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Futurist: Tomorrow crowded, diverse

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What will the world look like in coming decades and how can we best anticipate and respond to those changes?

Among those helping corporate America, the United Nations and other entities answer those questions is futurist Andrew Zolli. He offered a glimpse of the demographic, marketing and social forces shaping the world at a Wednesday luncheon for about 150 members of the American Advertising Association-Cleveland, formerly known as the Cleveland Advertising Association.

Zolli is founding partner of Z+ Partners, a foresight, strategy and marketing think tank in New York City, as well as a fellow at the National Geographic Society and futurist-in-residence for Popular Science magazine, National Public Radio and American Demographics magazine.

Among his insights:

The world is going to add another billion people within the next decade, but unlike in previous centuries, most of the growth will come from Asia and Africa. By 2040, some of the world's most populous cities -- which don't even exist yet -- will be in China.

The world is becoming younger and more urban, with more people living in cities than not and the population of other countries skewing more toward people under 30.

The U.S. population, which used to have most of its people in what Zolli calls the "nondiaper demographic" between childhood and old age, will by 2025 have more people in the younger and older age groups than in the work force. This means that people will work longer to support those groups.

Women born after 1972 are statistically guaranteed to take care of their mothers longer than their mothers took care of them. Even worse, "your mother-in-law is going to move in with you," Zolli said.

In New York City, the biggest growth in real estate conversions is from multifamily homes to multigenerational homes, and the fastest-growing demographic is "married with parents."

The population in sun belt states like California, Texas and Florida is projected to grow much faster than the North, Midwest, and East Coast. The newest Americans are coming from Mexico, Latin America and Asia.

By mid-century, non-Hispanic whites will be a statistical minority in a country with no racial majority.

The foreign languages our children study will switch from French and Spanish to Hindi and Mandarin.

Women will become more powerful and influential because they will be more educated. Among people 55 and older, more men than women have college degrees, but women now represent more than 56 percent of college undergraduates, and their numbers are rising.

The overwhelming breadth of choices means consumers are bombarded with a "surplus society" that ironically offers a "giant sea of sameness." The grocery store Zolli shops at, for example, sells 87 kinds of white bread, and his recent online search for a digital MP3 player found 11,659 kinds.

What will set companies and their brands apart from the pack are products and services that address what consumers really want, Zolli said. Those that are able to differentiate themselves and link smaller, insulated communities with broad-based mass media venues are going to be the brands people remember and want to use.

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