

Fortune Telling:

How do the gadgets measure up to the professionals?



In no area of consumer spending is "caveat emptor" more apt than when shopping for divination of the future. Professional prognostication services have been available practically since the first entrails were spilled. An often confusing array of techniques have been used by professional fortune tellers: tea leaves, crystal balls, proprietary modeling of stock momentum, and so forth. Perhaps because such techniques were shrouded in secrecy, the 20th century has seen a plethora of products which aid the do-it-yourselfer to prognosticate without professional (and expensive!) services. But do these more recent products really work? Below, we test some of the major devices on the market and compare their results with the professional services.

For testing purposes, we created four questions to which we did not yet know the answers. Obviously, we needed to ask questions for which the result would soon enough be obvious, so our results should not be taken as indicative of reliability for questions involving long-term outcomes.

There were two "major" questions:

1. Will Betty survive her case of cervical cancer?
2. Will John find romantic happiness this year?

And two "minor" questions:

1. Should we sell our stock holdings in Amazon.com?
2. What should we order for lunch at Bob's Diner?

Interestingly, we found dramatically different performance on each category of question despite the fact that most of the prognostication products claimed to be general-purpose in function.

The Professionals

Madam Zawatsky (Gypsy medium, crystal ball)

Representing the more traditional market, Madame Zawatsky offered us a selection of possible services including palm reading and tarot cards. We decided that her use of the crystal ball was the most appropriate for our testing purposes, as this service can only be effectively rendered by a professional oracle. We found that Mde. Zawatsky listened quite carefully to our questions and answered one major and one minor question correctly (survive cancer; sell stock).

William Butterworth III (Broker, computer modeling)

William "Just call me Bill" Butterworth refused to answer both of our major questions. His responses to our two minor questions (buy more stock; the double cheeseburger with fries) resulted in financial loss and a bout of diarrhea respectively for several of our test persons. Accordingly we cannot recommend these professionals except perhaps for purposes which we have not yet had the opportunity to test.

The Consumer Products

Tarot Deck

Traditionally a tool of the professionals, consumer decks have been flooding the do-it-yourself market in recent years. However we found the responses often very difficult to interpret. This - coupled with the hidden cost of having to buy an additional instruction book - makes it difficult for CR to recommend this method as a home product.

Ouji Board

While originally designed for communication with the spirits of the dead, the ouija board is now frequently used for prognostication. It is simple to use and learn, but requires two operators. While this may be fun, it can be a serious limitation in some applications (e.g. late night stock calls).

I Ching

Our Oriental entry. Like the Tarot deck, the responses were often inscrutable. Technically, one only need the instruction manual and six coins to use this method, so it scores high points for portability and versatility. However, we recommend this product only for those who expect their questions to be largely limited to the philosophical. For occasional use, a copy (not including the coins) can be obtained through many local libraries.

Magic 8-Ball

Our CR "best buy". For less money than our hardbound edition of the I Ching, this product was remarkably simple to use — just invert and place on a table top. The answers were prompt and easy to read. While the answer to one minor question (food order) was uninterpretable ("maybe"), it otherwise stood well ahead of its more expensive competitors. Construction was rugged — although one test person with sweaty hands had it slip from his hands and drop on his foot. Accordingly we recommend purchasers of this device to use with care and cotton gloves and protective footwear.

Summary

	<i>Cost</i>	<i>Overall rating</i>	<i>Reliability: Major questions</i>	<i>Reliability: Minor questions</i>	<i>Learnability</i>	<i>Ease of use</i>
Gypsy	\$15-30 ^a				NA	
Broker	\$100 ^a		NA ^e		NA	
Tarot	\$20 ^b					
I Ching	\$10			^d		
Ouija Board	\$15					
8-Ball ^c <i>Best Buy!</i>	\$10			^d		

Notes:

NA: Not applicable

a) per transaction

b) with optional instruction book, which we found essential for proper operation

c) Magic 8-Balls manufactured during April-May 1993 have been recalled owing to a disgruntled employee printing profanities on the floating answer ball.

d) uninterpretable responses given

e) refused to answer question

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