



David Murphy talks to Future Concept Lab president, Francesco Morace, about the Lab's work and its detailed research into health and wellbeing.

There isn't a client-side marketer in the world who would not pay a king's ransom to be able to see into the future. Isn't this, after all, what almost all market research is about? Trying to predict what consumers will do and want in the future, based on what they have done in the past?

At Italian research institute Future Concept Lab, the focus, as its name suggests, is fixed firmly on the future. The Lab's approach to trying to predict the future is based very heavily on observation. It has correspondents in 50 cities around the world who, through photographs and interviews, analyse and track consumer behaviour, in order to deliver insight to the Lab's clients on the macro trends that will influence the products and services that consumers will want in the future.

Future Concept Lab works with large multinationals like Procter & Gamble, Philips and L'Oréal. Typically, according to Future Concept Lab president Francesco Morace, its approach is to create a research lab for the client in question. For P&G, for example, it created the Cleaning Lab.

"Creating a lab is a different process from just doing regular research," says Morace. "It enables us to analyse all the materials and all the research that has been done in the past and regenerate the materials using our vision. Then we can integrate these materials using our methodology of observation at home and outside and understand the value they have for them. Then we can define priorities, projects, and new products or communications."

The three selves

For the past five years, Morace has been looking closely at health and wellbeing. Over the past two years in particular, he has identified an accelerated trend for consumers to show

more interest in, and demand more control over, their own health.

"For many people, health and the body have become the new religion," says Morace. "And we believe strongly that happiness, health and wellness are converging." Morace adds that while only a couple of years ago, the trend was restricted to a few trendsetters, it is now being observed among 40-50% of the population.

"Within a couple of years, this will be true for the majority of people," he says. According to Morace, the trend applies across all age groups. Middle-aged and older people are more concerned about health than younger people, for whom, he says, health is not a preoccupation. Instead, younger people are more concerned about the body.

"They see the body as a form of self-expression," says Morace. "The idea of using the body to tell a story, which expresses itself in the form of tattoos and a certain kind of clothing."

Morace has identified three 'selves', or conditions that people experience at different stages of their day-to-day lives in relation to their health, happiness and well-being.

The first is the protective self. "When we are ill, we seek out expert help," he says. "This is true of all generations, and it is fuelled by the culture of fear that exists today, created by media hype and misleading information on issues such as terrorism and climate change.

The second is the existential self, which is concerned with a person's socio-cultural experience. "This is very important,"

gazing

says Morace. "There is a kind of existential adventure in which the body is the protagonist, and people challenge the limits of what their body is capable of through sport, for example. The mental experience is equally important, so museums, architecture, festivals, these are all things that contribute to a person's cultural wellness."

The third is the explorative self. With people undergoing so many 'virtual' experiences, through the TV and the PC, says Morace, they need to compensate through the senses, by touching, tasting and feeling products in the real world.

The key point, Morace says, is that the three selves are converging and complementary. "It's not a question of one person being interested in the protective self and another in the existential self," he says. "The same people live the three conditions at different times."

Intercultural integration

So what are the implications of all this for brands? Morace feels that if brands recognise these basic consumer needs, they can tap into them in the way they create and market goods and services.

"To address the protective self, the brand has to provide the consumer with a guarantee of quality, expertise and competence," he says. "For the existential self, the brand has to tell the story and engage the consumer. And to address the explorative self, the brand has to innovate, not just in a scientific way, but in a cultural way too, doing the unexpected and stimulating the senses in a new way."

Looking to the future, Morace sees two key trends dominating the landscape. The first is convergence, not

just in expected places, such as between the cosmetics and pharmaceutical industries, for example, but in unexpected places too. For instance, he says, there will be convergence between the food and beverage, cosmetics/beauty and body treatment industries.

"We will see establishments being created where people can care for the body in a completely different way," he says. "Places where they can play sport, eat healthily, and care for their body." Morace believes that consumers will see this type of establishment, a sort of health club on steroids, springing up over the next few years.

The other trend Morace expects to be prevalent is what he calls 'intercultural integration'. He says, "More and more, we will see integration between alternative treatments that are considered a little bit exotic today, like Chinese medicine, for example. In the future, I think we will see integration and some unexpected links between different traditions and cultures – African, Western, Eastern, South American, etc. What is happening now in fashion and design, I believe will happen in health, and the integration and the way we measure ourselves through this cultural fertilisation will be another interesting perspective."

The Future Concept Lab is certainly an unconventional institution, and Morace an unconventional market researcher. But as those blue-chip companies will testify, while its methods may be unconventional, they are successful in delivering the insight clients demand. And in a world where there are no crystal balls to see into the future, insight is a precious commodity. ■