

# Faith on the Future

by Sarah Minier

Tips on tomorrow's  
trends from the  
Nostradamus of  
marketing.

"YOU CAN  
TRUST A  
CRYSTAL BALL  
ABOUT AS FAR  
AS YOU CAN  
THROW IT."

—Faith Popcorn

There's little tradition behind the sooth-saying of Faith Popcorn.

No astrology, no clairvoyance, no mirrors lurk behind the magic that prompted *Fortune* magazine to christen her "the Nostradamus of marketing."

Yet her predictions are pure gold to blue-chip corporations like IBM, Eastman Kodak, and Procter & Gamble, which pay upwards of \$1 million for a glimpse into the psyche of future consumers. With her knack for knowing what people will buy in coming years, Popcorn has emerged as the nation's most visible trend forecaster.

There's little madness to her methods. Popcorn's Manhattan-based marketing firm, Brain-Reserve, scans current trends for hints of things to come—an activity she calls "brailleing the culture." The firm peruses more than 300 publications, interviews 3,000 consumers annually, and regularly taps a talent bank of 2,500 consultants, including housewives, cookbook writers, CEOs, and even an Indian chief. Popcorn and her staff—mostly family and friends—also monitor such barometers of popular culture as movies and television programs, popular music, and fashion.

And they talk to people everywhere. As Popcorn says in her new book, *The Popcorn Report* (Doubleday, 1991), "I never stop myself from asking whomever I run into—cabdrivers, people at airports, moviegoers on line—what they think about cars or cookies or computers or whatever we're working on."

"Brailleing" helped Popcorn identify societal trends with uncanny accuracy over the last decade. While she missed a few—notably, her prophesied win for Michael Dukakis in the last presidential race—her overall batting average is remarkably high. In a 1980 *New York Times* article, Popcorn predicted a decreased divorce rate, renewed emphasis on family, and a shift from the "youth culture" to middle age and beyond. She also forecast increased sales for home entertainment centers, consumer demands for leaner beef and take-out food, and the fizzle of New Coke (which Popcorn said would become "the marketing fiasco of the decade").

Not bad for a seer who eschews tea leaves. Pollsters and statisticians may sneer at Popcorn's research techniques; detractors may ac-

cuse her of simply tying cute terms to what's already common knowledge. But no one questions her marketing savvy.

Popcorn clearly knows the value of the catchword. She called her best-known prophesy "cocooning," a *mot juste* coined in the late 1970s to describe society's "full-scale retreat into the last controllable environment"—the home. With cocooning, she bull's-eyed a major social movement of the '80s, and an international buzzword was born: *The Popcorn Report* notes an ad for bedsheets in a 1991 *Paris Metro* that offered the ultimate in "Le Cocooning."

Other kernels of PopcornSpeak that may someday enlarge the popular lexicon include "socioquake" (the shake-up of mainstream culture), "streamlining" (the desire for a simpler lifestyle), and "egonomics" (which Popcorn defines as "the I in what they buy").

Popcorn may be her own most memorable creation. The former Faith Plotkin shed her surname in 1969 for something that would "cause attention." As she tells it, "Popcorn originated with a former boss who had difficulty pronouncing Plotkin"—and the rest is self-marketing history.

As baseball sage Casey Stengel once remarked, "The future ain't what it used to be." Popcorn agrees. "For the last ten years, we've been telling our clients about this socioquake that's on the verge of happening," she says. "I've never seen any changes as total as these before."

## WHAT CHANGES DOES SHE ENVISION?

"This decade will see a full turn from fast-track living to a return to home and self-protection," she declares. "We'll experience a new morality, new religions, new foods, new science, new medicine, new everything."

Since "new everything" is a tad overwhelming, Popcorn presents ten trends she claims will provide "a map to the next decade." (See sidebar on page 38.)

Many of the concepts are wrapped around oxymora. Popcorn foresees a decade teeming with younger older people (Down-Aging), arm-chair escapades that provide the safe excitement of "risk-free risk-taking" (Fantasy Adventure), and a tendency for stressed-out workaholics to seek "more and more less" out of life (99 Lives). Sound contradictory? Maybe—but not too surprising for a serious business firm that specializes in foretelling the future.

Most of Popcorn's trends are tied tightly to  
(continued on page 38)

Sarah Minier is a regular contributor to LIFE TODAY whose feature on stained glass, "The Fragile Canvas," appeared in the December 1991 issue of LIFE TODAY.