

SPARKS!

Igniting
new ideas

The second in a series of occasional sparklers

Paradoxes, or Trends/Counter-trends, Truths & Contradictions

We are thrilled to bring you our second edition of *Sparks!* As we considered the myriad things we might talk about, we were struck by the wealth of seemingly contradictory movements in our lives. They are *paradoxes* (apparent contradictions in which both sides are necessary for the truth) or *trends and counter-trends*. In our roles as creative catalysts we have long found that paying attention to these forces provides fascinating food for thought and rich springboards for problem-solving and new ideas.

In the 1980's John Naisbett's *Megatrends* described an important trend/counter-trend which he called "high tech and high touch." A current example—*High Tech*: It's clear that PC's are the primary tool in business AND, *High Touch*: sales of fountain pens are booming as well—perhaps they're being used for nothing more than signing electronically generated documents!

We have selected some paradoxes and trends/counter-trends that especially intrigue us and present them here in vignette style. We hope that this collection will provoke you to think deeply about how these paradoxes and others may be affecting your business opportunities.

Enjoy this issue of *Sparks!* We welcome your comments.

Laurie Tema-Lyn

Open Secrets

When my friend emailed me her teenage daughter's on-line diary, I was torn between my love of eavesdropping and respect for the girl's privacy. However, the diary was clearly posted for anyone to see (and my friend assured me that her daughter wanted family and friends to read it), so my eavesdropping impulse soon won out. Still, wasn't it a bit odd, I wondered, for my friend, and anyone else for that matter, to be privy to her daughter's innermost secrets in this very public way?

As 1984 recedes into distant memory, George Orwell's Big Brother is very much alive and well, and he is indeed watching. In a surprising twist, however, some of us couldn't be happier. While today's technology raises more and more concerns about the loss of privacy, it also

"... Paradox is the source of the thinker's passion, and the thinker without a paradox is like a lover without feeling: a paltry mediocrity."

Søren Kierkegaard,
Philosopher

entertains us with public displays of what once was intimate behavior. We may worry about the possible disclosure of our on-line purchases and credit card information, our financial transactions, and our medical records; or about the hotly debated issue of internet and email surveillance of employees. Yet our culture revels in



voyeuristic "reality" TV shows like *Survivor*, *Temptation Island* and *The Jerry Springer Show* (which offers the spectacle of contestants clamoring to shock viewers with family secrets that were once safely hidden away). And then there are Internet web cam sites, a growing phenomenon where ordinary people invite strangers to watch them in their homes, 24 hours a day. Like many paradoxes, these trends that seem at odds with each other actually reveal two sides of the same coin: the wish to protect our privacy, coupled with a wild embrace of its very opposite.

As the private becomes more public, the distinction between what's real and what's "for show" gets blurred. What, after all, could be more theatrical than a band of "real life" castaways struggling to survive on prime time TV, with medical teams swarming off screen? And that on-line diary? It may seem a contradiction in terms, yet it raises some intriguing questions about the intricate dance between what's public and what's private in our lives.

Reva Dolobowsky



Harnessing the Power of Paradox

“Sometimes you have to whisper to be heard.” That’s the gist of a line uttered dramatically in a TV commercial for perfume some years ago. It’s an apt reminder that often the most powerful ideas come when we change our viewpoint, even stand our preconceived notions on their heads.

Next time you need a new approach to a business (or personal) opportunity, try searching in the opposite direction from where you’d normally look. Start by listing a few key assumptions about the issue. Then for each one, note its opposite. For example, if you’re in the food industry, and *convenience* is important, you might note *labor intensive* or *inconvenient*. What insights can you glean from this reversed perspective? Look for clues, paradoxical as they might seem, that could help solve your problem in an unexpected and promising way.

Reva Dolobowsky

Here are some paradoxes to get you started:

- public/private
- solo/teams
- city/country
- slow food/fast food
- good for you/junk
- heterogeneous/homogeneous
- trivial/important

Stay in Touch- Stay Away



“I keep the shades down and the lights dim...”, “I just shut the ringers off...”, quotable quotes from recent focus group participants discussing possible new telecommunications products. These folks, like many others we’ve spoken with, work in offices and spend so much time leashed to their communications devices that they want some peace and quiet when they come home.

Nokia estimates that in 1992, 10 million of the world’s people had mobile phones. In 2002 that figure is projected to be 1 billion! We’re definitely in an age where we can communicate with almost anyone, anyplace, anytime. Witness AT&T’s ad with a shepherd crowned in country glory making investments on his mobile phone. And then there are those people who want to keep the world at bay, hiding behind drawn shades with the phones off. A paradox, perhaps. What’s behind it: a human need for control.

Laurie Tema-Lyn

*“To see a world
in a grain of sand,
and a heaven
in a wild flower,
hold infinity in
the palm of your
hand and eternity
in an hour.”*

William Blake,
Poet & Painter

If America Is More Multi-Racial, Why Does It All Look the Same?

The 2000 census ushered in a new era. For the first time ever, Americans were allowed, even encouraged, to identify themselves as belonging to more than one racial or ethnic group. Besides choosing a race or combination of races, we were also given the option of identifying ourselves as being Hispanic or Latino/a. With all the combinations and permutations available, Americans can choose to identify themselves as being from one of 63 distinct race/ethnicity categories.

As the census is tallied up and the results are published, a paradox of our society becomes evident. As a nation, we have become more diverse. In spite of the dizzying array of census-designated race and ethnic possibilities, more than 97 percent of Americans identify themselves as being of just one race. However, it is more likely than ever before in our history that that race is not “white.” African Americans and Hispanics each make up more than 12 percent of the

population and the percentage of Asians in the country is also growing.

In many ways, however, our nation is becoming more homogeneous, even as we take pride in identifying our individuality. A visit to any city in America provides the same shopping options, from Old Navy and Starbuck’s to Barnes & Noble and Home Depot. One would be hard pressed to identify a community by looking at its malls.

All is not lost, however. The increasing influence of the country’s different racial and ethnic groups is making headway in certain key areas of our culture: notably fashion, music and foods. Tortilla chips are as popular as potato chips and sushi is available in most supermarkets nationwide. In a year in which two of the president’s key advisors are people of color and the country’s top golfer is of “two or more races,” America truly is becoming a “Hyphen-Nation.”

Marcia Mogelonsky

When Good Food Goes Bad



Eric Schlosser's *Fast Food Nation*, an exposé of the fast food industry and its effects on America, hit the shelves in January 2001. It got a lot of media attention—"We're shocked,

shocked that fast food can be bad for you!" many reviewers claimed, somewhat tongue-in-cheek. Schlosser's main thesis is that "eating in the United States should no longer be a form of high risk behavior" and he urges Americans to rethink their dependence on fast food.

But Schlosser is not the first to reveal the dangers of the American diet. The Center for Science in the Public Interest publishes a bi-monthly "rap sheet" of the most dangerous—and popular—foods at restaurants and supermarkets today, from soup to dessert. The federal government provides health warnings on wine labels and meticulously lists the ingredients and nutritional composition of every product we buy. Dieticians and doctors publish endless books and articles reiterating that we have to watch what we eat. And the Centers for Disease Control keep informing us that we as a nation are heavier than we have ever been.

The dangers of eating everything from a bag of french fries to an unwashed apple are well documented in the mainstream and alternate press. Yet we still keep eating. And eating. Why is that? It seems that the more we learn, the less we know.

Our nutritional confusion is not without foundation. First, it was eggs. They were bad for us throughout the 1980s, but by the 1990s, eggs had been rehabilitated. Butter, too. During the 1980s, we were told to avoid butter and use margarine instead. But butter made a comeback when scientists discovered that the fat in margarine posed a bigger health risk than the fat in butter. And the list goes on.

According to HealthFocus, an Atlanta-based consulting firm specializing in the healthy foods market, Americans are making fewer healthy food choices now than they did two years ago. More people are drinking whole milk instead of skim or low fat. Fewer people avoid meat. And more are choosing full-fat cheese instead of reduced-fat alternatives.

While it's true that there are a number of important health issues connected with the food supply and our eating habits, most of us have become jaded, disillusioned or just plain confused about what to eat. And nutritional confusion has led to nutritional fatigue. Eating has stopped being fun and we are getting tired of trying to figure out which foods are the least risky.

With all the contradictory evidence, it's no wonder that we've thrown up our hands and voted with our stomachs. Faced with the uncertainty of whether we should choose fish or chicken, soy or dairy, meat or vegan, more Americans are doing whatever they please, whether or not it's healthy.

Marcia Mogelonsky



Slow/Fast Food



I find it quite astounding that those fancy new homes being built in this country are designed with the most spacious and sophisticated kitchens. They have all the latest gadgets for people to create every fabulous exotic dish they see on the Food Channel. Yet a TV commercial for a ready-to-heat packaged meal tells a different story. The wife quips, "Let's eat at home tonight. I'm going to put this into the oven." The husband, caressing the stovetop says, "So this is the stove... it's been a long time..." The advertisers have hit the nail right on the head: most of us aren't cooking much these days. We're "assembling" ready-made food, bringing in fast food and dining out a lot.

And while this trend for fast, convenient foods and away-from-home eating has been steadily increasing

over the decade there is also a *Slow Food Movement*. Originated in 1986 in Italy, it now has chapters in the US and many other countries. Its *Manifesto* is in response to the effect that fast food has on society. The organization's members work to preserve craft-based food production, protect the artistic and environmental heritage of traditional places of gastronomic pleasure (cafés, bake shops, inns, etc.). The snail is the movement's symbol. In the US we see increasing evidence of this movement with artisanal products—hand-made, hand-crafted, slowly made foods. It's growing in importance in breads, chocolates, soups, beer and other categories.

Laurie Tema-Lyn

"I had to make my world large, as the universe is large, so that there would be room for paradoxes."

Maxine Hong Kingston
Writer

Reva Dolobowsky

For over 20 years, Reva Dolobowsky has given her clients a rich, in-depth understanding of what goes on inside the minds of their target markets. Through focus groups, in-depth interviews, and idea generating sessions among consumers and management teams, she provides critical insights and innovative ideas in many industries.

Dolobowsky Qualitative Services
94 Lincoln Street, Waltham, MA 02451
Tel: 781-647-0872, Fax: 781-647-0264
reva@doloqual.com
www.doloqual.com



Laurie Tema-Lyn

Laurie Tema-Lyn is a consultant, creative catalyst, qualitative market researcher and professional coach. She is a recognized leader in the field of innovation for over 20 years, working with Fortune 500 companies, smaller organizations and non-profits. She helps individuals and teams "dream the big dreams" and develop the strategies and ideas to successfully realize them.

Practical Imagination Enterprises
18 Losey Road, Ringoes, NJ 08551
Tel: 908-237-2246, Fax: 908-237-2248
laurie@practical-imagination.com
www.practical-imagination.com



Marcia Mogelonsky

Marcia Mogelonsky, Ph.D., is a senior research analyst at Mintel International Group. A consumer trend writer, speaker and consultant, her areas of expertise include consumer behavior, shopping habits and lifestyle patterns. She is the author of *Everybody Eats: Supermarket Consumers in the 1990s* (American Demographics Books, 1995 and 1996) and *Who's Shopping for Food and Drink* (New Strategist Press, 1996).

102 Cambridge Place, Ithaca, NY 14850
Tel: 607-257-0820, Fax: 607-266-0389
marcia@mogelonsky.com
www.mogelonsky.com or
www.mintel.com

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Trivial Pursuits: Objects (in Mirror) are Larger Than They Appear

Sometimes it's the little things in life that loom the largest. Seemingly low-status, innocuous material items like zippers, screwdrivers, pencils and mirrors can illuminate larger cultural truths. That's the theme of a February 24, 2001 *NY Times* article: "Screwdriver Scholars and Pencil Punditry: Society's Material Culture Garners Academic Scrutiny."

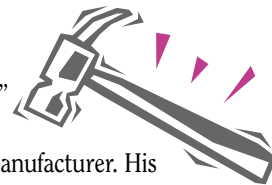
Looking for cultural clues in everyday material artifacts is all the rage, as several recent books attest. *One Good Turn: A Natural History of the Screwdriver and the Screw* by architecture professor Witold Rybczynski (2000) and *Zipper: An Exploration in Novelty* by historian Robert Friedel (1994) are two fascinating examples. We may take the lowly zipper for granted, but it took 20 years to perfect the invention, then another 20 years before people actually began to buy it, when B.F. Goodrich Rubber Company found a consumer-acceptable use for the device, with their creation of zippered galoshes in 1921. As the *Times* article notes, the zipper "was the embodiment of mechanized modernity, and for that reason it nearly failed. For many years the zipper was mainly a barometer of ambivalence about a fully

automated world — especially when it came to intimate matters like dress."

Objects may be mute, but they often speak volumes, telling us things that people can't or won't. By watching how others interact with the ordinary stuff of daily life, a technique used by "observational" researchers, we can learn a lot about people's hopes and dreams. These mundane items are often catalysts for revealing major insights.

Still tempted to dismiss these small objects as merely "trivial?" Consider this carpenter in our focus groups for a hand tools manufacturer. His fellow tradesmen, a seemingly thick-skinned lot, listened in rapt attention as he described the sadness of losing his favorite hammer a few years earlier. They all agreed that their hammers were like an extension of their bodies, nearly as important as a girlfriend or wife, so such a loss would be much more than just an inconvenience. Imagine the collective sigh of relief when he announced that he had been miraculously "re-united with his hammer!"

Reva Dolobowsky



Solo Colleagueship in Different Guises

My office is in the country. My colleagues are just a phone call or an email away. I look out over rolling farmland. I relish the fact that my computer resonates to the sounds of cheery birds, neighing horses and mooing cows. Yet I just have to get into a city every week, whether it's New York or Chicago, San Francisco or Paris. I need the buzz—the culture, cacophony and people-watching to inspire me in other ways, to nurture my intellect and creativity. I'm not alone in this need.

While many cities are going through resurgence, particularly with boomers flocking back from suburbs to inner cities, it's fascinating to note that 26 percent of all single family dwellings in the US are surrounded by one or more acres of land. It seems that we want both peace and quiet AND the noisy urban bustle.

In the last 10 years the number of people working in home offices, whether as solo entrepreneurs or telecommuters has dramatically increased. Yet there is an interesting counter-trend to this

decentralization of work: during this same time the idea of bringing people together from many different functional areas to work closely in teams (face-to-face or virtual) has become a "best practice."

I worked in offices for many years. Even the innovative consulting firms I was part of had us each in our small, separate rooms. Recently I visited an ad agency where I worked many years ago. Yes, there still were quiet individual work spaces, but what struck me was how much of the total office environment was open space, replete with couches, comfy chairs, a baby grand piano, a pool table and a cappuccino bar. Why? To make that corporate environment feel more like community. To enhance communications—of the face-to-face kind. To bring more creativity and collaboration into the daily mode of its employees.

Laurie Tema-Lyn

