

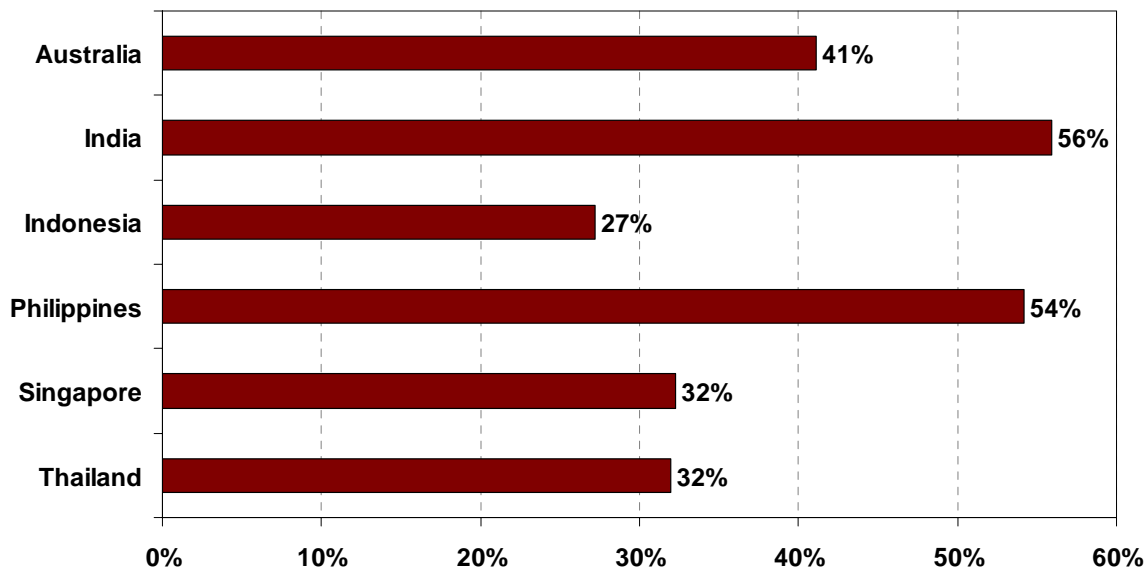
## Doing business in a world divided. Where to from here?

Last week, a group of political consultants from all over the world gathered in Bali to discuss, promote and celebrate democracy. The 3-day annual conference was opened by the President and closed by the Speaker, with substantive speeches reaffirming Indonesia's commitment to the democratic way of life. The views of the leaders from the world's single-largest Moslem population had significant impact on the delegates attending from all over. Commissioned by the Asia Pacific chapter of the International Association of Political Consultants, Roy Morgan Research conducted a survey among urban respondents in six countries of the region. The countries were chosen to represent rich and poor, big and small, East and West, as well as the four major religions practiced this side of the world.

From a business perspective, a particular revelation from the survey demands attention. While the media has been recognised as a force of influence, a pillar of society, it has not drawn enough attention to the fact that business has become a major column of our societies today. Its ability to influence change, both good and bad, is underestimated all too often. While the power of big business is occasionally raised as a bogey, the collective might of small business receives less attention than it deserves.

Respondents were asked what they thought were the serious problems of the future, whether it was the conflict between Jews and Moslems, or Christians and Moslems, or East and West, or Palestine and Israel, or Rich and Poor. While all the issues were of concern, they responses were influenced by the dominant religions in each country. But the one shared concern above all was the Rich-Poor divide.

**"In the next 10 years, which of the following do you think will be serious problems facing the world?"**  
Rich Vs Poor



Together, big and small business can address the one common issue that unites the people of the Asia Pacific region more than any other. That issue is poverty. Big business has to take the lead. It's no secret that many major corporations marketing consumer products and services make more than half their revenues from the less fortunate sections of Asian societies. These range from shampoo and instant noodles to cellular networks and motorcycles. On the one hand, they should all be congratulated for creating jobs and helping to raise the quality of life. On the other, the question could well be asked if they are giving back enough to the people to whom they owe their success.

Giving back to society does not have to be acts of charity that have no positive impact on the balance sheet. The examples worthy of emulation already exist. Mohamed Yunus' Grameen Bank helps millions of poor people build micro businesses in Bangladesh. Hundreds of thousands of unemployed rural women act as quasi-distributors for Unilever India's products, making them available where they weren't before. There are other such successes that demand attention, but they are few and far between. But they should at least inspire every CEO and marketing director to rethink how their resources are being utilised today, to seek opportunities that redeploy those costs for mutual gain of shareholder and society. Shifting the paradigm need not be a monumental effort or an additional cost.

The opportunities to do that are endless in Indonesia. Any attempt to dissect the lives of consumers would lead to the conclusion that most people, as one reader of this column put it, lead a rather "lite" version of life. For most people, recreation ranges from chatting to eating to shopping to watching television, day after day. Not many people read. Or travel. Or play any sport. Other than using the near total coverage of television via popular entertainment programs, advertisers have very few opportunities for effective and relevant sponsorships. To use an old cliché, behind every problem lies an opportunity.

By supporting the development of art, culture and sports, businesses can gain from the enrichment of life. For example, investment in Indonesian soccer, or badminton, or swimming would produce returns. A hollow trophy advertised to saturation cannot be the answer unless talent is fostered, standards are raised and the games are worth watching. Done right, heroes worth supporting and role models worth emulating will emerge over time and the people can be engaged across the country to aid and abet that effort. With local stars, brands across all product categories will stand to gain. All it needs is a little imagination and no philanthropy at all.

Buried under the pressures of getting the job done, most of us do the same thing over and over again every day, as if by rote. Or is it simply that our instincts haven't developed all that much because it's still the law of the jungle out there? As the subprime crisis in the US continues to spread its contagion throughout the world, one cannot but wonder whether double standards still divide the rich and the poor. The IMF set countries like Indonesia tough standards in the years that followed the financial crisis of 1998. Yet, the same powers that pulled the levers in those dark days are standing by as bailout plans are shamelessly being put together for the perpetrators of a global commercial disaster. Countries like Indonesia are watching.

Roy Morgan  
— Research —

Decision-makers in business today also have a choice to make. You can get rich by simply exploiting the poor, thereby contributing to the widening of the gap. Or you can get equally rich by consciously working with them to raise the quality of their lives.

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