

## Isn't it good to know what you're talking about?

There's a big difference between a sleeping man and a dead man even though they may appear the same. A quick jab to the ribs or a gentle finger on the pulse and you can tell the difference. Hasty conclusions can be injurious to health. Then again, just because his pulse is beating doesn't mean he's in the pink of health. The signs need to be read, before the diagnosis or the prognosis begins to make sense.

This week's column is dedicated to reading the signs, making sense of it all, even when some of the information available seems to contradict each other. To begin with, some introspection is advisable. My years of travel to different countries, the hours of conversation with people from different cultures has only led to the re-confirmation of stereotypes: The passionate Italian, the 'propah' Englishman, the loud Indian, the Australian larrikin, the courteous Indonesian. Exceptions prove the rule, of course. But beneath the obvious each culture has a complex web of social currents, layers and textures, hues and patinas that make the canvas of life in each country and in each culture, unique. Is it important to understand some if not all of these nuances?

Among other ills, globalisation has led to the dumbing down of marketing intelligence. At the forefront of this colonisation of the mind are the giant multinationals, preaching a culture of regional if not global 'lowest common denominators', or similarities. The drivers for Clear and Head & Shoulders may be similar, but we know that all 18-year old males aren't clones of each other in any given country, much less a region or the entire human race. Sure, they all have hair. But the wealth of knowledge beyond just demographics can make all the difference between success and failure, between shotgun wastage and sharpshooter efficiency. Regardless, knowing what you're talking about in each marketplace can't hurt you, before you go ahead and throw a heap of money behind that regional campaign. A local promotion based entirely on local knowledge, created and executed locally can complement the regional pulveriser prescribed by the regional gods. The trouble is that brains without teeth don't have much bite, and all the brains are in the regional office. So it seems.

Local marketers are often adversely influenced by this international malady, the overwhelming pursuit of LCDs. People move, from global to local, valued for the halo around their heads. Many bring their bad habits with them. Across the board, marketing discussions are degenerating. With client, advertising and research agencies represented at CEO level, no conversation should be interrupted with a remark like "half the people in this country are poor, aren't they?". On the one hand, the fact implied in the question is far from accurate. On the other, answers to such questions should be well known, especially at that level of experience. The scenario is not a figment of my imagination, nor is it a rare occurrence in Jakarta boardrooms. No longer is it important to know the real truth gathered from the cities, towns and villages across the country, the distortions garnered from just the metros are often deemed sufficient. The excuse? "Don't all those poor people in the hundreds of towns and thousands of villages aspire to live like rich city-folk?" It's called aspiration. By armchair marketers.

I have nothing against tinsel town, short skirts or fast cars. My issue is with tinsel thinking. Simply put, we should know better. That's regardless of what we may finally end up saying or doing. A press release that announces 160 million cellular "subscribers" could lead to a distorted sense of national advancement, as there are less than 160 million Indonesians, above the age of 14. "Activations" is the appropriate word, not "subscriber". There are less than 80 million "subscribers" in reality, a very big margin of error. Similar damage would be done if an airline were to say they carried 18 million "passengers" last year, leading innocents to believe another airline's catchy slogan "now everyone can fly". The truth? Less than 3 million Indonesians fly each year, but many fly often. "Flights sold" would be a more accurate descriptor, not the word "passenger" alluding to human beings.

If my examples lead you to conclude that shallow knowledge and distorted truth is the sole domain of those much-maligned people in marketing, advertising and media, nothing could be further from the truth. That Achilles heel also affects the mighty central bank, Bank Indonesia. I think I would be right to suggest that their Consumer Confidence rating is highly regarded as a true indicator of the national pulse. What very few stop to ask is where their information came from. Gathered from just the bigger cities, Bank Indonesia's rating and Roy Morgan's mirror each other. But the latter's uniquely national rating often tells a completely different story. What are the consequences of leading the world to believe that confidence in Indonesia has dipped when in fact it has climbed to an all-time high? Incalculable, I would imagine.

The central bank could also tell you that the number of bank accounts continues to grow each year, leading not just the average man on the street to conclude that the number of people with bank accounts is growing as well. The reality? The number of people with an active bank account is going down in recent year, driven by higher minimum balances and monthly fees. The problem is that most people, including many a seasoned professional, instinctively believe the gospel they are preached. They do so without question. But the one characteristic that defines the marketing "pro" is the irrepressible desire to know the truth. Curiosity is known to kills cats, not marketing professionals.

Here's another example. If the total count of Indonesians with debit cards looks remarkably low when compared to the number of people with a bank account, the desire to shoot the messenger is best curbed quickly. The problem is complex. The questions that need to be considered include the level of familiarity with the term "Debit Card" or indeed, "ATM Card". One word reflects the process, the other reflects the channel but many wonder if it is indeed one and the same thing. When we ran a survey to uncover any misunderstandings, we realised that the problem lay in the terminology, not the count. When put together to read "ATM/Debit Card", the number of people jumped up. That discovery leads to a whole host of other possibilities. Among the solutions, one stands out. Internal communications aimed at the bank's customers are essential, to those who have a card and even those who don't. But that's a story in itself, one I will reserve for next week. Till then, remember to question what you are told. That way, you might really get to know what you're talking about.



These opinions are influenced by Roy Morgan Single Source, the country's only syndicated survey that covers the cities, towns and villages of Indonesia. With over 25,000 respondents each year, the data is updated every 90 days.

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