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## Love, Jobs & 401(k)s

By RUTH LA FERLA



ON a good day last summer, Thomas Taccetta, a stock trader, might have checked his financial charts before plotting the day's investments. Today he is likely to check in with his psychic as well. "I'll play the broadest index, the S.&P. 500," Mr. Taccetta said, "and if she tells me she is getting a negative view, I will sell."

Since September, when the Dow collapsed, Mr. Taccetta, who trades for his own portfolio in Boca Raton, Fla., has talked with his psychic about once a month, roughly twice as often as a year ago. "There is no rhyme or reason to the way the market is trading," he said. "When conditions are this volatile, consulting a psychic can be as good a strategy as any other."

In an era when even Henry M. Paulson Jr., the Treasury secretary, changes his mind weekly about how to rescue the United States economy, Mr. Taccetta's decision to seek the advice of a psychic may not seem all that irrational. With Washington flinging pieces of the \$700 billion bailout package around, dithering about whom to rescue — homeowners? automakers? cousin Fred? — a good set of tarot cards might come in handy.

"Your mortgage agents, your realtors, your bankers, you can't go to these people anymore," said Tori Hartman, a psychic in Los Angeles. "They're just reading a script — at least that's how my clients feel. People are sensing that the traditional avenues have not worked, that all of a sudden this so-called security that they've built up isn't there anymore. They come to a psychic for a different perspective."

Psychics say their business is robust, as do astrologers and people who channel spirits, read palms and otherwise predict the future (albeit not the winning lottery numbers). Their clients, who include a growing number of men, are often professional advice-givers themselves, in fields like real estate and investments, and they typically hand over anywhere from \$75 to \$1,000 an hour for this form of insight.

"My Web traffic is up and up and up," said Aurora Tower, a New Yorker who constructs spidery star charts for her growing clientele. "People will entertain the irrational when what they consider rational collapses."

Quackery? Whatever. But after all, the nation's supposed experts on the economy, from pundits on the networks to billionaire investment bankers, have not been exactly reliable. And spiritual readings, as they are known, appear to be one of the few growth sectors in a contracting economy.

"My phone is ringing off the hook," said Roxanne Usleman, a psychic in Manhattan.

Ms. Usleman, who says she channels angels to advise her clients on interpersonal and financial matters, reported both a spike in traffic on her Web site and a significant surge in private consultations. She used to see comfortably 15 to 20 clients a week, she said. Now she meets with more than twice that number. "I'm having trouble squeezing in appointments," she said.

Dawn Carr, a psychic in Boston, said her holiday bookings jumped as much as 70 percent this year over last, fueled in part by corporate bookings for holiday parties. "These people are looking for someone not just to entertain them, but to enlighten them," she said.

Although most of us would settle for just enough telepathy to read our spouse's mind, some people crave more.

"When you don't know what to expect of a job interview or a business partnership," said Gita V. Johar, a professor of at the Columbia University Business School, "that is when you're most likely to turn to a psychic."

Professor Johar, whose specialty is studying the effects of superstition on consumer behavior, suggested that when your portfolio is shrinking or your business is tanking, talking to a soothsayer may be "one way of feeling in control." She needed no crystal ball herself to predict that "given the uncertainty of the economy, psychics are going to see an increase in business."

The steep prices charged by practitioners of divination do not seem to have deterred many of the financially fretful. Ms. Hartman, the Los Angeles psychic, said her Internet traffic has picked up substantially, from about 30 visitors a day to more than 200. She charges from \$150 for a 30-minute telephone reading to \$500 for 90 minutes of "intuitive counseling." In what is perhaps a sign of the times, the \$70 moss-scented prosperity candle offered on her Web site has become her best seller, she said.

Many more men have joined the ranks of seekers. "In the old days men would turn to their wives and ask, 'What did that goofball say, honey?'" said Michael Lutins, a New York writer and astrologer. "Now they are raising their heads, interested in matters that were once considered women's stuff." Mr. Lutin has lectured about astrology at such male-dominated institutions as the Harvard Business School Club of New York.

Ms. Usleman said that her once predominantly female clientele has also expanded. Men — among

them lawyers, doctors, chief executives and insurance brokers — now make up about 50 percent of her business. They approach her, she said, with highly targeted questions, as if they were grilling an investment counselor. “Before agreeing to a reading, they will ask: ‘What is your accuracy rate? Can you guarantee your readings? How do you get your information and can I depend on it?’ ”

Aside from storefront readers, psychics rarely hang out a shingle, making their earnings hard to track. But one person who has attempted to quantify the rising popularity of psychics is Robert LoCasio, the chief executive of LivePerson.com, a site offering telephone consultations with experts in fields from finance to fly fishing.

When he bought his company a year ago, Mr. LoCasio checked the Consumer Sentiment Index, which is published by the University of Michigan and charts consumer confidence, from 2005 through September of this year. He then compared the data with records from his own company, and drew the conclusion that when the economy is down, consultations with psychics spike noticeably.

Live Person earned revenues of \$30 million this year, about 70 percent derived from spiritual readers, Mr. LoCasio said. “In this day and age, a spiritual guide is an everyday therapist — that’s what the business has become,” he said.

In more ordinary economic cycles, psychics tend to offer guidance on romance and relationships. These days, they are besieged with questions about whether a pink slip is in the cards, whether a condo will sell, or whether a company will continue to prosper.

Alicia Bowling, who runs a sports bar in Manhattan, consulted a psychic when friction with a business partner seemed about to imperil her livelihood. “I used to go to my psychic about twice a year, but in the past year, yikes, I may have talked to her a dozen times,” said Ms. Bowling, 49. “I used to ask more about love, or will I ever be married, but with all these hard times, I wonder, ‘What’s going to happen to my bar and will I survive?’ ”

Sergei Pamukh, a New York stock trader, considers himself a skeptic about supernatural matters, but softened his stance after consulting Ms. Usleman, the Manhattan psychic. When his business was flailing earlier this fall, she suggested that he travel to Moscow to meet with a billionaire mogul. “In two or three weeks I am going,” he said.

Ms. Usleman said she typically fields questions these days like, “Should I go back and live with my parents?” and “Is it O.K. to take my children out of private school?” In the past, she added, “they would ask, ‘Should I have a baby?’ But now they have put that on hold.

“Basically, what people want to know in a troubled economy,” she said, “is what can they do to

reinvent themselves.”

Fahrusha, a Madame Blavatsky from Manhattan, said that clients have been pressing her with highly focused queries. “They might want to know about investing in a particular security, or ask how the euro will fare against the dollar,” she said. In flusher times, they might have consulted a financial expert, she said, “but some of these people are experts themselves.”

Maria Napoli, a Manhattan astrologer whose clientele includes a growing circle of the rich and famous in the worlds of fashion, art and finance, observed that many of her clients were fretting about a global picture, not just their careers. “They are asking: ‘Where are we headed as a country? Are we entering a depression?’ I get a lot of Republicans wondering where their party is going.”

Mostly they are after a little peace of mind.

“It pays to cover all your bets,” said Stuart McFaul, who runs a marketing and public relations company in San Francisco.

Mr. McFaul checks in with his psychic when he is stumped for answers about where his business, and his competition, might be headed. “I’m a big believer that you really don’t dismiss any opinion,” he said.

Ms. Bowling, the bar owner, is grateful for the slightest shred of insight. “In times that are this nerve-racking, all it takes is one word that kind of helps you get through your day,” she said.