

Exploding myths marketers believe

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Marketers face the constant challenge of understanding their market and their consumers. By necessity, marketers search for and receive information from wide-ranging, yet not always reliable sources. Misreading a societal and cultural trend is a dangerous trap into which many prominent companies have fallen.

While marketers generally have sophisticated metrics measuring their brand's equity, its product-intrinsic quality, pricing and advertising - and how these stack up against competitors - it is rare that more general societal trends, other than political preferences, are gathered in a systematic manner.

How then do we marketers measure the zeitgeist of the population? What are their key sources of information? Well, marketers appear to use exactly the same references as accountants or doctors or lawyers in order to try to understand how society is shaping up: the popular media.

This can be extremely dangerous indeed if marketing strategy is formulated around these perceived trends, as good news is so much less attractive than bad news, for both the reader and for the writer. And from this source popular myths emerge.

Alcohol abuse and P-plater driving have both received a lot of news coverage recently, and both are excellent case studies of how readily we all embrace popular myths.

A myth that defines, for many of us, a facet of our culture is: "We are a nation of heavy drinkers and we are drinking more than in the past."

Few would contend that this social stereotype is that far off the mark. It therefore beggars belief that it is completely false. The World Health Organisation statistics show that the average Australian has steadily decreased alcohol consumption since 1977. We now drink a third less than we did when the Sex Pistols made the charts.

OK, so we are drinking less, but we are still a nation of heavy drinkers. Right? Well, no. Again, the World Health Organisation shows Australians are, by world standards, only moderate drinkers. We consume nine litres of pure alcohol per year on average, the same as the Americans. The English, Danes, Germans, Spanish and Portuguese all drink 12 litres per year, while the Irish drink more again, consuming 14 litres per year.

We drink 25 per cent less than those in countries we compare ourselves to, and we are drinking less every year.

Every person registers sadness when yet another young person, usually a boy, dies in a senseless car accident. But while popular opinion holds that these deaths are on the increase and, indeed, are symbolic of a lawless youth culture, the simple truth is that deaths per 100,000 18 to 24-year-old males has decreased from 100 in the late 1970s to a third of that now.

The list of popular myths spread by the media can go on.

Somewhat hysterical claims about a flood of cocaine into our cities hide the fact that we have fewer than half the numbers of World Health Organisation-defined "cocaine abusers" than the United States, Britain, Canada and Spain.

In 1999 there were 300 homicides registered in Australia. In 2007, despite a far larger population, the number was 250.

The consumption of any illicit drug has fallen by almost 30 per cent in the past 13 years.

And even more amazing, the Australian Institute of Criminology shows computer viruses and financial fraud have significantly decreased since 2004.

Beware, then, basing marketing strategies on perceived societal trends. The truth is often very different.

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