

Tracking Which Way The Wind Blows

TRENDS

Hold bull sessions at your firm, tap peers' brains, get nerd update from kids

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Advisors wear many hats. They can double as teachers, social workers and consumer advocates.

Yet one of their most overlooked roles is also crucial to their success: trend-spotter.

Top advisors stay one step ahead of trends, both within their industry and society at large. Because they anticipate what's ahead, they can develop farsighted strategies and act on their hunches at the right time.

Their keen awareness of consumer behavior, demographic shifts and other big-picture developments enables them to grow their business and serve clients more effectively. The tricky part can be stepping back from the day-to-day operations of the business to spot larger trends.

Keeping up on trends can come through throwing around ideas with staff meetings, tapping feedback from clients and networks, enlisting input from peers and vendors, and staying in tune with your kids.

"It's extremely important to pay attention to trends," said Jeff Powell, an advisor in San Rafael, Calif. "We're constantly evolving our business to be better all the time," and identifying incipient changes in the marketplace helps lay the groundwork for improvements.

In monthly meetings, Powell and about five colleagues compare notes on their ideas and observations. The group often start these by asking, "Are we doing our best to stay ahead of best practices in our industry?"

They share insights on new products and services that might benefit the firm. They also discuss input they've gathered from clients and others both within their practice and beyond.

"Our clients provide us with the most meaningful feedback on how



to serve them best," Powell said. Consumers can act as your eyes and ears to the larger world as they open up about their purchasing patterns, favorite new activities and use of new technologies.

Learn From Teens

Spotting trends is easier when you can tap a rich network of well-informed friends and colleagues. They can help you assess new developments in your field and make better strategic decisions.

With more than 20 years of experience in financial services, Powell has cultivated friendships with other advisors around the country. His peers keep him plugged into relevant trends.

When his human-resources manager sought to update the firm's compensation and benefit package, Powell enlisted the help of his peers. They discussed their pay structures, and their data and input enabled Powell's team to maintain a competitive edge in terms of attracting and retaining top talent.

Powell also solicits input from his firm's custodian, **TD Ameritrade**^{AMTD}, along with his vendors. For example, he periodically asks his advertising firm, "What are you seeing out there that's working for other advisory firms?"

Some advisors find that the sharpest trend-spotters reside closer to home. In fact, they live at home.

Chris Orestis, who specializes in life insurance and helping seniors with financial planning issues, stays on top of trends by learning from his four teenage sons. Over dinner, he often poses questions such as, "What's cool out there?" and "What new websites are up?"

"They tease me by calling it 'Dad's daily download,'" Orestis said. "They've left behind traditional media, and sometimes what they tell me keeps me ahead of my peers."

Short, Hip Videos

Orestis says he learned about the latest advances in podcasts from his sons. They also introduced him to the proliferation of YouTube channels that present content that appeals to younger audiences who spend much of their time on mobile devices.

"Based on what I've learned, we modified our video content for marketing, educational and outreach purposes," he said. "Before, we featured three- to five-minute talking heads with PowerPoint (slides). Now, we post two-minute hip, animated, all-music videos with infographics and no voice-over."

Orestis says he's receiving "great feedback" on the new videos, even from baby boomers and seniors. Better yet, the new online content only cost "a couple thousand dollars," he adds.

"All of our social media metrics have increased for us," he said. "That's led to higher brand awareness. And I had no idea about all this until I talked with my teenage boys."

Building on his video success, Orestis is rolling out a podcast in the same catchy style. He urges other advisors to expand their horizons to capitalize on consumers' ever-changing habits and preferences.

When advisors engage in target marketing, they may not realize the importance of narrowing the scope of their audience.

Orestis emphasizes that a key to tracking trends is identifying narrow niches and building loyal followers within those well-defined clusters.

"You've got to be a keen observer of your environment," he said. "Go beyond mainstream media. Talk to your kids and grandkids. Show interest in what they're doing. It's a great way to reconnect with them and to spot trends that can help you in your business."