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Silicon Insights: Betting on Tech Futures

Web Site Taps Into Industry Leaders' Forecasts

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When I speak at conferences and industry events, I am often introduced as a futurist.

I was given this futurist label because of my predictions about desktop publishing, two years before the technology came to market, and because I predicted multimedia computing would be a big trend in PCs as early as 1987.

I also spoke about the concept of PDAs in 1989 and wrote extensively about wireless data as early as 1991.

Truthfully, since I work in the world of technology market research, predicting technology futures is really just part of my job. It is great fun going into labs very early on in projects and seeing engineers inventing the future.

But most of my futurist bets have relatively short time frames.

Although I have gone out on a limb from time to time and predicted technology trends 10 to 20 years out, most of my forecasts are based on solid research and come from peeks behind the scenes as labs work on core technology that will come out sooner rather then later.

The Rules of the Game

If you want to get a real glimpse of how technology bigwigs think about the long-term future technology, check out the Web site www.longbets.org, backed by the Long Bets Foundation, a nonprofit group that collects predictions about what the world will be like years, decades and even centuries out.

The foundation has lined the technology world's who's who and asked them to put up monetary bets ☐ which can go to a charity of the winner's choice ☐ to back up their predictions.

The rules of the Long Bets are pretty simple: The minimum bet is $1,000; the minimum prediction period must be at least two years. The odds are always even and the result is always win or lose, without the possibility of partial wins.

The subject of the bet must be of importance to society or scientific issues. Bettors must provide an argument on why the subject of their bet is important and why they expect to win. Bettors also provide the name of a charity to receive the winnings, and must sign a Bettor's agreement with the Long Bets Foundation.

On Their Minds

Reading the bets on the site not only give you a feel for how industry heavyweights see the future, but is also a highly educational experience.

For example, Microsoft's chief technology officer, Craig Mundie, recently bet Google CEO Eric Schmidt $2,000 that by 2030, commercial passengers will routinely fly in pilotless planes. The two explain their positions in the "On The Record" section of the Web site.

Author Jason Epstein, co-founder of the New York Review of Books, has bet Vinton Cerf, senior vice president of data architecture at MCI □ and considered one of the fathers of the Internet □ that more then 50 percent of books sold worldwide will be printed on demand at the point of sale in the form of library-quality paperbacks, by 2010. Epstein says yes, Cerf says no way.

Also, Jim Griffin, CEO of Cherry Lane Digital, has bet Gordon Bell, senior researcher at Microsoft's Media Presence Research Labs, $2,000 that a profitable video-on-demand service aimed at consumers will offer 10,000 titles to 5 million subscribers by 2010.

Although sports bets are not allowed, there is one sports bet on the record that has a societal twist. Time magazine Editor-At-Large Mike Elliot, has bet actor Ted Danson $2,000 that the U.S. men's soccer team will win the World Cup before the Red Sox win the World Series.

Can We All Agree?

Some of the bets that have not been challenged include the prediction that we will receive intelligent signals from outside the solar system by 2050. Also uncontested is the notion that by the year 2020, the tickets to space travel □ at least to the moon □ will be available over the counter.

After perusing the site, I think I will stick with my short-term prediction strategy. However, Long Bets offers a most fascinating place to check out many futurists thoughts on technology and its impact on society and at the very least gives readers some great food for thought.

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