



# So You Want to Be a Futurist ?

BY TOM VANDERBILT  
PORTRAIT BY DORON GILD

Have you ever had a job  
interview in which you  
were asked where you saw  
yourself in five years  
?

Now, picture a job  
interview in which you are  
asked where you see not  
yourself, but the company  
that is interviewing you  
(and perhaps the country,  
or even the world) in five  
years. Well, how did you do  
?

*Andrew Zolli (left) and Matt Marcus  
in Zolli's Brooklyn studio*

If you answered that second question with acumen, flair, and persuasiveness—if you were able to spin out several compelling scenarios of where company X's best prospects lie, where its customer base is heading, or what kinds of goods it should be producing next—odds are you have a place in a profession with a future:  
**a professional futurist.**

Prognosticators are increasingly abundant in corporate America. Most likely, if you've been to a design or tech conference recently, you will have come across a business card that reads something like "Futures Researcher" or "Scenario Planner" or, simply, "Futurist." There is a World Future Society, an Institute for the Future, and, more recently, an Association for Professional Futurists (APF). The back pages of *The Futurist* magazine are filled with ads for people who offer "visioning" skills and "socio-technological forecasts." Ad agencies maintain divisions that provide "futurescoping." Periodicals such as *Futures Research Quarterly* and the *Journal of Futures Studies* cater to those who are eager to know the shape of things to come.

Just what is a futurist? The vagueness of the term troubles even the APF, which notes with chagrin on its website that a Google search for "futurist" yields a number of inaccurate or unsavory connections: believers in the apocalyptic divinations of the Book of Revelation, followers of the art form made most famous by Marinetti (the voluble, machine-loving Italian artist who died fighting for Mussolini), and people who predict the future.

Lee Shupp, a partner and "resident futurist" in the Redwood Shores, California, office of the consultancy firm Cheskin, says that owing to this confusion, futurists need to be defined as much by what they are not as by what they are. "What futures is not is trendspotting, coolhunting, next big thing," he says. "What futures is is a rigorous set of methodologies that are used to understand the process of change. It's understanding that there are different kinds of change

and that they manifest themselves differently. Some kinds of change are predictable, some are not—it's the kind of change that's not predictable that really interests futurists."

The future may be anyone's guess, but corporations still want a heads-up. That's why you can find people like Christian Crews now serving as the director of "futures strategy" within Pitney-Bowes, the company best known for postal technology. "Snail mail" may not seem as if it has much of a future, but that's precisely why a futurist can be so vital for the company.

Crews's job is to look at a range of variables—the actual data and forecasts of mail use and volume; the core competencies of Pitney-Bowes; the social, economic, and even legislative trends occurring outside the industry—and create different forecasts on how the future might play out. To craft these scenarios, he uses models borrowed from business and academic disciplines. "We steal tools from anything. We use simulation, we use Monte Carlo, we use Game Theory, we use systems thinking, we use complexity theory, we use basic strategy, we use industry change, we use theory of innovation."

The goal is not just to anticipate the future, but also, perhaps, to influence it. "Where does Pitney-Bowes want to be, what's our preferred future given those forces at work? Where are there areas of leverage, and where are there ways we can affect and create the future? In areas where we don't have power, are there strategies that work across a range of futures that help us to remain healthy and vibrant in returning value to our shareholders?" Crews wonders.

In the sense of imagining what will happen beyond one's immediate circumstances, every civilization has had futurists, from ancient prophets to 19th-century Utopian technofabulists like Jules Verne and Edward Bellamy. The modern institutionalized version of futurism has emerged from a number of sources. One, says Peter Bishop, who heads the Institute for Futures Studies at the University of Houston at Clear Lake, was the early-20th-century social scientist William Fielding Ogburn, who analyzed reams of data from the U.S. Census. "It was the first time anyone sat down and said what the social statistics are and where they are going."

Most futurists agree, however, that futures studies began to take shape at the dawn of the Cold War. In a broad sense, the U.S., which emerged as the dominant Western power after World War II, was trying to draw a road map that revealed how its power was going to play out. "We articulated a 50-year vision of the future," says Andrew Zolli, head of Z + Partners, based in New York. "We were going to spread free-market consumerism around the globe, use technology to out-innovate the Soviets. There was a ping-ponging between the big structural elements in our society, which helped create things like Silicon Valley."

At the same time, that bright future was threatened by the potential of nuclear war with the U.S.S.R. It was in places like the newly created RAND Corporation (an army spin-off whose acronym signified "research and development") that ultimate scenario planning began to take place: What were the possible outcomes of nuclear war? "Because they didn't know what the U.S.S.R. was going to do," Shupp says, "they started using scenario planning as a way to look at various contingencies." The most famous of these proto-futurists was Herman Kahn, the author of *On Thermonuclear War* and the model for Stanley Kubrick's Dr. Strangelove, who explored everything from "winnable nuclear war" to the possibility that the U.S. would have to move its key institutions underground.

How much attention the future receives depends in part on current moods, Bishop notes. The Institute for Futures Studies (which claims both Shupp and Crews as alum) was formed in 1975, a time when "we had a lot to worry about," Bishop says. (Indeed, even the U.S. government got in on the act, with the fledgling Congressional Clearinghouse for the Future commission co-chaired by none other than Al Gore and Newt Gingrich.) The field "went into a low point in the 1980s" before peaking again in the early 1990s. As it happens, the Futures Studies program is currently "in limbo," according to Bishop, which he finds ironic given that "interest in the future, and acceptance in thinking about the future, has increased."

The problems may stem from continued suspicion over the validity of a futures studies curriculum, or the brand value of a profession whose boundaries often blur into strategic forecasting or behavioral analysis. Indeed, many of the leading lights in the next generation of futurists do not want to be tagged with the F-word. "I'm not calling myself a futurist," Zolli says, despite being a poster boy for the discipline: He's "futurist in residence" at *Popular Science* and NPR's "Marketplace," not to mention that he was recently named a *National Geographic* "Emerging Explorer" with a particular focus on the future. He thinks there is something retrograde about a publication like *The Futurist* ("Isn't the title even in Futura?"); the word labels the bearer as someone who follows the future, rather than leads it, he believes. "Google doesn't have a futurist in residence," he says. "They're inventing the future."

Matt Marcus, head of the consulting firm Segue in Chicago, lists "experience forecasting" among his services, and yet he also dislikes being known as a futurist. "It connotes that you know something that others don't about what's going to happen," he says. "And when is it that you decide you're a futurist—do you wake up one day and feel it?" Still, his work falls within the typical job description: "I help companies look at what kinds of experiences they can expect their customer base to want and which products and services are appropriate."

Marcus, who has a master's degree in design, says his forecasts range from three to five years. Longer ranges are "less useful for design teams—they're beyond the pale of product development." Instead, he looks for patterns in the behavior of groups that might be expected to migrate to the mainstream. "A great place to look is occupations that have some level of protocol about them," he says. "Quite often these are places where behaviors are incubated but then move themselves into the mainstream." Think of the personal-mobility accessories pioneered by bike messengers, or the wheelie luggage that for years was solely the provenance of flight attendants. Years ago (current futures work is always a no-go subject owing to non-disclosure agreements), Marcus did a study for Motorola in which he and a team studied the way a news crew interacted with the wireless headsets and other gear that was used only by communications professionals at the time. "People now are walking down the streets with Bluetooth headsets," Marcus says. "Seven years ago you never would have thought that behavior would catch on."

A metaphor for futurism might be found at the Waste Isolation Pilot Plant near Carlsbad, New Mexico, where much of the nation's hazardous nuclear waste is currently buried. Planners there have studied how best to warn future generations of the potential hazards of the material, which remains radioactive for thousands of years. Future warning signs are written in many languages and even in graphic symbols, because the truth is, we don't know what language, if any, will be spoken. It doesn't stop people from making predictions, as witnessed on the longbets.org website, in which prognosticators butt crystal balls. (Sample challenge: "At least one human alive in the year 2000 will still be alive in 2150, yes or no?") Perhaps there's something intrinsically human in trying to anticipate what is coming down the road. As we walk along a quiet residential street in Brooklyn, Zolli, who has a degree in cognitive psychology, offers a theory: "In cognitive neuroscience, one of the problems they've had is in explaining a theory of the brain." In design terms, he notes, brains make little sense: "They're very delicate and they consume a huge amount of resources. You could wire the human body to serve its basic functions without such a large brain." There's an emerging theory: "Brains are prediction engines. Walking down the street, your brain is processing massive amounts of information. We build these regulatory technologies in our heads to facilitate the flow of predictions. We're always making predictions—every person with a brain is a futurist." ★

I.D. contributing editor Tom Vanderbilt profiled William McDonough, James Dyson, and Dean Kamen for *The I.D. Forty* (January/February 2005).