

How to identify a trend

By [Andre van der Merwe](#)

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In my own experience, I identify a trend based on an initial intuition, but I always combine intuition with research. Research helps to validate an idea, it gives you a chance to step back from the idea and engage it from a distance.



Andre van der Merwe, co-founder and Director of Eiffel Corp

Research may take on industry validation, peer benchmarking and may bury you in a library of reading, which are all part and parcel of testing the trend or new business venture.

When I first started our business twenty years ago, I was in a fortunate position to sense an inflection point between technology and education. I had spotted the proverbial swell on the ocean that later became a wave. It was related to timing – timing the swell as well as the wave. But it took six months of research to really see the opportunity, the swell that would become the wave.

As entrepreneurs sometimes you only have one chance to stand up on the board, so you have to make it count. Spotting a trend requires a certain dedicated presence and deep attention. Passion, enthusiasm is important but it's not a silver bullet.

Let the trend work for you

Many people fail to realise that trends also have a dark side; innovative ideas or an industry trend need to be viewed with a healthy degree of skepticism. Innovative ideas are like romances, there has to be an interest from both sides. Let the trend work for you, let it seek you out as much as you seek it out.

This may sound strange, but never let an idea of inspiration make you do all the work. In the identification of a trend, there is often a coincidence of opposites, just like the tension outlined in Greek mythology between a bow and lyre.

The true harmony of the trend or idea is possible only when you see the Ying and the Yang of the trend, the tension which is present at each end of the instrument. Trends can be your friend and equally your foe.

Just because you were successful before is absolutely no assurance that you will be successful again. I have seen arrogance lead to mediocre results because people fail to see what made them successful in the beginning. Humility and research go hand in hand.

Should I have an idea, and it sustains itself in a meaningful conversation, I will only then invest energy into research. Who are the competitors? What level of funding is required? Perhaps a great trend presents itself, but we may be the wrong business or at the wrong cycle of our investment path to investing in the trend. I really try to avoid at all costs trying to go from zero to hero with a potential business idea.



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What I've learned is that really good ideas and trends have sufficient timelines and should not be rushed. Ideas are not all sweet candy, failures are an integral part of exploring and acting upon ideas. Ideas and trends are seductive. As an entrepreneur, you need to be able to identify a trend and be equally able to say no to it. Begin with caution and always validate and research the trend.

Past success can lead business leaders to stop listening. We lose our humility and become too self-important. Mediocrity can also cause you to stop paying attention. Today we rely on our team to spot trends of which I am part of. We have recently had the opportunity to introduce a new Student Information System into Africa.

We had noticed many unsatisfied customers for over a decade but the ultimate decisions to venture into this area took hundreds of hours of research. The ultimate direction was validated by a team of our executives after many international flights, extensive internal business negotiation and planning. Our brand reputation will always be more important than a trend.



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Pay attention

Paying attention is a leadership skill. Spotting a trend requires attention.

In the sector of education technology, I believe Artificial Intelligence (AI) is going to be important, and our current research is to establish what role it will play in education.

Pioneers are the people with arrows in their backs, so there is often a debate about being the trailblazer in an industry and first to market, or hanging back and seeing the market's appetite for the trend.

It will be interesting to see who creates the beachheads with AI in education. We will watch the trends emerge before choosing a strategy, because we may let AI romance us a while longer yet.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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