

## Survey Says

The use of surveys, polls and other opinion measurement tools is not new in the world of marketing. What is relatively new, however, is a complete dependency on these highly fallible instruments, as well as an apparent inability to translate an interpretation of poll results into a formidable, comprehensive marketing strategy.

Perhaps the most glaring example of this was the marketing meltdown of the Kerry campaign, which doomed Kerry's candidacy way before Election Day. Let's assume that the Kerry marketers – all experienced and with past successes – polled the American people and discovered (lo and behold!) that security was an issue that is heavy on the mind of the American voter. So far so good. The polling tactic works. They were able to tell what is important to the market and then sort to structure a message that addresses this concern. Marketing 101, right?

Wrong.

President Bush owned the idea of security in the hearts and minds of the American people and Marketing 101 also teaches us that no two products (candidates) can own the same idea in the same market. So by trying to “steal” away the security issue (they even had the slogan “A Stronger America”) they were not only trying to establish a perception in the minds of the consumer (voter), they were also trying to undo an existing perception. This is extremely hard to achieve. Their efforts, first by emphasizing Kerry's Vietnam heroism (and juxtaposing it to President Bush's wartime escapades) and later by pointing out the mismanagement of the Iraqi war, never proved effective because people were not able to substitute their image of Bush the wartime President with Kerry, the “I'll do better” candidate.

The problem here was that the entire campaign was ruled by the polls. Depending on what the surveys said...the campaign adjusted their tactics. This meant that at no time did Candidate Kerry have a complete message. Tudog doesn't blame the marketers. Tudog blames the polls.

It's not that Tudog has a problem with the science of polling, or even the idea that one should measure the market's stand on certain issues or products. The ability to poll is a great thing. But not when the results of these polls become absolute imperatives that must be acted upon. And that's the problem with polls. The logic of them leads marketers to believe that their results are absolute and that there is great danger in ignoring the results.

So, under these circumstances, Coca Cola tested a new formula for its cola and finds out the new formula outperforms the tradition cola formula. What is there to do? Guess they had no choice but to change the formula and introduce New Coke. And we all know where that got them.

Of course, polling is not always accurate and the pollsters will be the first to say so. People often see polls as a chance to be who they wish they were and not who they are. They exaggerate income levels, and may even give answers that are incorrect. In focus groups the dynamics of the group, and even the personality of the group leader, can lead to incorrect results. But more damaging than the frailty of poll results, is the awkward, sometimes incompetent manner in which the results are interpreted, not to

mention the craziness of the conclusions for actions drawn. People tasting the New Coke formula thought they preferred the slightly different flavor. They did not mean that they wanted their beloved Coke replaced. And yet, the results of the samples somehow led the marketing team (and a quite brilliant marketing team it was – as Coca Cola is a brilliant marketer) to conclude that a dramatic change was necessary.

The Kerry campaign also changed their formula every time their old one was being outperformed, and the results were about the same as those experienced by Coke.

The problem, and what's really bugging us, is that polls have created a situation where no one, and no company, actually stands for anything anymore. There are no corporate values that are communicated to us, because the companies don't want to commit, lest the pollsters discover somewhere down the road that those values are no longer embraced by the majority. And the same is with our politics. George Bush won the election because he managed to give the impression that he was faithful to his beliefs and wasn't afraid to act upon them even if people didn't agree with him. This was such a refreshing burst of principle that people who disagree with his national agenda voted for him. Why? Because they desperately wanted to vote for something that resembled values (even those they disagreed with).

The reliance on polls and market surveys is taking the soul out of American business. The great ideas used to come from risks being taken by people who offered the market what they had, based on their quality and values, and then watched as those who appreciated them came to buy. Now all of us are after the entire market, trying to be all things to all people, and shifting values whenever the polls tell us to.

It may seem like a way to run a business, but truth be told, it's no way to win elections.