

MEDIA & MARKETING

Questions For...

Faith Popcorn

Reinvent the Wheel in 2004—
Or Risk Being Flattened by It

Agency: Brain Reserve
Title: Founder

By SUZANNE VRANICA

DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY and changes in consumer behavior are creating opportunities for futurist Faith Popcorn, who made her market by forecasting important social and economic trends.

Ms. Popcorn founded Brain Reserve, her marketing consulting firm, back in

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1974—which means she knows something about lasting the course. She has also written several books, including

“EVEolution” and “The Popcorn Report,” which helped establish her credentials.

Today, Campbell Soup is using Ms. Popcorn to broaden its marketing efforts. One concept: “Soup Sanctuaries” at shopping venues nationwide, where shoppers can rest and enjoy free soup. “TV commercials are over,” Ms. Popcorn says. “We are creating a new model where a brand interrupts the culture.” Her thoughts on 2004 follow.

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WSJ: Are consumer-purchasing habits returning to normal in the aftermath of the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks?

Ms. Popcorn: No. There are two kinds of fear that are still in place. Internal fear,



David M. Russell

‘Our shock button has been turned off,’ says Ms. Popcorn.

which includes the fear of carbs, office stress and aging. And external fear, which includes the fear of terrorism, bioterrorism and even the flu. Fear is still running high and that is why the alcohol industry is doing well. Fear makes consumers suspicious and it makes it harder to sell to them. Big advertisers should be more maternal and nurturing in this type of environment. They also need to be available. Today, you can’t get hold of any company. If you have an issue with your soap powder you can’t find a live person to talk to at a company. That is a problem.

WSJ: What trend are marketers missing?

Ms. Popcorn: Only 10% of families are traditional. The new household formation is mixed, but companies still market to the soccer moms and white families. About 51% of households are married-cou-

ple households—down dramatically from 80% in 1950. The fact is if you are in a new type of household—your child is adopted, you used an egg bank [to become pregnant] or grandparents are raising the kids—you are being ignored.

WSJ: What key marketing trend will take hold in 2004?

Ms. Popcorn: Porn will become the norm. Nothing shocks anyone anymore. Our shock button has been turned off and that is why advertisers are finding it hard to get their messages through. The whole country is desensitized. The media will continue to push the limits of what’s acceptable.

WSJ: Will marketers embrace aging boomers this year?

Ms. Popcorn: Marketers don’t understand them. No one understands them. Our culture throws out older people. More importantly, marketers don’t realize that there is a group of boomers that are born-again parents. Many grandparents are raising kids today. Paying attention to this generation is not about putting old people in ads. You must put products into people’s lives in imaginative ways.

WSJ: You spent part of your childhood in China. As that market heats up, how should American companies prepare their marketing?

Ms. Popcorn: Speak Chinese first. Chinese culture is complex. Americans are terrible at not understanding the culture. I have adopted a Chinese daughter and had to learn about the culture. Companies must do the same—it is enormously important. You need to know that black is a bad-luck color in China. One small misstep could destroy your communications.

WSJ: Will TiVo gain strength in 2004, and if it does, what does this mean for TV marketers?

Ms. Popcorn: TiVo will take the guts out of the television industry. You will see a

lot of marketers become partners with TV shows. Soon you will be able to buy the wardrobe of a character on a show, or the entire living room that appears on a show’s set. It’s not about having Evian [bottled water] appear in a program.

WSJ: Are there any other new technologies that have the potential to change advertising and marketing?

Ms. Popcorn: One company has begun putting built-in mini TV screens on wine bottles. It shows a short film about the wine and how it was grown. I think other food marketers may also use the new TV technology. It’s part of wanting to understand the source of our food.

WSJ: Is reality TV a fad or a trend?

Ms. Popcorn: It’s a long-term trend that will be supported by virtual reality rooms that will be in almost every home. With the advent of virtual reality, we’ll be playing so many mind games that reality truths will be blurred until there is no difference between reality TV, Internet games and real life. For example, we will travel with the reality-TV team for days at a time in our virtual reality rooms. When we must go to work, the game will be installed on the inside of our glasses. We will gather at locations at specific times to meet others playing in our game. It’s ‘Matrix’ to the max.

WSJ: What do you think about the advertising business today? How will it evolve?

Ms. Popcorn: I think it’s on its way to extinction. In three to five years you will see consumers rejecting advertising—which will cause agencies to scramble as they try to make a living. Right now, they are opening trend departments, public-relations arms and viral-marketing departments. It’s about trying to reinvent themselves—but they are very late to the game.