



The world abounds in opportunities, large and small. We are still waiting for a cure for cancer, tasty nonfattening foods, weight-loss schemes that work, and flying cars to avoid congested roads. While waiting, we can focus on trying to make our present products and services better in a hundred ways.

Look for problems. People complain about it being hard to sleep through the night, get rid of clutter in their homes, find an affordable vacation, trace their family origins, get rid of garden weeds, and so on. Each problem can spark several solutions. As the late John Gardner, founder of Common Cause, observed: **“Every problem is a brilliantly disguised opportunity.”**

Look for trends. Surely you can get some ideas from Faith Popcorn’s list of 16 trends, including *cocooning*, *down-aging*, and *cashing out*. Cocooning refers to people spending more time in their homes because the outside world is getting rough; therefore, think of ways to make the home more pleasant through furnishings, electronics, and entertainment. Down-aging captures the fact that older people want to feel young; hence the explosion of wrinkle creams, plastic surgery, and Jaguar sales. And cashing out means that people want to lead a less hectic existence and seek simpler lifestyles and smaller towns.

Don't just talk about opportunities. Success happens when preparation meets opportunity. A company has to either make history or become history. Someone compared market demand to a swiftly running stream: If you don't throw your line in fast enough, you won't catch the fish. Mark Twain learned this from bitter experience: **"I was seldom able to see an opportunity until it had ceased to be one."**

One of the greatest opportunities today is to invent businesses that can charge significantly lower prices than competitors and still be profitable. This has been the secret of Wal-Mart, Southwest Airlines, IKEA, and Dollar General. They reinvented their respective industries so as to be able to offer significantly lower prices than their competitors. Given the vast and growing number of low-income families, these retailers attracted millions of loyal customers.

Rosabeth Moss Kanter, in her *When Giants Learn to Dance*, observed: **"The years ahead will be best for those who learn to balance dreams and discipline. The future will belong to those who embrace the potential of wider opportunities but recognize the realities of more constrained resources, and find new solutions that permit doing more with less."**⁴⁶

Said Ralph Waldo Emerson: **"This time, like all times, is a great time if we but know what to do with it."**