

The background of the entire page is a dark blue gradient. On the right side, there is a large, glowing, abstract shape that resembles a funnel or a wave, composed of many parallel lines of small dots. The dots are colored in a gradient from yellow at the top to cyan at the bottom. The overall effect is a sense of data flow and digital connectivity.

**KANTAR**

Analytics Live

# Marketing decisions in times of disruption

Experts discuss the relevance of historical  
data in predicting the future

# Introduction

Marketers and analysts use data from the past to predict the future. But in uncertain times, analytic models that rely on past data may not be as relevant for providing accurate forecasts.

So how are companies using old models to provide useful predictions, despite ongoing disruption?

[J. Walker Smith](#), Knowledge Lead, Global Consulting at Kantar talked with three marketing and analytics experts to see how they combine old models with new approaches to produce more impactful forecasts. Our experts ([Sunando Das](#), Global Head of Predictive Marketing & Shopping Analytics, Unilever, [Stephanie Lakritz](#), Digital Data and Analytics Transformation Lead, NA, Mars, and [Meghan Liefeld](#), Director of Consumer Insights, Champion Petfoods) share their advice for developing analytic tools and resources that can be leveraged to drive growth, discover vulnerabilities, and even help retain staff.

*"Predicting the future permeates everything we do," says Smith. "But a lot of our predictive systems were developed and perfected during a time of relative stability. As disruption emerges as the new normal in business, and we head into a period that will be characterized by a lot more volatility, marketers need to understand what they can do differently to be prepared for this future."*

How can organizations improve their forecasts? Our experts explored these key topics:

1. Recognizing the need for change
2. Making forecasts more impactful
3. Accelerating timeframes and cycles
4. Defining the role of scenario planning
5. Ensuring organization-wide impact

## Panel of experts



J. Walker Smith  
Kantar



Sunando Das  
Unilever



Stephanie Lakritz  
Mars



Meghan Liefeld  
Champion Petfoods

# Recognizing the need for change

What have been the biggest disruptions, and why is it important for businesses to plan for large-scale uncertainty? Marketers must adapt even more quickly in volatile times.

*"All the models that we developed earlier were based on the premise that the past is a predictor of the future," says Sunando Das. The challenge now, he says, is "predicting the future of an unknown past."*

Covid-19 brought change and uncertainty to nearly every industry. At Champion Petfoods, Meghan Liefeld saw an influx of new pets into households. *"We lovingly referred to it as a Covid-19 puppy," she says, "and it made a huge change in how we are predicting demand."*

Pet owners—and most consumers—spent more time at home. *"We've been talking about the transition from brick and mortar to e-commerce for a while, but I was still a little bit shocked at how fast that happened," says Liefeld. "People were really excited to have 25-pound bags of dog food delivered to their house."*

Stephanie Lakritz saw similar patterns in the confectionary category. *"I think the volatility just massively amplified a lot of the underlying trends we were already seeing."*

While some of these shifts are likely temporary, others will be permanent. Marketers are responding by changing models and embracing uncertainty. *"I've seen a move away from what I'll call demand-based forecasting for new products," says Liefeld, in favor of looking at more specific behaviors. Error ranges around predictions are broader, as much as plus or minus 15%, notes Das. And it's not getting easier. "We're all just getting more comfortable with the fact that the environment is more volatile," says Lakritz.*



**Sunando Das**  
Global Head of Predictive  
Marketing & Shopping Analytics  
Unilever



**Meghan Liefeld**  
Director of Consumer Insights  
Champion Petfoods



**Stephanie Lakritz**  
Digital Data & Analytics  
Transformation Lead, NA  
Mars

# Making forecasts more impactful

Is the nature of a forecast changing? If so, what are the best practices for developing a forecast that will still be useful, in spite of disruption?

*"It's more about reinventing things rather than discarding them, or creating completely new things," says Das. "It's not necessarily about the algorithms and the models; it's about how you design those to be able to answer the objectives in the context. If we have the right question and the right design, modeling can solve most of the challenges."*

Lakritz notes that updated forecasts have *"far more factors"* than before—a trend she expects to continue as they *"get more granular with the inputs,"* and look at different levels of forecasting. Das advises marketers to think about de-averaging, *"going down to the lowest level of platforms, channels, audiences,"* and other factors. While incremental shifts will still have an impact, Liefeld notes that, *"in times of disruption, you're going to see more macro trends that are impacting businesses."*

Proxy variables are increasingly important when marketers lack data about past behavior. *"If you tap into the digital footprint of consumers, you can get a lot of proxy data"* about mobility, stockpiling, and other factors, advises Das.

Ultimately, new models should help companies *"minimize the waste, maximize the opportunities, and move from predicting demand to shaping demand,"* Das adds—while remaining actionable. *"There's a balance between what is digestible versus what is possible."*

As Liefeld says, marketers need to ask, *"is the juice worth the squeeze? And is your forecast well enough above that payout line, where you are really confident that's going to happen?"*



**Sunando Das**  
Global Head of Predictive Marketing & Shopping Analytics  
Unilever



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Mars



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Champion Petfoods

# Accelerating timeframes and cycles

How fast can you go?  
Perhaps more importantly,  
how can you go faster, while  
still making your forecasts  
as useful as possible?

*"We used to run quarterly forecasts, because I run a seasonal business," says Lakritz. In a volatile environment, running forecasts more frequently "ensures that the models are learning from all the factors, and allows us to feel more confident in the decisions that we have made." Some marketers are even moving to "always on" modeling, which can help reduce error ranges. However, marketers should understand the pros and cons.*

*"The first time you build, it takes quite a bit of time to make those conscious choices and get all the data," says Das. Once it's set up, he adds, you have to "work with other partners within the organization to ensure that data is available, including to internal and external partners." Even then, having everything always on is not possible, he adds.*

To achieve best results, marketers should focus on ongoing refinement and agile thinking, the experts say. *"It's all iterative," notes Lakritz. "It's a continuum of learning, and that's the biggest shift for us. But I wouldn't be in this space if I wasn't excited to get up every day and do something new."* She also credits improvements in technology with helping her organization stay ahead, and *"feel more confident in our ability to predict the future."*

Just remember that there's never enough time to try everything. *"One of the members in my team asked, 'when do we stop trying new models?'" says Das. "My answer was that you stop in the morning when you have to give the results."*



**Sunando Das**  
Global Head of Predictive  
Marketing & Shopping Analytics  
Unilever



**Stephanie Lakritz**  
Digital Data & Analytics  
Transformation Lead, NA  
Mars

# Defining the role of scenario planning

In uncertain times, organizations must adjust their timeframes, and consider shifting to more short-term focus. As Smith notes, *“we’re going to have to be more comfortable with using scenario planning to envision different futures.”*

*“We do scenario planning both on a micro and a macro level,”* notes Liefeld. On a micro level, that might include *“pressure tests”* for supply chain and pricing issues. *“We’re asking questions like what if this has a slightly stronger impact, or consumers react a little bit differently than they had in the past?”*

On the macro side, Liefeld uses scenarios to understand *“what these new behaviors signal in terms of demand opportunities, and if there are emerging trends that we can capitalize on.”*

Scenario planning can also help marketers find vulnerabilities in their models—such as a potential over-reliance on channels. *“Convenience stores are a massive channel for our chocolate and gum brands,”* says Lakritz. *“If, during the pandemic, somebody isn’t out there buying gas and they’re not in a convenience store, they’re certainly not buying a Snickers or a pack of gum. That had a massive impact on us.”*

Marketers should consider the time horizon when looking at scenarios. *“During the pandemic, it was important to give higher weightage to more recent data,”* says Das. *“As we have come out, and we’re getting into macro uncertainty, we don’t know what will happen for sure, so we try scenarios.”*

For Das, scenario planning will have a *“huge impact”* for short-term planning. *“We can probably say what’s going to happen in two or three months, but not with so much accuracy what’s going to happen in eight or nine months.”*



**Meghan Liefeld**  
Director of Consumer Insights  
Champion Petfoods



**Stephanie Lakritz**  
Digital Data & Analytics  
Transformation Lead, NA  
Mars



**Sunando Das**  
Global Head of Predictive  
Marketing & Shopping Analytics  
Unilever

# Ensuring organization-wide impact

Analysts should set revised expectations for leadership regarding analytics, while also ensuring that associates can provide input and access insights.

*"The expectation isn't perfection, right? The expectation is that we're going to get better next period," says Lakritz. "If we were wrong, but we can tell you why, then we aren't going to have that same problem the next time."*

Lakritz adds that she has "massive support" from her leadership to accelerate the analytics journey. "I'm lucky that I get the pull, but it creates a lot of accountability on what I have to deliver." A focus on analytics can also create a "people shift" as leadership decides whether to build or buy analytic expertise.

Ultimately, says Das, "it's not about whether it's a 2.5% growth or a 2.9% growth. It's the additional insights beyond the models that are appreciated by leadership, because that actually drives business actions."

Associates also need to be involved. "A data scientist alone cannot predict consumer behavior unless he or she knows more about consumer insights and the decision process," says Das. Similarly, consumer insights experts who understand machine learning and AI can help conceptualize and challenge solutions.

On the front end, associates can shape models by "bringing the context and the knowledge that help us narrow down the scenarios," notes Lakritz. But even if they're not involved in this way, she says, "predictive analytics is really what empowers our associates. We want them to see things before they're happening, which is why we've created simulation capabilities and self-service tools." As an added bonus, she adds, helping associates become savvier in making data-driven decisions also helps the organization attract and retain talent.



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Global Head of Predictive Marketing & Shopping Analytics  
Unilever



**Stephanie Lakritz**  
Digital Data & Analytics Transformation Lead, NA  
Mars

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# KANTAR

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