time we have to consider the long-term effects of our quick decisions, the higher the chances are of disastrous consequences.

Flux Trends predicts a new strategy: that of flying low under the radar, and purposefully limiting one's accessibility. We are not advocating total withdrawal, just more selective availability. The strategy puts its trust in the theory that if someone really wants to get hold of you, they will eventually. You really don't have to be at everyone's beck and call. It's a subtle shift of perspective, but a refreshing (not to mention empowering) one nonetheless.

Try this Stealth Bomber tactic for starters: File for "email bankruptcy" the next time you have to travel or go on holiday. Leave an out of office reply that states that all email messages sent during your time away will NOT be read and will be deleted. You then ask people to kindly resend their mails once you are back. You'll be surprised at the number of non-essential mails you deal with on a daily basis, and can eliminate. It's not rude to do this, just reasonable email etiquette that should have kicked in ages ago.

7. The lure of the SPECIALIST

We live in a global village, and wherever you travel you see the evidence of this. A shopping mall in Jakarta will look and feel very similar to one in middle America, thanks largely to global franchises. Mass market fashion chains, fast food outlets and coffee shops replicate at an astounding rate and spread like a universal rash across the planet.

However, there is a growing movement that celebrates individualism, and with that, a growing trend to find individuality in products and design.

With eco consumerism on the rise, provenance of a product is becoming more and more important, as is its uniqueness. The fact that we do live in a global village is forcing people to look for differentiation, rather than similarity. You don't want to make the effort to travel to a far-flung corner of the planet, only to be greeted with a shopping mall filled with shops and brands you have in your own city.

The same applies to services. Looking for a carpenter to refit your sash windows, or a watchmaker who can service your antique clock? Skilled artisans are becoming harder and harder to find, but they do exist and their businesses are booming.

The Flux prediction? If you have a unique trade or service, specialize and do it well. There is a growing customer base out there that will make the effort to find you... and spread the word once they do.

8. REALITY BITES: Dealing with an ideological hangover

There are many sobering factors that will converge and influence the mood and attitude of society and business in 2008. It is as if we have been given a collective wake up call. The turbulent political landscape we are experiencing has been sobering, not only for the people of the country, but for the politicians themselves. We have all been forced to ask the question: 'What sort of country (and democracy) do we really want?', and thankfully, that question makes us look beyond individuals and consider the bigger picture and our long-term options.

Economically, we are coming out of a boom period, and the harsh realities of interest rates hikes, rising inflation, skyrocketing prices of crude oil, and a leveling out of the property market will force us all to tighten our belts and consolidate. The party is not quite over, but it is winding down - rapidly.

The euphoria surrounding South Africa hosting the 2010 Soccer World Cup has also settled. Strikes by stadium workers, newspaper headlines proclaiming, 'The first crime victim for 2010' and FIFA's watchful eye (and subtle concerns), have all resulted in a more sober approach to the task at hand. This is too precious an opportunity for the country to waste, and deadlines are looming.

Our rose tinted glasses have finally been lifted and we find ourselves adjusting to the glare.

ABOUT DION CHANG

Flux Trends is a new trends analysis company launched by Dion Chang, who also launched his now-annual Flux trends review event in 2007. The company's byline, 'The State We're In' says it all. Visit: www.fluxtrends.com for more.

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