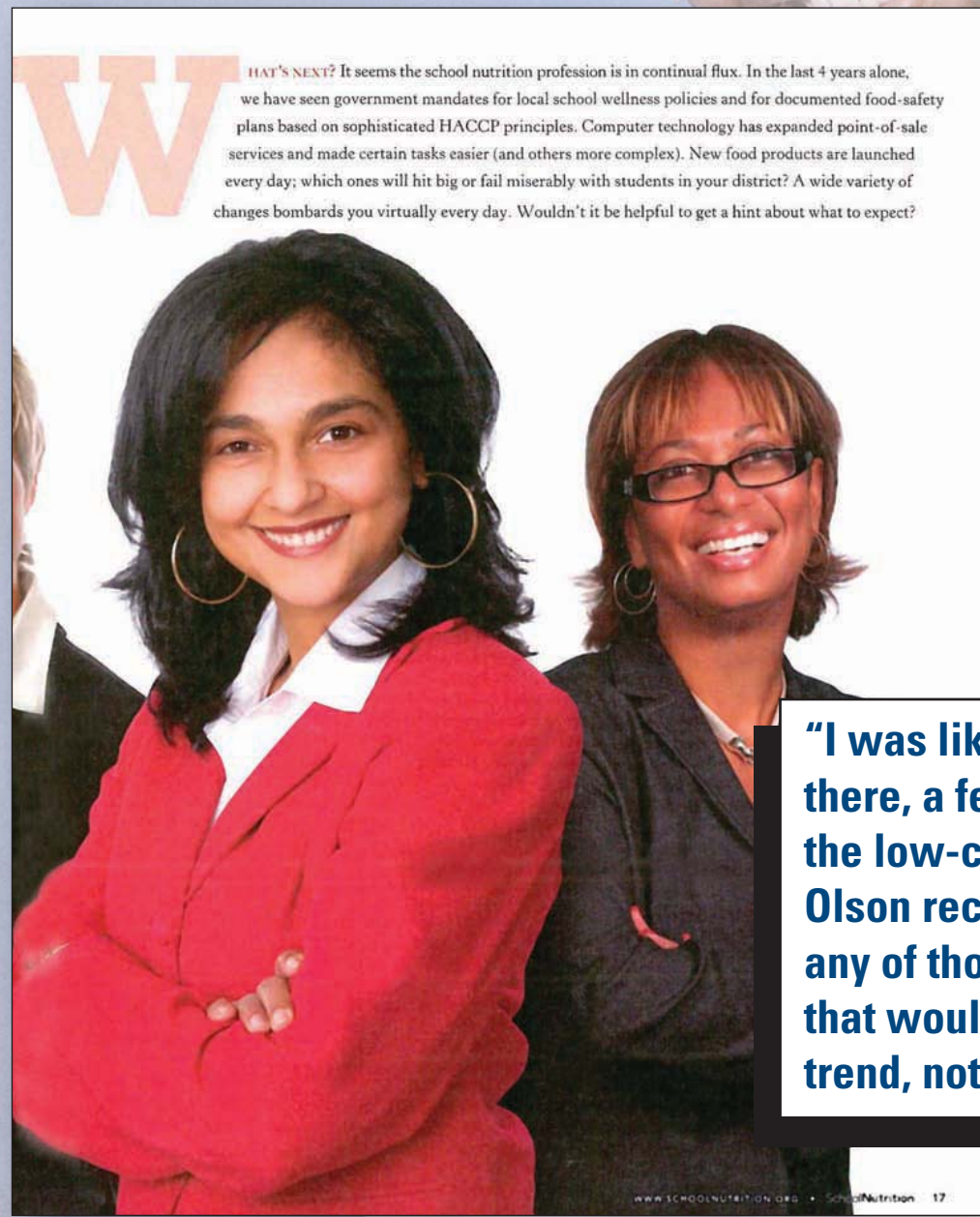


School Nutrition

OCTOBER 2008

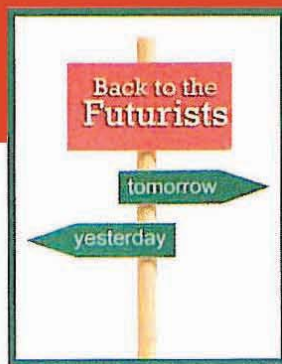
Solutions & Strategies
for K-12 Foodservice

"All day, every day, I'm involved in understanding people, and I find that really interesting" says Olson, a partner in Y-Pulse, LLC.



WHAT'S NEXT? It seems the school nutrition profession is in continual flux. In the last 4 years alone, we have seen government mandates for local school wellness policies and for documented food-safety plans based on sophisticated HACCP principles. Computer technology has expanded point-of-sale services and made certain tasks easier (and others more complex). New food products are launched every day; which ones will hit big or fail miserably with students in your district? A wide variety of changes bombards you virtually every day. Wouldn't it be helpful to get a hint about what to expect?

"I was like the lone wolf out there, a few years ago, saying the low-carb thing is a fad," Olson recalls. "It didn't have any of those characteristics that would have made it a trend, not a fad."



**“The
future belongs
to those who
believe in the
beauty of their
dreams.”**

—Eleanor Roosevelt

For professional prognosticators, this is no idle question. Identifying upcoming trends is their job! Some professionals in this field prefer to call themselves “trend forecasters” and study current data or use computer simulations to project the immediate future. Others call themselves “futurists,” proposing scenarios that could occur decades from now. (And European futurists prefer the term “foresight professionals.”) They go by a variety of monikers, but the goal is the same: making the future easier by anticipating it.

Though you may feel there’s barely time to think about today, let alone *tomorrow*, experts suggest that taking the time to investigate the future could prevent your operation from engaging in the painful process of scrambling to catch up with new trends later. Dr. Peter Bishop, coordinator of the future studies program at the University of Houston, cautions, “If you don’t have time for it now, you’re going to be surprised by change in the future.” Or, as Benjamin Franklin put it long ago, “A stitch in time saves nine!” Join *School Nutrition* as it explores this fascinating new field—and demonstrates how you can use it to help you meet your changing challenges.

Out of the Frying Pan

Like school nutrition professionals, futurists trace the official beginnings of their profession to the aftermath of World War II. Having poured resources into anticipating enemy strategies and technologies and evaluating potential responses, the U.S. military turned to two new organizations for assistance in handling similar considerations in the future. Project RAND (Research AND Development) was founded in 1945 to envision futuristic inventions; its first report was the 1946 *Preliminary Design of an Experimental World-Circling Spaceship*. Two years later, RAND became an

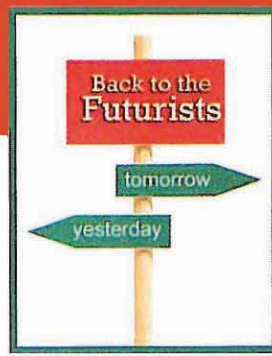
independent, nonprofit organization.

The other organization was the Stanford Research Institute (now known as SRI International), established in 1946 to advance research in economics, industry, management, science and technology. The Institute’s first project involved improving a source of rubber, but, by 1953, its work also encompassed topics of military interest, such as studies of the effects of explosions on various structures. In 1970, shaken by protests against the Vietnam War and a negative perception of SRI, the Institute split away from Stanford University. But before then, the paths of both RAND and SRI would intersect with that of a seemingly unlikely champion of the futurist profession: Edward Cornish, a young reporter for *National Geographic* in Washington, D.C.

Mightier Than the Sword?

In 1961-62, the Cuban missile crisis alarmed Cornish so badly that he considered moving his growing family to Australia. Two years later, however, he gained a new perspective when he read Bertrand de Jouvenel’s new book, *The Art of Conjecture*. A political thinker and economist, de Jouvenel was leading a new “Futuribles” project in Paris, advocating the mastery of the future, rather than anxiety over it.

Inspired, Cornish began to dream of creating a worldwide society of futurists whose work might help to avert another world war. In 1966, Cornish found more inspiration in a *Time* magazine article entitled “The Futurists.” It included the names of forward-thinking experts from around the globe. Cornish took the plunge and founded the World Future Society (WFS). Its first members hailed from a variety of backgrounds—professors, engineers, corporate executives, businessmen, science fiction writers and politicians. WFS also successfully called on



experts from RAND and SRI to join the organization and serve as conference presenters.

Birds of a Feather

In the Seventies and Eighties, the American public seemed to be equally star-struck by a new generation of futurists. Alvin Toffler arguably was the first futurist to gain fame with his 1970 best seller *Future Shock*, which predicted that society would undergo such rapid technological and social changes that people would have difficulty keeping up—consequently suffering from a sense of stress and disorientation, not to mention shorter amounts of time in which to make increasingly complex decisions. He coined the term “information overload.”

Another famous futurist is Canadian Frank Feather, who began his career in 1970, helping financial institutions predict future trends. He broke away as an independent futurist in 1981, becoming something of an icon in the profession. Feather reportedly invented the phrase “thinking globally, acting locally” to describe how individuals would apply their knowledge of world events to small actions they could take at home. Today, you can read his blog or swap ideas with him at the online community of *Fast Company* magazine (www.fastcompany.com/user/frank-feather).

After serving in the administrations of Presidents Kennedy and Johnson, John Naisbitt traveled the world and began researching American trends in the Seventies. In 1982, he published his findings in *Megatrends*, which predicted, among other changes, the rise of a global economy. The book stayed near the top of *The New York Times* bestseller list for 2 years. Today, at age 79, Naisbitt continues to stand out in the futurist field; his latest book is *Mind Set!: Reset Your Thinking and See the Future*.

You may have heard of another current futurist, Faith Popcorn (whose real last name is Plotkin). Her popular 1991 book, *The Popcorn Report: Faith Popcorn on the Future of Your Company, Your World, Your Life*, predicted such trends as the widespread use of e-mail and e-commerce. She made her mark as a futurist in 1975, when she founded BrainReserve, a marketing consulting firm. The late 20th century was an exciting time, as Americans looked to the future with new optimism—and futurists gained celebrity status.

A Rolling Stone

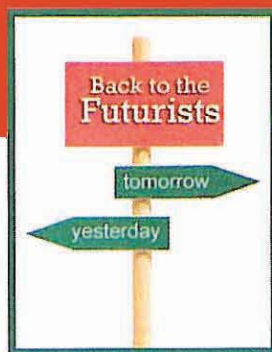
The growing profession also captured the attention of Hawaiian state legislators. Intrigued by the idea of using futurist advice to govern more effectively, they established the Hawaii Research Center for Future Studies in 1971. Six years later, the Center launched an educational program in future studies. Known today as the Manoa School of Futures Studies, it's one of the leading organizations for future studies in the world, advising such clients as NASA, state agencies and even foreign governments.

In 1974, the University of Houston launched a similar education program, dubbing it “future studies,” at its Clear Lake campus. It got new life in 1982, when Associate Professor of Strategic Foresight Peter Bishop became chair of the program. In 2005, Bishop began teaching the Future Studies in Commerce (FSC) Graduate Program at the main campus. “As an FSC graduate,” says the website, “you will enter an emerging professional field helping clients and employers anticipate significant changes that lie ahead and to influence those changes to achieve their long-term goals.” Bishop himself has provided consulting services for numerous clients, including Nestlé USA, Tetra Pak and the W.K. Kellogg Foundation.

**“The future
is here.
It’s just not
widely
distributed yet.”**

—William Gibson





Over the past few decades, business colleges also began benefitting from the insights of futurists—and from new technologies that helped them to capture customer data and project potential future purchases. In 1977, Sharon Olson obtained a dual bachelor's degree in psychology and marketing, and she later earned a master's degree in business. "I loved finding out what makes people tick," she explains. When Olson noticed a new market opening up for grocers, who needed forward-looking strategies for packaging, distributing and marketing goods over wider distances, she knew she had found her niche. "I thought, 'I could start my career in this, and...30 years from now I could really be hot stuff!'" she remembers.

Today, Olson serves as a partner in

snake oil salesmen. "Anybody who pays attention and looks cool and has a dynamic personality can call themselves a futurist," Olson laments. Membership in the World Future Society is no guarantee, for example. While the Society reports 25,000 members in more than 80 countries, its membership categories include both professionals and many who merely dabble in future studies as a hobby.

To help advance the profession, the Association of Professional Futurists (APF) was established in 2002, holding its first conference, "The Future of Futures," in Austin, Texas, the very next year. To date, APF has attracted approximately 200 members. A familiar name—Peter Bishop—serves on the board. According to Bishop, the timing for advancing APF



YPulse, Inc., a marketing research firm that follows teen trends. She also works with food manufacturers, helping them to improve the development and marketing of products that will appeal to highly targeted consumers. "All day, every day, I'm involved in understanding people, and I find that really interesting," she enthuses.

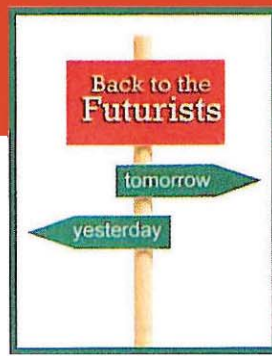
All That Glitters

The identification of future trends has become big business. There's just one problem: It's tough to tell the difference between the true professionals and the

is just right. Since the Nineties, more people are expressing interest in future studies. "I wouldn't call it explosive," he notes, "but it's sustainable."

Before You Leap

More people are seeing the value not only of anticipating future trends, but putting them into action. "You don't jump on them; you *set* them," explains Gerald Celente, who founded The Trends Research Institute in 1980. He reportedly predicted the explosion of the bottled water industry and, in 2000, wrote about



the concept of edible landscaping. Three years ago, he advised Sodexo to establish local gardens and composting stations. According to Celente, "The more knowledge you have, the more facts you're working with, [the more you're] capable of developing forecasts."

Want to try a little "trend forecasting" yourself? Here are a few quick tips to get you started.

Get the big picture. To catch the trends that might affect school foodservice next, you must be aware of trends in *other* professions, advises Celente. "Opportunity misses those who view the world through the eyes of their profession," he observes. He advocates reading one newspaper a day and at least scanning headlines on the Internet.

Get the small picture. Many futurists would love the prospect of having a captive consumer audience whose behavior they could study. Guess what—that's exactly what *you* have! If necessary, ask someone to take your shift one day so that you can talk to and observe your student customers. "Look at how they come through the line, how they choose what they choose and hear what they're saying," Sharon Olson advises. "That tells you the kind of things that they're interested in."

Open your mind. If you see only what you want to see—or only what others want you to see—you might not recognize the next big trend when it comes along. "Our motto is, 'Think for yourself,' and that means suspending ideologies," Celente advises.

Be a kid for a day. "Experience their life in general," Olson says. Read kids' magazines, observe the way teens act at the local cafe and visit their favorite shops. Then go back to your school nutrition operation and brainstorm ways to incorporate the trends you have noticed. "Some things you can't solve," Olson concedes. For example, she says, "You can't become

**"When it comes
to the future,
there are three
kinds of people:
Those who
let it happen,
those who
make it happen,
and those
who wonder what
happened."**

—John M. Richardson, Jr.

a convenience store for them...but you can be something that's relevant to their context."

Let it go. Once you have your research assembled and it's time to brainstorm a new product, service or cafeteria concept, forget about restrictions for a moment. Celente sympathizes with school nutrition professionals regarding the numerous federal, state and local regulations they must meet. "When it's legislated, there's no innovation," he opines. He encourages clients to "unleash the creativity that we all have within us." You can prioritize your list later.

Exercise common sense. After you finish your brainstorming, be practical

about which ideas to implement. For example, in her corporate work, Olson always advised against jumping on the low-carb bandwagon. "I was like the lone wolf out there, a few years ago, saying the low-carb thing is a fad," Olson recalls. "It didn't have any of those characteristics that [would have] made it a trend, not a fad." According to Olson, one of the most important characteristics of a new trend is that it's easy for people to incorporate into their existing lifestyles. For better or worse, Olson says, instant gratification is human nature.

One Good Turn

According to Olson, however, there's one trend that always has staying power, regardless of what's hot and what's not. She recalls eating school lunch every day of her K-12 schooling, partly because the school nutrition professionals reminded her of her own mother. "It was like my mom's food with my friends!" she says. According to Olson, kids everywhere want customer service that makes them feel loved and respected, and all the trendiness in the world can't replace it. "To a large degree," Olson concludes, "some things like that really don't change."

Still, providing the best customer service in the world won't help you implement "green" operational initiatives, write a grant proposal to fund a nutrition education program or explore opportunities to serve reimbursable meals through vending machines. Yep, these changes could become your new realities. What's next? The articles in this issue offer a few hints. It's up to you to turn knowledge into action! **SN**

Rita Nolan is senior editor of *School Nutrition*. Photography on pages 16-17 by **Spiderstock**; 16, 18, 19, 21 and 22 by **Ahmet Cuneyt Selcuk**; 18 by **Christine Balderas**; 19 by **Don Bayley**; and 21 by **Yannis Ntouslopoulos/istockphoto.com**.