

# My Sources Say... 'Most Likely'

By Jim Gauntt

As I was conducting research for this issue of *Crossties*, I realized that for the first time during my tenure RTA would not be issuing a firm forecast for crosstie demand for the upcoming year. Readers of this issue will come to understand why.

The level of uncertainty that exists in the world's economies has risen to unprecedented levels. It isn't that we don't know what's going to happen in a few months, or even in a year. We can't even make it through a single day without an unforeseen monkey wrench rattling its way into the wheels of commerce.

Operating in the dark is unsettling, so I went on a mission to find a way to forecast our future.

I found a vast array of tools and strategies—some centuries old—that have been used to prognosticate. The list is impressive: pendulums, crystal balls, oracles, trances, Ouija boards, tarot cards, palmistry, talismans and amulets, runes, tea leaves, gemstones, dominos, astrology, numerology, dice, pebbles and hairballs (seriously, read Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* to find this example).

My list does not include the scientific fields of forecasting such as meteorology and econometrics—primarily because weather forecasters and economists rarely miss. But, seriously, whether in weather forecasting or economic modeling, it is people who ultimately input the “assumptions” from which forecasts are derived. So, no matter how good a job any person may do in this process, it's a fact that in addition to changing conditions, a human element is involved and thus the results will never be “perfect” predictions.

Take, for example, the RTA econometric model for forecasting tie demand. It has proven quite reliable over the past several years. Members and others who read RTA's forecasting articles frequently comment on how important these predictions have become in their business planning. Yet behind the two forecast scenarios presented this year still reside “best estimates” on U.S. gross domestic product (GDP) growth, levels of future railroad coal shipments, and diesel price movements, among others. As good as these assumptions may be in either

forecast, they are just educated estimates.

Realizing there may be more than a teensy bit of uncertainty in this year's forecasting effort, I continued my search for an all-seeing, all-wise instrument to produce new revelations—solid answers for a foggy future. Ultimately, I found it.

It is, of course, the Magic Eight Ball. Once thought of only as a toy, the Magic Eight Ball has become my most remarkable friend when asking penetrating questions about the future. On a couple of occasions I asked, “What will tie production be in 2009?” Each time, the Eight Ball replied, “Better not tell you now.”

Undaunted, I pressed on. “Will the Class 1 railroads be successful in their drive to enact tax-credit legislation to increase infrastructure investment?” The ball answered, “Reply hazy, try again later.” I haven't figured out when I will try again, but I just know that when I do, I will get another such insightful answer.

Just the other day I inquired, “When will the U.S. housing market stabilize?” The answer: “Concentrate and ask again.” Sheer brilliance.

You have to admit it would be nice to have one small package in which definitive answers to future-forecasting questions reside. Wait, the ball just chimed in, “It is decidedly so.” I will never be able to replace this thing!

When you look at the long list of things people have used to try to predict the future, it becomes apparent we humans are obsessed with what lies ahead.

I wonder what would happen if we simply chose to deal with the things at hand—doing the best we can with whatever comes our way.

That's easy to say, but not so easy to do, especially when you operate a business, have payrolls to meet and customers' needs to serve. These things do require knowledge and planning. And preparing for what may be around the bend is problematic without actually

looking forward into the future.

Yet, even though in this economy we can't know exactly what will happen tomorrow with tie demand, there are a couple of things about which I am certain.

First, as a member of the association, you can truly be thankful that you have a terrific board of directors. I have just returned from our winter meetings. The manner in which your leaders have laid out RTA's plan for the next year is outstanding. It is budget conscious, flexible, and will bring even more value to your membership (see full write-up on page 12).

Second, RTA will not stop working for you. With strong leadership, experienced staff, and an understanding of what tie producers and tie users want to see from this association, RTA is well positioned for whatever comes.

Still, I have a nagging feeling that I am missing something. Something that would eliminate all doubts and uncertainties. Something that maybe the Magic Eight Ball can help with. Oh, Eight Ball, are you confident that through the hard work of RTA members the wood tie will continue to provide outstanding service to railroads now and in the future? What's that? You're floating in an answer. Ah, yes, “You may rely on it!” §

