

Is marketing a brand to the consumer any different in politics?

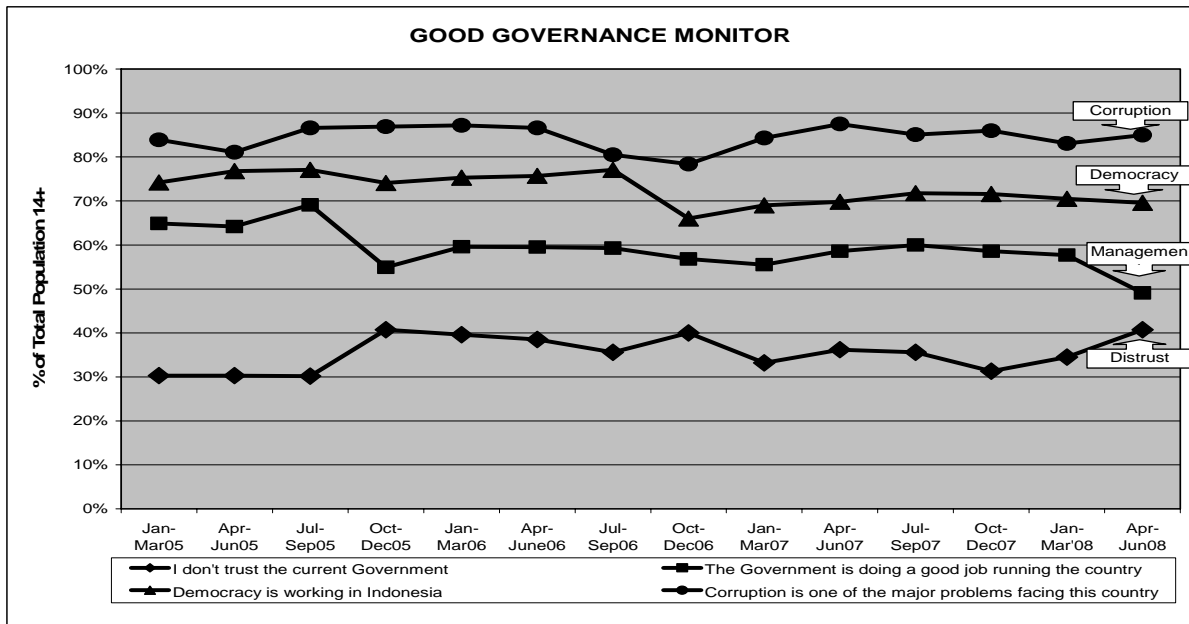
The April-June quarter saw the lowest point this government has ever hit in public opinion, since it came into power over three years ago. Not surprising, as the impact of the fuel price hike in May bit into an electorate already reeling from the spiralling cost of food. The Good Governance Monitor reflects those sentiments, across each of the four components of the report card.

“I don’t trust the current government” is at its highest, with 41 per cent of the population echoing that view. It mirrors the October-December quarter of 2005, in the aftermath of the second fuel price hike that year. That connection between the cost of fuel and public sentiment remains inextricably linked, more directly than any other single factor affecting domestic politics. It impacts the view “the government is doing a good job managing this country”, with only 49 per cent in agreement with the statement. That is lower than ever, well below the 69 per cent achieved in the July-September quarter of 2005. Soon after, it took a beating with the second rise in fuel prices that year, a blow the government could afford to take early in its term.

Reassuringly, the current misfortunes of the government have little impact on the people’s faith in democracy. The overwhelming majority of 70 per cent continues to believe that “democracy is working in Indonesia”. But at a time when the wounds are raw, questionable actions favouring ministers and bureaucrats under investigation have once again affected public perception on corruption. Climbing two points from the previous quarter, 85 per cent now agree that “corruption is a major problem affecting this country”. Wavering in the mid-80s for six consecutive quarters, the battle for this major election promise isn’t being won in the eyes of the people, it is at best stagnating.

These conclusions are based findings from Roy Morgan Single Source, the country’s largest syndicated survey with over 27,000 Indonesian respondents annually, projected to reflect almost 90% of the population over the age of 14. With all insights linked to a multitude of data from the big cities, small towns and villages from across the archipelago, gathering the data, analysing and reporting it with confidence is a time-consuming effort every 90 days. The survey is used by more marketers and advertising agencies than any other survey in the country.

Now, with barely six months to go before the April 2009 elections, repairing the damage done to its image will be a considerable challenge for the coalition in power. The circumstances are considerably different from the last election, with global factors impacting the price of everyday essentials in the local market. What most Indonesians are unaware of, and would chose to ignore if they did know, is that the price of a litre of fuel is still considerably lower than it is in most developing economies. That dark cloud isn’t about to go away anytime soon, compounding the cost of raw materials, fertilisers and eventually food, on both the global and local markets. Without any relief on these fundamental pressures faced by the dominant majority of the electorate, the bearers of bad tidings will find it difficult to win hearts and minds, more so their all-important vote.



Like every other business, politics too is largely influenced by telling people what they want to hear, giving them what they want to buy, without worrying too much about the details. Like their sisters across Asia, Indonesian women shy away from the sun, keen to keep complexions “fair”. The plethora of skin-whitening creams on shop-shelves offer hope, don’t worry too much about how they work, what effect they have, if any. More relevant is the political drama now being played out in the United States. The Republican core want to hear “the surge in Iraq” is working as their aspiring leader John McCain promised, regardless of a “Sunni Awakening cutting off support for insurgents, or targeted sniper hits diminishing their leadership, or walls segregating sects. Terror is down, it doesn’t matter how or why.

Add to that mix a female running mate who is a pro-gun, anti-abortion, pro-drilling, anti-lobbyist governor and suddenly the Obama camp have a major threat to what seemed a cruise to victory after eight disastrous years of George Bush. Cynical as it may sound, the introduction of a younger woman with conservative small-town values is just what the Republicans needed. A calculated risk has paid off, rejuvenating a tired campaign. That choice wasn’t just the work of the self-styled maverick, it was a selection based entirely on plugging all the loopholes. Good, robust information lay at the core of the selection, responding to the concerns of an electorate made complex by issues of gender, religion, ethnicity and values, not just socio-economic strata or demographics.

In Indonesia, the pundits will tell you that pleasing the electorate prior to an election is much less of a challenge. A new democracy weaning itself from authoritarian rule is still impressed with strongmen, willing to obey symbols of authority, witness the growing numbers of ex-generals and wealthy businessmen in politics. The religious parties get no traction, an ingredient that the major parties have avoided using, with great maturity. But to ignore the worries of the consumer, the concerns of the voter, to be over-confident and take them all for granted, is fertile ground for a new brand. Even one willing to work with an old party.

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