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## FUTURE IMPERFECT

### Looking ahead and back

By **Dianna Marder**  
Inquirer Staff Writer

By now you know the end-of-the-year drill: the “holiday” stories; the articles on retail sales (up/down); the year-in-review pieces; and finally the story that takes a look at trends for the coming year.

So you might call this story predictable.

Indeed, the art of making predictions is now very big business.

Trendspotters or futurists, as they are called, hire themselves out as consultants to corporate CEOs and start-up entrepreneurs who want to cash in on the next big thing.

Hasn't that been happening for centuries, you ask? Ever since the world began, someone's been predicting its sorry end.

But Marian Salzman, a futurist with more than a dozen nonfiction books to her credit, says trendspotting is more than a matter of making observations and collecting data.

“You have to be able to extrapolate,” says Salzman, whose latest book, *Next Now: Trends for the Future*, is a follow-up to her 1990 publication, *Next* (both from Palgrave, an imprint of Macmillan).

She claims to have predicted that young white men would covet those humongous, XXX-L white T-shirts first worn by their black peers.

But even I saw that coming, I tell her.

Ah, but she went out on a limb and said white suburban adolescents (she called them wiggers) would mimic urban blacks in a range of areas.

Recognizing this phenomenon, Salzman says, allowed her to predict that hip-hop would go mainstream.

“And that forced me into the spotlight.”

That's how she became worldwide director of the Department of the Future in Amsterdam and, later, head of a global think tank called the Intelligence Factory.

How cool is that?

For 2007, Salzman predicts we'll see greater polarization: Splits among people, countries, religions will all become more pronounced and troublesome, she says. And in reaction to that, great numbers of people will pursue ways to “make their mark, express themselves.”

And from that she extrapolates that we'll see continued popularity of sites such as YouTube and hobbies such as scrapbooking and knitting, as expressions of creativity.

Globally, Salzman says, beware the Chindia factor. She says China and India will become technology strongholds and leave the U.S.A. in the dust.

“They're going to clean our clocks.”

All well and good, but not terribly fun.

What's fun is looking back at failed predictions, says Laura Lee, author of *Bad Predictions* (Elsewhere Press, 2000).

Some were wacko ideas: plastic plates that would melt in hot water and wash down the drain; flying houses.

But Lee also points to the 1964-65 New York World's Fair, where General Motors' Futurama exhibition showed people living in colonies on the moon.

And Roger Smith, chairman of General Motors, who said in 1986 that by 2000 “we will live in a paperless society.”

Oh yeah? So what's all this stuff on my desk? And while we're at it - what happened to the idea that technology would

make our lives easier? And who stole my four-day work week?

Remember Y2K? —the fear that at the stroke of the millennium (12:01 a.m. on either Jan. 1, 2000 or Jan. 1, 2001, depending on how you count) computers would crash, jets in flight would collide, there would be massive power failures, and we wouldn't be able to get money from ATMs?

Businesses spent \$100 billion on fixes to avoid the great computer glitch.

And nothing happened.

Futurist Faith Popcorn, who claims a 95 percent accuracy rate and was once hailed by *Fortune* magazine as the Nostradamus of marketing, predicted in a 2000 interview with CNN that one day we'd be able to communicate without words.

“Much communication will be telepathic,” she said. “People and computers will merge, and will be able to receive messages from each other, with no real words, as we know them today.”

Say what?

Sure, some predictions pan out.

In a 1900 edition of *Ladies' Home Journal*, journalist John Elfreth Watkins Jr. predicted air-conditioning and direct-dial long-distance telephoning.

He failed, however, to foresee how many vendors would call at dinnertime to sell us long-distance telephone service.

According to the folks at [www.everything2000.com](http://www.everything2000.com), somebody predicted in 2000 that women would abandon their Jane Fonda fitness tapes in favor of spinning classes and something called “Pilates.”

Yeah, right.