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MCR is Queensland's top social research agency, having conducted work for both government and corporate clients for over 15 years. We regularly conduct polling and focus groups to tap into the very latest opinions on the public and community impact of a range of social issues. These include public health matters, the environment, transport, road safety, financial changes and government regulations.

Welcome to our July edition.

FOR OUR NEW READERS:

The Drum is a monthly publication which reports back on the views of MCR's special "public interest" focus group.

The group consists of 8 Brisbane residents who come from all walks of life and a range of Brisbane suburbs. They are aged from their early 20s to their 60s. Each month we get the group together and ask them to discuss a number of "hot" news issues.

For previous issues of The Drum you can visit our website at www.mcrpl.com.au.

This month we look at issues critical to Queensland (daylight saving and energy deregulation), issues critical to the nation (indigenous reform) and issues critical to our clients (branding and emotions).

Daylight Saving? "Yes, please!"

The majority of our group are strongly in favour of introducing daylight saving. But they have some reservations if it means splitting the State.

Why they like the idea

Most of the respondents want it because of lifestyle factors. They love the idea of coming home and being able to do things in daylight. Running, going to the beach, more quality time with the family – all of these were mentioned.

Some also think that having all the east coast states on the same time zone can only be beneficial. Beneficial for business, but also personally beneficial if it means no longer having to get started at 4am to catch the first flight to Sydney for work!

So will it get up?

Our group feels there's a certain inevitability about this issue and that eventually it will have to be introduced.

Their frank opinion is that a lot of the current opposition is about resistance to change and that this just goes with the territory when you see something new come along. They believe that once it has been operating for a while, people will get used to it and the criticism will die down.

And what about splitting the State time-wise?

This is a sticking point with a number in the group. About half think such a move will just perpetuate the problem that currently exists between Queensland and the rest of the east coast. According to these respondents, all it will do is transfer the existing problem further north.

But with the Premier vowing that “hell will freeze over” before he agrees to having daylight saving outside the southeast corner, these sorts of views will probably remain a matter of “talk to the hand”.

At the end of the day our respondents aren’t too worried about the Premier’s attitude. For them, having daylight saving only in south east Queensland is better than no daylight saving at all.

The Prime Minister’s Indigenous Plan

There was some strong passion generated in the room when John Howard’s action plan for indigenous communities in the Northern Territory was discussed.

The group was unanimous about the fact that the reforms were long overdue. The consensus seemed to be that it was a good start for what is a very serious problem.

A common chord among the group was that when it comes to children, there is no time to waste. These people were even a little angry about what had been revealed over the previous days, particularly about child abuse and poor school attendance.

All of this paralleled what was found in a Newspoll survey this week, with 61% of Australians approving the plan.

And Howard’s motivation?

On the question of what was motivating Howard, the group was more divided.

A number had no doubt it was politically motivated and had a lot to do with the looming Federal election. This was reinforced by their perception that Howard’s plan only had a six-month life span. They did not perceive it as a long term strategy.

But, interestingly, even with this underlying scepticism, no-one in the group was ready to criticise the plan itself.

It was almost a case of ‘Who cares why it’s being done. The fact is, it needs to be done.’

As one respondent put it, ‘They need to do something drastic because the situation is so bad.’

Will the plan work?

No-one was willing to make a definitive prognosis on the success of the plan.

There was some agreement that implementation needed to be handled sensitively within the indigenous communities and that it would be important to gain their confidence and co-operation.

But overall, it was hard not to conclude that, in the back of their minds, our respondents were thinking about the plethora of other reform plans that had been tried over time by governments of all shapes and colours.

Will it work? Well, as one person responded quite fervently, ‘We can only hope that it can.’

Will it carry as an election issue?

No, is the unanimous verdict. Our respondents admitted reluctantly that indigenous issues just do not have that sort of profile in elections.

Advertising, branding and emotions - How do you feel?

As a prelude to some work about advertising and branding we want to do with these respondents later in the year, we asked them to explore (just using their memories) what kinds of ads produce different emotional responses.

Here is a snapshot of what they told us.

Ads that make them happy and entertained

- Bigpond – Great Wall of China
- Beer ads – especially Carlton Draught “Big Ad” and Fourex “4 Fishermen”
- Honda
- Toyota – “Bugger”

Ads that irritate them

- Ads that scream or yell at you to sell a product
- Rugs a Million
- Tooheys Extra Dry – “Tongue”

Ads that make them feel as though the brand is a friend

On this category, the group were stumped for suggestions at first. With a little prompting, they came up with examples like Qantas, Bigpond, the Origin “Nostalgia” ad and Johnson & Johnson baby ads.

Why these ads? Because for our respondents they produce a warm, fuzzy feeling triggered by some association – for example, nostalgic recollections of childhood or the pride and patriotism associated with being Australian.

But what was even more intriguing about this category was why the group was initially reticent in coming up with examples about “the brand as friend”.

What was going on?

Maybe a little cognitive dissonance? We suspect the group was able to think of products but just didn’t want to say. Maybe in their mind, identifying a brand as a friend starts to cross some line which is not quite acceptable.

As one respondent rationalised it, “No-one likes to think they are getting won over by an ad.” Or as another put it more bluntly, “Ads aren’t friends!”

We think this is interesting territory and we know some of our clients will have lots of questions. So we intend to pursue this and other issues about branding in a special session of The Drum which will be devoted to advertising.

Stay tuned!

Energy Deregulation – Not generating much heat

Just about everyone in the group was aware of the introduction of energy deregulation in Queensland on 1 July. However, no-one was particularly fired up about the issue.

The general impression is that most people are taking a “wait and see” approach before making any moves towards changing retailers. While some think they might start investigating the issue, they don’t expect to make any changes before 6 to 12 months.

What sorts of expectations do they have about what might change?

Our group has a high expectation that over the next 12 months they will be courted by a range of companies seeking their energy business.

And the main benefit? Definitely, cost savings and discounts.

But (and it's a BIG but) a number of respondents also hold a strong belief that trying to compare what companies have to offer will be difficult and complicated. This seems to stem from their previous experience with the deregulation of the telecommunications industry. A common refrain was that trying to decide on a mobile plan had proved "hard work".

So it's not surprising that most respondents say they will rely on word of mouth to find out where the good deals are to be had.

A lot of room for communication

It looks like retailers will have a big job in front of them trying to sort out for consumers the benefits and gains they might expect.

Our discussion suggests that consumers really only know the bare minimum so far. Even understanding the distinction between distribution and retailing is very fuzzy.

It seems to us that, right about now, the communications campaign of any tuned-in energy retailer needs to do more than emphasise savings. It also needs to show consumers how the switch to their company can be made simple, straightforward and understandable.

And once again to The Beattie Barometer...

Impending retirement – Is it really the end?

The group had mixed reactions to the Premier's announcement at the ALP's State Conference that he is considering retiring in the next 12 months.

Exactly half consider the announcement is genuine and that Beattie wants to go out

on a high. The fact that his wife has retired seems to make them even more convinced that he will depart the scene.

But there are others in the group who feel that it will be too hard for Beattie to give up the limelight and that he will stay on while he has no real opposition.

And what will politics be like in Queensland post-Beattie?

Different, according to our group. Mainly because they see the upcoming Bligh era as more about issues than personality. And while some have niggling doubts about her ability without Beattie there to back her up, most think she is attracting more attention than any of the other Ministers at present.

And how did the month generally go for Beattie?

It seems the needle is stuck in the same place on the barometer again this month and just doesn't want to move. Our respondents say it's still calm weather for the Government, rating it as about a 6 or 7 out of 10 when it comes to effectiveness. "Not much noise from them this month", said one member of the group.

So good news for Beattie. But you've got to wonder where the Opposition is?

In coming issues.....

- The Advertising "Special" – Successful marketing strategies under the microscope
- Has the image of banks turned the corner? And what has caused the sands to shift?
- Which Federal team is 'Faster, Higher, Stronger'? – A spotlight on Costello v. Swan, Turnbull v. Garrett and Hockey v. Gillard
- What is stalling the Seeney leadership – The man or his manifesto?
- The Beattie Barometer continued

Any other suggestions? Please send any topics to Annette Ruschena at aruschena@mcrpl.com.au