

## How can marketers respond to a more conservative Indonesia?

If Conservative values aren't making way for more liberal views in this young democracy, how should marketers, media owners, media buyers and advertising agencies respond? That's a question I've been asked by many, these last few weeks. I've also been asked to "stop pontificating and offer some direction instead". This is easier said than done, only because I'm conscious of the fact that different people respond to the same information, differently. Anything I say hereon are individual opinions, based on facts measured by Roy Morgan Single Source, Indonesia's largest syndicated survey. That study is now expanding to include over 27,000 respondents annually, projected to reflect 90% of the population over the age of 14.

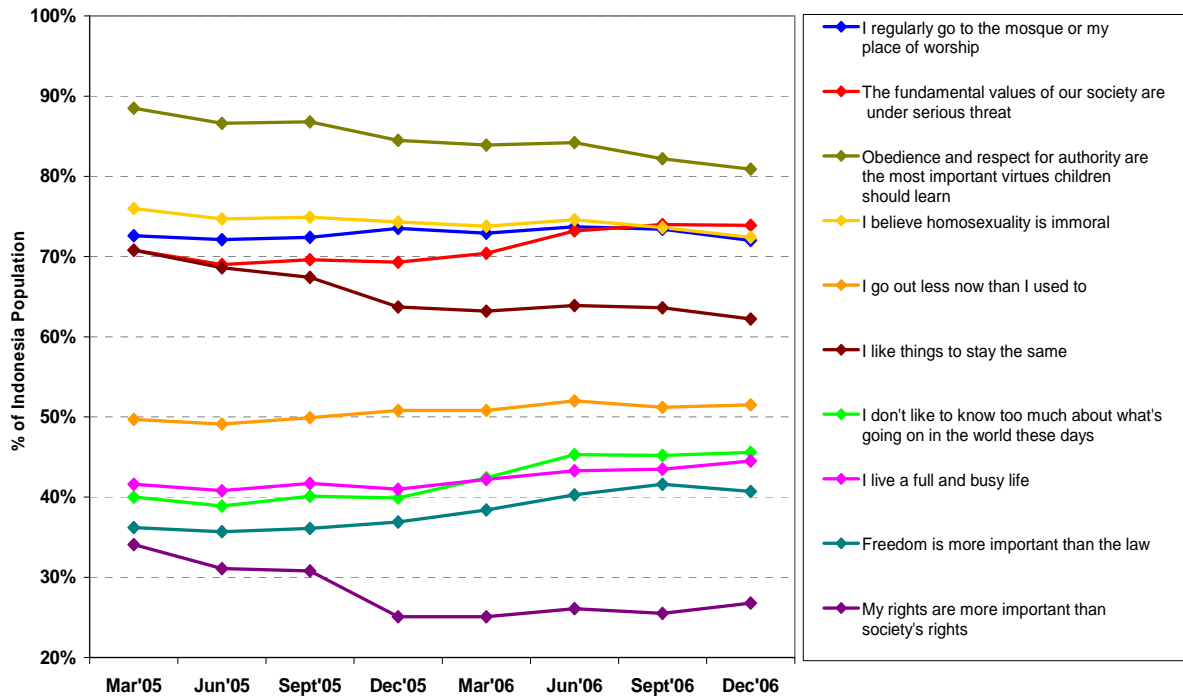
If we understand the Problem in its entirety, we have a good chance of finding the right Solution. As a first step, let's examine the many expressions of conservative thought and behaviour, so we can then form an opinion. It's the only way to figure out which buttons to push from a brand perspective, which ones to leave alone for now or forever. The inescapable 'big picture' is that Indonesia is a deeply religious country, with almost three out of four people going "regularly to my place of worship". Almost the same number believes that "homosexuality is immoral". These two social indicators have now been overtaken by those who believe that "the fundamental values of our society are under serious threat". An equally high 74 per cent is of the view that "magazines like Playboy have no place in this country". Any stimulus that offends the values of this overwhelming majority will have an equal and opposite reaction. I was never a good student of physics but even I understand that.

Brands, media channels and individual campaigns do not exist and cannot flourish in isolation from the context within which they operate. It could be argued that the other 25 per cent of Indonesian society, more liberal in its view, is indeed the target audience for several brands focussed on say the Top 10 Cities. If that assumption were true, use of localised marketing and marketing channels would make good sense. But that leap of faith assumes that all the relatively liberal people live in just these ten cities. Deeper analysis of data would reveal the differences of opinion between urban and rural, big city and smaller town, but wouldn't justify what is inherently a faulty assumption. For too long, too many people in the marketing and media business have seen Indonesia through the limited aperture of these ten cities and that too from the very narrow perspective of demographics alone. Some of the world's best-known marketers are now discovering that many of their supposedly 'metro-driven' brands are in fact driven by a majority of loyal consumers residing in the smaller towns and villages around the country.

Too many have used old-fashioned instinct or shallow “Focus Group Discussions” to justify their assumptions in the past. If these “FGDs” comprise respondents who don’t reflect market realities, information garnered can be fatally flawed. Supposedly ‘trendy’ communications aimed at a ‘trendy’ target audience can offend three people for every one person it tries to win over. To treat that possible scenario as an acceptable risk is a cavalier and irresponsible way to conduct business, devoid of any social responsibility. In a country where 95 per cent of the people watch television regularly, the medium’s ability to do good is equal to the ability to do damage. What you put on that screen is the key question. A socially responsible marketer does not have to feel restricted or curtailed. What I’m advocating is judicious use of facts. Recognition of the appropriate building blocks for each brand, assets that build Trust, is an essential pre-requisite for any marketing or communications plan. Here are some examples, from my own experience in Indonesia.

For decades, Unilever have been winning with ‘The Pepsodent Smile’. To refresh the old asset, we had added ‘Indonesia’s Smile, the Pepsodent Smile’ some fifteen years ago. In a country that’s fiercely proud, it had to work and it did. Indomie’s “Seleraku” was similarly given a new lease of life around the same time, with a visual celebration of Indonesia’s rich variety of herbs and spices. The launch campaign for IBM’s PCs depicted a father playing with his son in the park, because the computer created more ‘quality’ time. To those who’d argue that these were safe therefore boring ideas, I should point out that they were all both effective and award-winning campaigns in their time. Years later, Telkomsel demonstrated its coverage of the country through the costumes and headgear worn proudly around the country. The common thread of these ideas, old and new, is that they are all “inclusive”, by nature, embracing all and offending none. There’s nothing wrong with taking risks, but there’s only a fine line that divides bravery from foolishness. I’m advocating judicious caution over ignorant bravado, nothing more and nothing less.

How Indonesia Is Becoming More Conservative



In any case, there are positive signs in Indonesia's evolving society that marketers can take comfort from. The blind devotion to authority from the Soeharto years is slowly changing, note the gradual decline in the numbers of people preaching Obedience above all to their children. In a society where Authority has traditionally ruled over the Community, the belief that "Freedom is more important than the law" is being shared by growing numbers of people, currently over 40 per cent. In a culture where Community has always been important than the Individual, there is a continuing dip in the numbers of people who think that "my rights are more important than society's rights".

The subtext has another message. In an increasingly globalised world, Brand Managers are being rewarded for process management, not ingenuity. The less they rock the boat, the higher the reward seems to be. "Thinking globally and acting locally" has now become a glib statement for public consumption, not actual action on the ground. The desire to amortise efforts and centralise all thinking has led to managers missing the trees for the woods, compelled to using blunt instruments regionally. Missing out on local opportunities, the inability to see potential threats on the ground are once again compelling leading marketers to re-think what they thought they knew. Brands given little attention over the years are being revived not just for the contribution these 'local' brands can make to the bottomline but the barriers they can raise against competition.

None of this is achievable without a real and sensitive appreciation of the context within which each brand operates, be they global, regional or local. Ignoring the evolving signs of societal change, believing that category knowledge in metro Indonesia is adequate for the task of brand-building, can only bring grief to stakeholders in the longer term.

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