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MATTHIAS CLAMER/GETTY IMAGES

It's January, and in many industries that means kicking off the new year with a trip to a big trade show — from Detroit's North American International Auto Show, to the Consumer Electronics Show in Las Vegas, to the National Retail Federation's Big Show in Manhattan.

Each one provides a glimpse on the trends, technology shifts, and startups that have the potential to impact a particular industry. Those lucky enough to attend will walk the show floor, sit in on

keynotes, take meetings in suites, experience demos — and no doubt, hoist a few complimentary cocktails at networking receptions.

They're useful events for the individuals and small teams who get to go. But everyone in the organization who doesn't make the trip only hears faint echoes of what happened. Maybe there's a lunch-and-learn recap a week later, or a trip report emailed around to colleagues.

Most companies, it turns out, spend more time and money scouting trends and emerging technologies than they do sharing the results of that scouting work with others in their organization, or creating ways to run pilot tests related to what they see. Solving those two problems is a big opportunity to create competitive advantage — or perhaps just survive as an organization that is relevant to your customers in the 21st century. It's always mystifying when I talk to leaders at large companies who see the moose in the middle of the highway, and know they're barreling toward it at 70 miles per hour, but aren't doing anything to avoid it.

Companies Know Scouting Is Important

Big companies realize they need a radar system that can help them see what's ahead, and a survey that my company, Innovation Leader, fielded in late 2017 found that the majority of them have multiple groups responsible for operating that radar, in departments like marketing, research and development, new product development, or the innovation lab. (The survey had 140 respondents at companies with greater than $1 billion in revenue.)

But we also asked how well they do when it comes to looking at the dots on the radar and actually doing something about it. On a scale of 0-10, our respondents gave their company an average rating of 5 when it came to taking action on consumer trends they observed, and a 4.8 when it came to taking action related to emerging technologies.

The top five challenges to doing better? According to respondents, they are:

1. Connectivity to the business.
2. Identifying what areas to scout.
3. Time to do it.
4. Sufficient staffing.
5. Sufficient funding.

Addressing those latter three resource challenges involves making the case for why scouting activity is important, and showing that it can deliver value to the business in a concrete way. Does senior leadership believe that changes in consumer habits could pose a threat to the company's position, or that a new technology like voice interfaces could render existing products obsolete? Are there instances you can cite where not acting fast enough led to lost market share, or a hasty and high-priced acquisition of a startup?

But addressing the top two challenges — connectivity to the business and what areas to scout — involves strong relationships with business unit heads, support groups like IT and legal, and senior leadership. Business unit heads can provide some near-term focus related to gaps in a product line, or problems they see customers trying to solve. They can make the resource commitments necessary to pilot new concepts, and support functions can help create "sandboxes" or exceptions to standard operating procedures that make quick-and-dirty tests possible. And for scouting longer-term changes in technologies or markets, senior leadership can both benefit from what the scouting teams are doing, as well as help prioritize findings — and, as usual, rattle cages when others in the organization are not providing the support they've promised to a team that wants to conduct a test.

How does this work at companies that have figured out some of the intricacies of scouting in a way that delivers business value?

At Kellogg, the Michigan-based packaged foods giant, Senior Vice President of Global R&D Nigel Hughes explains that marketers often create "opportunity briefs" for scouts who work in the R&D organization. "Our marketing colleagues... say to us, 'Look, if you could solve this problem, we think we can turn this into a big commercial opportunity,'" says Hughes.

He continues, "A lot of scouting...has moved from what I call idea-based to being solution- based, so it's directed against big opportunities that we've identified from a commercial point of view."

Mona Vernon, Chief Technology Officer at Thomson Reuters Labs, says that if scouting is focused on business and customer needs, it should lead to pilot tests that allow you to discover its rough edges, or where it is best applied. "To the extent that you start running an experiment with a desired business outcome and a clear hypothesis of what you're trying to learn, then I think you end up with success," Vernon says, "because you either get further along in moving towards an implementation, or you get some learning back and [realize] this is not really mature or, as we learn more about this technology, we think we should be looking at a partnership in order to...capture value."

Developing the right relationships inside the company is important, says Tatyana Zakrevskaya, Assistant Vice President of Innovation at Toronto-based Manulife, the financial services giant. "As silly as it sounds, you have to go where the love is. ...You need to find a supportive sponsor or stakeholder on the business side who is willing to try something different, and you need to clearly articulate the benefits to them," she says.

Signals of Change Shouldn't Be Top Secret

The final opportunity for wringing more value from the scouting work your company is probably already doing is thinking about who participates in it — is it only the high priests of R&D? — and who has access to it.

In our survey, we asked whether there was a mechanism for employees who weren't on the "official" trends or technology scouting teams to contribute data points they were seeing, like a field service worker using some new cloud-based software package, or a new way that customers were using their smartphones while shopping for groceries. Sixty-eight percent of respondents said that there wasn't a way for employees to do that. And when we asked about how those employees might get access to the scouting information that the "official" teams were collecting, just 22% of respondents told us it was easy, while 78% described access as either "extremely limited" or "somewhat limited."

Among the explanations we heard from respondents about why access is so limited:

- "We are open to having anyone review the information, but are a little behind in making it easily available."
- "There is no central repository available to rank-and-file employees. There is information in annual strategy documents, but distribution is fragmented and limited."
- "[We have] many gatekeepers and restricted flow."
- "Generally limited to executive level."
- "If you know the right people to ask, they tend to share freely. But... you have to know what you are looking for and who to go to."

What about the 22% of companies that make access to trend and tech scouting data easily accessible? They're not using anything especially sophisticated to do it. They're creating blogs, online video series, holding briefing sessions, or using widely available software like Microsoft Sharepoint. If you believe that many people in the organization may be important "sensors" for change, and that many people might benefit from a better understanding of what is happening outside your walls, then why not make it easier for more people to contribute to and view scouting information?

If a company is serious about responding quickly to the ways customer behaviors are changing, the startups that are gaining momentum in its industry, and the new technologies that ought to be integrated into its offerings, there are probably dozens or hundreds of people throughout the organization who should be tuned in to those signals. The results of scouting activity — whether it happens in a convention center or university campus or at a startup demo day — need to be shared much more broadly and seamlessly than it is today.

"You go to conferences, incubators, and accelerators, and exchange business cards," says Zakrevskaya at Manulife. "In my opinion, a lot of that is theater. It doesn't always lead to a meaningful partnership or engagement with the ecosystem. What's more important is staying focused on what does that activity lead to?"

That's a key question to keep in mind — both before you leave and after you return from a scouting trip to the big trade show. If you're investing in understanding how the world around you is changing, you also need to invest in the relationships and systems that will let you take quick action on what you find.

Scott Kirsner is the editor of Innovation Leader, an information service for corporate innovation executives, and a long-time business columnist for the Boston Globe.