

**TRENDS!**





# future teller

**Gerd Leonhard foresees organizational changes and opportunities in the meeting industry and provides insight into the path to becoming a futurist.**

**By Rajendrani Mukhopadhyay**

**I**n going from jazz guitarist to media futurist, Gerd Leonhard hasn't quite had a conventional career path. Since the mid-2000s, Leonhard has been considered an expert in forecasting the futures of the music, social media, leadership and entrepreneurship industries and identifying new growth opportunities. Over time, his expertise has branched into education, travel and the meeting industry.

"[A futurist] is not a person who predicts or knows anything that hasn't happened yet, but one who can develop foresights," Leonhard explains.

As CEO of Basel-based The Futures Agency, Leonhard works with organizations such as Google, Nokia, Sony Music and the European Commission, and also speaks at more than 100 conferences and events each year. A fellow of the U.K.'s Royal Society for the Arts, Leonhard has written several books, including *The Future of Music: Manifesto for the Digital Music Revolution*, which launched his career as a futurist in 2005.

Although he started off in the music industry, Leonhard is continually broadening his portfolio to encompass additional areas. He collects data from all manner of sources, talks to as many experts as possible, understands the whole context of what is happening in a given field and then articulates how trends will most probably move over the next three to five years. He says his ideas are often things people are already aware of but they either haven't had the chance to crystallize the new focus in their own heads or haven't taken appropriate action in their operations.

### Education, Travel and the Future of Meetings

Working with the common threads that tie adult education, travel and event planning together, Leonhard shared his thoughts on the futures of these industries.

For meetings among far-flung colleagues and education, he sees rising Internet technologies, with high-speed connections, 3D monitors and augmented reality tools making virtual gatherings more feasible. This will be especially true as travel costs rise. Businesses and students think twice about the cost of travel to particular locations for a meeting or education, so in many cases, the virtual meeting room or classroom will trump the brick and mortar kind.

But there is something technology will not be able to replace: human connection.

"Any digital interaction creates the need for the live face-to-face interaction," Leonhard says. "It doesn't replace it."

For instance, in regard to the learning process, he points out that it isn't merely about information gathering; conversations with peers and teachers help people digest and fully comprehend all the information given to them.

The need for social interaction, while at the same time sav-

ing costs, poses a conundrum for education and meetings. But it provides an opening for planners to exploit: They have to up the ante, specifically in terms of content quality, venues, food—the entire experience.

"If the experience isn't good enough, people will just stay at home and watch [TED.com](http://TED.com)," Leonhard said. [Incidentally, read about some TEDx organizers on Page 80.]

### All that Jazz

Leonhard has always been on the lookout for the next big thing. Born in Germany in 1961, he was seriously studying music by the age of 12. He also got into theology and, for a while, was aiming to become a Lutheran minister.

But the pivotal moment came when Leonhard was 22 years old. While traveling on a train in Cologne, Germany, he met his soon-to-be first wife, an American. That led him to move to San Francisco and get into the music scene.

He landed in California in 1983 and immediately worked his way into local music circles. Then, in 1985, he won a scholarship to attend Berklee College of Music in Boston.

"I still don't know why they gave me a scholarship," Leonhard says.

He trained in jazz guitar and after his 1987 graduation became a professional musician for about eight years, playing everything from jazz to heavy metal and contributing to the production of more than 20 records. The highlight: playing in a concert with one of his idols, Miles Davis.

But Leonhard was realistic about his musical talents.

"I wasn't good enough to get to the very top," he says.

In 1992, he moved back to Germany to work at a college for professional musicians, fashioned after Berklee College.

But only three years later, Leonhard caught the same bug that was going around among entrepreneurs:

the Internet. Given his training, he was quick to realize that this global advance in technology was going to radically change the music industry. He started [LicenseMusic.com](http://LicenseMusic.com), which provided music for film and TV over the Internet for a fee, and got involved in other start-up companies, fueled by the dot-com boom.

With the dot-com bust, Leonhard was forced to shut down his company in 2001 and take up strategic advising for industries such as media, telecommunications and entertainment. However, he had been carrying an idea for a book in his head for two years. Along with good friend David Kusek, now a faculty member at Berklee College, he co-wrote *The Future of Music* for three years.

When the book came out in 2005, it was hailed by the industry as prescient. Kusek and Leonhard talked about how music would be freely shared over the Internet—much like what is happening now on YouTube and Spotify. *Publishers'*

**“Any digital interaction creates the need for the live face-to-face interaction. It doesn't replace it.”**

*Weekly* called the book “one of the most provocative music books published this year.”

The book also enabled Leonhard to adopt a new label.

“People started calling me and saying, ‘You are a futurist,’” he recalls. “I didn’t know what a futurist was.”

The idea did, however, appeal to him. Leonhard started on his home turf of music but then expanded to communications, other forms of media, marketing and technology. He recognizes how his previous career was a clear asset in growing into his current role.

“Going from musician to futurist was a very good transition because you have to be able to improvise and work well with people,” he says.

### Embracing the Label

For much of the year, Leonhard globetrotts: He speaks at conferences, visits clients and teaches at the Fundação Dom Cabral, a center for executive and business development in São Paulo, Brazil. When not on the road, he’s at home with his second wife in Switzerland, where he says the slower and less frantic pace of Swiss life forms a nice counterpoint to his travel itinerary. An avid cook of Asian and Italian cuisine (chicken massaman curry is a favorite), Leonhard occasionally peppers conversation with food analogies.

As a futurist, Leonhard has to keep up with always-on sources such as Facebook, Twitter and Flipboard that spew out prodigious amounts of data all the time. One of the necessary prerequisites of his job is the ability not to be overwhelmed by never-ending data and to know exactly which sources of information need to be studied.

“It’s like cooking—you can’t use all spices at once,” he says, “you can only use some!”

He also must be able to distinguish fads from trends, an ability that, he says, is much like drinking wine. You can only judge a wine’s quality if you drink it. In making forecasts about social media, for instance, Leonhard plunges in to test new technologies and discusses them with early adopters. You realize Leonhard is a serious social media consumer when you look him up on Google—an avalanche of profiles: a blog, LinkedIn, Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr, YouTube and



## Maximum Linkage

Media futurist, author and CEO Gerd Leonhard leverages the Internet—a tool which he identified early on as an impending disruptive force for the music industry—to not only help shape his research but also to share resources.

Download his three last books (for free!) at <http://gerd.fm/ibXx2G>.

Follow him on Twitter @gleonhard.

Watch many of his recorded speeches at [www.gerdtube.com](http://www.gerdtube.com).

Visit him online (and explore tons of links) at [www.thefuturesagency.com](http://www.thefuturesagency.com) and [www.futureof.biz](http://www.futureof.biz).

many more appear.

“You try to get a feel for it. In the end it’s not a science,” he says. “It’s really a question of saying this feels real to me and feels real to 15-year-olds or 50-year-olds, depending on who you’ve talked to.”

### A Green Future

Leonhard has held onto four of his 18 guitars and expanded his collection of mobile devices to 25. Many of the devices are freebies. But personally, he is an Apple fan.

“Anything from Apple is mine,” he states. “I am also very much a Kindle fan.”

Accordingly, he just published his first Kindle-only book, *The Future of Content*.

As for his own future, Leonhard has big plans. He’s casting himself as a “green futurist” and moving into sustainability and environmental issues. He is also looking to launch a TV show where he says he will host discussions on “future issues in a way that will interest everyone, not just geeks or intellectuals.”

Fully embracing the life of a futurist, a role he absorbed a mere six years ago, you can’t help but believe him when he says, “What I do for a living is fun!” **one+**

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