



# Book Microtrends

## The Small Forces Behind Tomorrow's Big Changes

Mark J. Penn and E. Kinney Zalesne  
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## Recommendation

This book is useful, entertaining and, at times, a little strange. These qualities all arise from its core premise. Mark. J. Penn and E. Kinney Zalesne set out to reveal dozens of “microtrends” they say are reshaping U.S. and global society. They group these contained trends by topical clusters (work, health, etc.), and argue that Americans’ freedom of choice is allowing social fragmentation into more distinct niches. The result is snapshot after snapshot of 70 or more niche groups. The book provides just a few pages on each one. If you’re familiar with a trend or, conversely, find it too quirky (“Young Knitters”), these few pages may seem long. If you haven’t encountered some of these trends, the entries will seem tantalizingly short. No matter what your niche, Penn and Zalesne will surprise you at some point, and their explanations of the forces shaping society are detailed and often quite original. As a result, *BooksInShort* recommends their book to all marketers, especially those seeking niche audiences, and to everyone whose business requires planning for social change.

## Take-Aways

- The time of mass social movements is over. Now, “microtrends” define society.
- A movement can exercise real influence if it reaches 1% of the population.
- Emerging microtrends often spark balancing contrary trends.
- In religion, more women are entering the ministry, traditional faiths are fragmenting and new creeds are multiplying.
- In politics, swing voters are key, the elite are out of touch with political reality, and previously silent groups, like immigrants and convicts, carry new weight.
- Family is still central to American life, but it now takes many different shapes.
- Sexuality is changing. Relationships start and evolve in new ways in response to trends ranging from demographic change to Internet introductions.
- Many people, including homeschoolers and college dropouts, seek more flexibility in education.
- In leisure, sports are shifting from team to solo activities, adults are playing video games and technology has become social glue, rather than a source of isolation.
- Americans seek control over their bodies, whether that means getting tattoos, having plastic surgery or researching their own best health care options.

## Summary

### An Explosion of Choices – and Microtrends

The combination of freedom, material comfort, and access to technology and information gives people a broad range of choices, allowing them to govern their lives and lifestyles to an unprecedented degree. As a result, identifying a few sweeping trends and expecting them to explain society is no longer possible, though that is how some futurist writers once operated. Pinning down today’s myriad emerging “microtrends” requires engaging in “microtargeting,” the only way to unravel how one

microtrend might spawn another opposing trend. Given the new ways members of small groups can connect via the Internet and multiply their impact by using other technologies, such as television, any group that reaches even 1% of the population can now become markedly influential.

“The most powerful forces in our society are the emerging, counterintuitive trends that are shaping tomorrow.”

This proliferation of trends has other major implications. For one, creating community or unity is becoming much harder. However, growing microtrends also threaten authoritarian regimes and generate personal freedom. Society is switching from a mass-produced “Ford economy” to a “Starbucks economy,” where you make continual personal choices to shape the life you want. As individualization grows, opinion-shapers, from marketers to politicians, will find it necessary to address many different niche markets. Here is a look at some of those microtrend groups:

## Relationship and Family Trends

Romance is changing. One emerging trend involves women who become “Sex-Ratio Singles.” They would like to be married, but the demographic imbalance between genders leaves them single. Several factors influence their marital status: Men die sooner, more men identify as gay than women identify as lesbian and more men are in jail. Some women may be joining another trend; they could become “Cougars,” older women who date younger men. Staying younger in appearance with exercise (and perhaps elective surgery) allows them to match their spiking sexual drives with the energies of younger men.

“The more choices people have, the more they segregate themselves into smaller and smaller niches in society.”

“Office Romancers” are a separate trend. As of 2006, almost 60% of U.S. employees had experienced an office romance, up from 47% in 2003. This trend generates complications, since people in such romances risk sliding into sexual harassment or nepotism. At the other end of the spectrum are “Commuter Couples,” who travel long distances for work or live apart much of the time. Such separations have always marked some jobs, such as military service, but they are affecting more “dual-career couples.” Some commuters may also be “Internet Marrieds,” couples who met online, and tend to be urban, employed, “upscale” and politically liberal. A growing number of transgendered people, part of the “Unisexual” trend, are challenging gender categories by choosing their sexual orientations.

“America is no longer a melting pot...small groups are now defining themselves in sharper, starker distinction than ever before.”

As relationships change, so do families. “Late-Breaking Gays” are complicating family life, because they do not realize their sexual orientation until they are adults, often after marrying and having kids. “Old New Dads” are marrying late or remarrying, and having kids with their second wives. They bring more wisdom and money to the role, but are, by definition, older fathers. They may become “Pampering Parents,” who talk things out with their kids rather than punishing them. Some parents hire “Modern Mary Poppinses,” educated women who become nannies on the road to having families and careers. More “Dutiful Sons” – a disproportionate number of them Asian – are becoming caretakers for their aging parents, though few receive much support from the government or society. “Pet Parents” spend money on animals that they regard as family members.

## Work and Money Trends

Americans no longer retire at 65. “Working Retired” people have doubled in number since the early ’80s. Healthier elders find that work provides meaning, identity and cash for medical care, but few companies are planning for older workers. “Extreme Commuters” and “Stay-at-Home Workers” are pulling the work force in opposing directions. Stay-at-homers telecommute, making employers deal with workers who are less integrated into their corporate cultures and who need new pay structures for hours worked out of sight. Extreme commuters drive three hours or more, round trip, for work. They travel alone, clogging the roads and seeking reasonable gas prices. They might rather be “Second-Home Buyers,” people who buy second houses or condos for better access to family or fun.

“The art of trend-spotting, through polls, is to find groups that are pursuing common activities and desires, and that have either started to come together or can be brought together by the right appeal that crystallizes their needs.”

Several other trends are reshaping the workplace. “Wordy Women” are flooding language-based careers, such as journalism, public relations, law and advertising. “Ardent Amazons” choose traditionally male professions, like the police or the military, or male-associated sports. “Stained Glass Ceiling Breakers” are women who become clergy. Women, now a majority of divinity school students, approach spiritual leadership more personally than men and emphasize social justice. Yet, membership in the religions that ordain women has dropped, while denominations that exclude women clergy have grown. “Black Teen Idols” go to college and have lucrative careers, disproving stereotypes, whereas “High School Moguls” don’t wait for college. They start businesses (often online or high tech) and get rich before they leave home. “Non-Profiters” enter the charitable sector, which has been outgrowing industry and government for decades. “Shy Millionaires” live beneath their means, ironically distorting the public perception of wealth. And, middle-class people going broke are “Bourgeois and Bankrupt,” due to easy credit and low savings.

## Social Trends

American education is changing. Socially ambitious parents are holding their kids back from entering kindergarten, believing that the “Smart Child Left Behind” will be measured against younger class peers, and will thus succeed in school and throughout life. “America’s Home-Schooled” are increasing, as religious parents, those who want to protect their children or those who seek more educational choices are teaching their kids at home. More Americans are entering college, but “College Dropouts” are also rising. Some just take a break; others, especially first generation college students, go to work and never return to campus.

“More women are finding themselves left out of the institution of marriage. Some opt out deliberately, but others fill up dating Web sites, only to be disappointed.”

American society now includes more than three million “Interracial Families,” part of a general movement de-emphasizing race in U.S. life. In a parallel trend, “Pro-Semites” are multiplying. Voters seeking representatives who have strong moral values have supported Jewish candidates for office, celebrities such as Madonna are drawing attention to various elements of Jewish culture and non-Jews are signing onto “J-Date.com” in search of Jewish mates. “Protestant Hispanics” are coming to the U.S. in large numbers. And the nation is home to “Moderate Muslims,” members of Islam who share little or nothing with the extremists in the news.

“The total number of people in America today who speak English either ‘not at all’ or with limited proficiency is nearly 25 million. That’s more people than live in Taiwan.”

Some trends cause other trends. For example, a growing number of left-handed people can become “Southpaws Unbound” because fewer parents and teachers now force kids to become right-handed. The aging population generates more “Hard-of-Hearers” in today’s noisier world. The information technology explosion has generated a few microtrend groups. “New Luddites” shun the electronic world, but the Internet is pivotal to “Social Geeks.” Computer-related work is drawing more women (“Tech Fatales”). Marketers pursue Social Geeks, but the market fails Tech Fatales, as it fails the “Car-Buying Soccer Moms,” who really buy most of the automobiles in the U.S.

“Sports in America...are just shifting from a communal rite to a personal one.”

How Americans entertain themselves is changing too. Sports remain wildly popular, but “Archery Moms” are replacing “Soccer Moms,” since solo sports are rising in popularity as team sports decline. Social interaction is changing, too, as “Video Game Grown-ups” meet through their avatars in various video games, and teenage “Young Knitters” share tips and patterns online, then knit alone or in groups as a break from the online world. Some social interaction is disappearing, even from sex, as “XXX Men” are viewing more pornography than ever. “Long Attention Spanners” are rebelling against instant messaging and continual change by seeking extended engagement; for example, half a million Americans run marathons or read lengthy book series, such as the Harry Potter collection.

“The future rarely turns out as predicted.”

In the realm of self-expression, personal choice is king. As tattooing moves mainstream, the “Uptown Tattooed” are becoming its public face. “Surgery Lovers” want even more control over their bodies: They have elective plastic surgery, sometimes several procedures at once, contrary to doctors’ orders, to remake their looks to match their dreams. By contrast, “Snowed-Under Slobs” try to accept themselves as messy individuals and live with it. “Powerful Petites” are smaller people who are starting to unite. Americans, especially women, are shrinking. As women live longer, they lose a little height. Add recent immigrants (Asians, Latinos), who also tend to be short, and you have a growing market share that fashion stores aren’t yet serving.

## Political Trends

Many political microtrends revolve around exploding stereotypes or correcting misconceptions. Isolated, intellectually arrogant “Impressionable Elites” generate a number of these misconceptions; being formally educated and successful, they assume, incorrectly, that they know America’s needs and perspectives. They believe, wrongly, that America is distinctly, even dramatically, polarized. Actually, “Swing Is Still King”: The number of swing, split-ticket and independent voters is rising. The view that illegal immigrants are politically quiet is also wrong: “Militant Illegals” are emerging and they’re willing to speak up for their needs. The political landscape also includes “Native Language Speakers” who live in the U.S. without learning English and Protestant “Christian Zionists” who support Israel because they believe its existence is biblically necessary. Some 650,000 “Newly Released Ex-Cons” have much more secular roots: These “re-entrants” went to prison when America got tough on crime in the ’80s and early ’90s. United, they “could have been a political force.”

## Health Trends

Americans no longer think a tan is sexy. “Sun-Haters” abound as the ozone layer thins and skin cancer risk rises. They’re related to “DIY Doctors,” do-it-yourselfers who study the Web to learn about their health and form partnerships with their doctors. “Vegan Children” are kids who turn vegetarian for ethical and health reasons. Adults are “Starving for Life” for health reasons. “Calorie Restrictors” cut their intake as low as 1,200 calories daily. This may partially counter the trend toward obesity, but not among black women, who bear “a disproportionate burden” as more of them are obese than the rest of the population. Sleep is another place for linked trends. “30-Winkers” are getting much less shut-eye than they really need; no doubt their group includes some coffee-craving “Caffeine Crazyies.”

## International Trends

Several emerging international trends generate more niche communities, like the “Mini-Churched.” Globally, major faiths are fragmenting and spinning off two or three new religions every day. Usually well-off “International Home-Buyers” buy houses and condos in different countries, though the U.S. is particularly popular. “LAT Couples” are complicating the British housing market. These couples “live together apart,” having both committed relationships and separate residences. “*Mammonis*” is the Italian phrase for men who live at home with Mom, 82% of men aged 18-30 in Italy! The Germans call them “*nesthockers*”; in England, they’re “kippers,” for “Kids in Parents’ Pockets Eroding Retirement Savings.” The European birth rate is dropping, so many couples are raising “Eurostars”: pampered, celebrated only children.

“Most predictions are driven by the same conventional wisdom that drives the daily consensus around us...but as you dig deeper, you see a world teeming with the lesser-known, harder-to-spot developments...the small forces that will drive tomorrow’s big changes.”

For microtrends in commerce, look to Vietnam for an intense concentration of optimistic “Vietnamese Entrepreneurs.” Amid India’s marked economic growth, watch the emergence of “Indian Women” as leaders in various fields. China’s prowess in business and technology is well-known, and it is also producing “Chinese Picassos.” As wealth spreads across this huge country, many people are turning to the arts. Politically, “Russia Swings,” trending toward freedom and then back toward a strong central leader. An even darker trend is that of “Educated Terrorists.” The cliché is that poverty breeds terrorism, but actually people who start terrorist groups are rich and well-educated.

## About the Authors

**Mark J. Penn**, CEO of Burson-Marsteller, was the primary adviser on Hillary Clinton’s presidential campaign. **E. Kinney Zalesne** was a White House Fellow and counsel to Janet Reno, the U.S. attorney general in the Clinton administration.