

Q&A: Dr. James Canton, CEO of the Institute for Global Futures

By Jeff Weiner

Dr. James Canton is CEO and Chairman of the Institute for Global Futures, a leading think tank he founded in 1990 that advises business and government.

Dr. Canton is a renowned global futurist, social scientist, author, and visionary business advisor. He has been insightfully forecasting the key trends and technologies that have shaped our world. *The Economist* recognizes him as one of the leading global futurists. Dr. Canton has advised three White House Administrations and over 100 companies. His next book, *FUTURE SMART – Managing the Game-Changing Trends That Will Transform Your World*, is due out in January.

You can hear Dr. Canton speak at [Game Plan 2014](#), the only B2B-focused e-commerce event in the country, Nov. 4-5 in Chicago. Click here to [register now>>](#)

The following is part one of a two-part interview with Dr. Canton on the future of B2B e-commerce.

FOC: What are the emerging trends in B2B that managers need to keep an eye on?

JC: A key trend is what I call the “hyper-competitive marketplace.” This is where there are lots of non-traditional competitors using digital technology to reach your customers much faster, or even customer segments you don’t have. It’s the disruption of B2B marketplaces, and

that's where all the money is. You're going to see many more non-traditional competitors creating hyper-competitive opportunities, which is going to put a lot more stress on incumbents to adapt faster.

FOC: What can B2B businesses do to succeed in this hyper-competitive environment?

JC: Companies need to adapt much faster – become more agile – and embrace innovation, or they're going to lose market share. You're either inventing your future or somebody else is. As many as 35 percent to 40 percent of existing market leaders who get disrupted will be because they did not innovate fast enough. So if you have any concerns about having an innovative culture, attracting and retaining the right kind of talent, if you don't have data scientists, if big data sounds like a foreign language, if you don't understand predictive analytics, if you don't think that the emerging mobile economy relates to you, you're likely looking at your own demise as a business.

FOC: Are data science and predictive analytics being embraced by most B2B organizations?

JC: Every B2B enterprise is a predictive enterprise whether they do it well or not. So every enterprise that wants to survive must understand how to become more predictive. They need to address a range of critical questions. What are the key opportunities to collect data on customers, on competitors and their customers, on the marketplace? We call that big data. How can you analyze that data to determine the best way to do B2B business? That's predictive analytics. But you have to be able to understand first what is the data telling you, and where is it telling you to look. What's missing? Where are the breakdowns? What are the potential solutions?

FOC: What can businesses do to become more predictive?

JC: For starters, B2B marketing needs to be driven much more by data science. Every organization needs to embrace more data science to figure out who is the customer of the future, the business sectors that they're not doing a good job with, and what they can do to change that. The second part is that organizations need to be more future-ready. Future-ready is the ability to adapt and to be very agile today in anticipation of the key trends that are emerging.

FOC: Earlier you mentioned the hyper-competitive marketplace. What are some of the other key trends that you see emerging?

JC: There are some key trends in terms of the fusion of digital business and the enterprise that we need to pay attention to. A major trend relates to the shift in computing and business to a much more mobile platform. Consumers basically are mobile and if the consumer is mobile that means that every business is mobile. So what's happening is all the major brands, particularly if they're in B2B businesses, are now re-evaluating their mobile strategy, their social media strategy, and innovation within their culture.

FOC: In terms of the fusion of digital business and the enterprise, how critical is the role of human talent versus the role of technology?

JC: One of the black holes that B2B companies have but don't realize they have is talent. Businesses can embrace all the right technologies but if they don't have the right people to create value for their customers they just wasted millions and millions of dollars. The opposite is true too. Having all the right talent that understands the technology, the customer, the business, without the resources or the will or courage to innovate with the right tools, that's your second black hole.

And your third black hole is to continue to look in the rear view mirror and say, "We have a huge investment in legacy systems and they really do work for us so it's okay. We don't really need to innovate. Sure at the end of the day mobile and social media are interesting but it's not really a big deal." If you're looking in the rear view mirror you're missing the opportunity to look forward. And too many B2B companies are looking in the rear view mirror.

FOC: What advice do you have for B2B managers in today's hyper-competitive marketplace?

JC: You want to be thinking about what's on the minds of your B2B customers – what are the problems they have today and what are the problems they think are emerging tomorrow. You've got to get into those conversations. And you have to look forward.