

Does Obama Mean It's Time To Refresh Your Thinking?

The world is changing so fast around us that we cannot afford to effectively stand still by simply repeating what we've done before without question. So, while you are planning ahead for 2009 and tempted to simply repeat that piece of research that you've always done – maybe it's time to have a rethink. Are you really learning all you can from it – does it need supported by something else? Does it represent good value for money and, most importantly, is the business able to act with certainty based upon its results? If the answer is not an unequivocal “yes” then maybe you need a sense check.

Recent world events have highlighted for me a number of factors that should be of interest to research and marketing practitioners who are keen to stay ahead of the curve. With the economy as it is, you might consider all your customers to be in such a state of flux that they are increasingly hard to connect with and understand – how do you keep track of how their lives are being affected by the world around them and more importantly how that affects their behaviour? My answer would be that you may have to reconsider how you can get the best picture of what is going on with your customers and that may mean fewer surveys and more observation and analysis of how customers actually behave, as a starting point.

Who could not be fascinated by the predictions, the polls and the eventual results leading to the eventual election of Barack Obama as the next US president? Most people will acknowledge that opinion polls can be wildly off the mark, but perhaps not everyone will understand what lies behind this, in any detail. We know now that that there was an astonishing turnout, but have you heard of the Bradley (or sometimes the Wilder) effect? This relates to a situation which occurred in California in the early 80's whereby a black democratic candidate, Tom Bradley, had a substantial lead in the polls but lost out at the ballot box to a white republican candidate, Douglas Wilder, who went on to become Governor. This same scenario occurred later that year in New York. The explanation for this comes down to voters not

wanting to appear racist or politically incorrect by saying they were not voting for Tom Bradley, even when they were not prepared to do so. Here is one example of why we cannot rely on one source of data when trying to predict the future.

A disparity often exists between what we say we will do and how we actually behave. Again, in the last few weeks I listened with interest to a Radio 4 programme which discussed "neuro-economics". Simply put, the programme discussed how brain imaging and scanning techniques reveal more about consumer behaviour than what people say they think or feel. This might help explain why 9 out of 10 new product launches fail, even when backed up by consumer research in advance of their launch. While the precise mechanisms and relationships between areas of the brain, and emotions cannot yet be determined, from observing what happens in the brain during shopping, researchers can tell a lot more about what engages consumers and their behaviour than we can by asking them. So while you may not have access to neuro-scientific knowledge – or certainly to a brain-scanner, in what other ways might we better understand our customers?

I caught a short item on daytime TV introducing a new book called "Buyology" which examines why we buy and the psychology behind shopping. I have ordered a copy and will read it with interest because I think it takes a multi-faceted approach to gather sufficient insight into how our customers behave and ultimately how we can both improve their experience and the build the value we provide to them as suppliers of products and services.

If you would like to discuss your current customer research programme with us and see whether there is room for improvement, contact: Rachael@icdinsight.co.uk to set up a meeting with one of our experienced researchers.

Liz Moody
ICD Insight
December 2008