

Implications of election year

Graeme Trayner debates what impact the breakdown in trust between elected and electors will have on society and on qual

As I'm writing this in early April, readers will have the advantage of knowing who won the General Election (assuming, of course, that there is an outright winner come the morning of May 7th), or at least have a clearer sense of who has navigated the challenges of the Debates and weeks of endless media scrutiny. But, in many ways it doesn't matter who wins in May, as politicians of all varieties will still have to contend with the absence of trust and goodwill.

This breakdown in trust between the elected and electors has major implications for qualitative researchers, as the narrative of mistrust impacts how people engage and relate to organisations of all kinds. In politics, the MPs expenses scandal exacerbated an existing trust deficit, and has become a toxic issue for all mainstream political parties.

Simultaneously, this challenge has found an echo in the business world – the perceived failings of banks and financial institutions has led to a wider questioning and scepticism of elites. Indeed, this Election has happened against the backdrop of both political sleaze and economic fear and anxiety – a rare if unwelcome combination.

Nuances and subtleties

Yet, behind the headlines and topline story lies nuance and subtleties – ones we need to bear in mind as we explore public attitudes. The perceived failure of business has led to a greater support for state intervention and regulation – a shift from the 1990s mindset of 'business knows best' and earlier reactions against government involvement. The changing context meant even 'New Labour' could nationalise banks – an unexpected echo of the 1983 manifesto to take over the commanding heights.

Conversely though, growing scepticism around public service reform and the impact of major investments in the early 2000s means business has more permission to talk about how it can bring know-how and efficiency to healthcare and education. The public are often more pragmatic than those they elect, and are driven by common sense rather than ideology.

What matters is whether something works, rather than who runs or owns a service. Bear this in mind as we see more debates on whether to open up further the running of services to private sector providers, and the divides between opponents and supporters start to cut across party political lines.

Above all, researchers need always to bear in mind that the trust issue is complex and nuanced, and are dependent on the context and how communications is framed. We also need to guard against the knee jerk consumer attitude of 'I trust no one', and realise that everyday behaviour shows trust – conscious or otherwise – towards public and private institutions.

If trust represents one current conundrum to deal with, understanding how consumers look at the downturn represents a major challenge. Separating out what is opinion versus behaviour is absolutely critical, as is the need to identify what is a playback of

media panic versus actual consumer changes.

Polling shows a complex picture – our survey for AlixPartners¹, the global business advisory services firm, has shown consumers across Europe cutting back – whether that's everyday purchases and 'treats' such as premium brand groceries, eating out, or delaying a major purchase such as a holiday or new car. But consumer attitudes seem resilient – in our survey, only one in 10 of Europeans see these mostly as permanent changes.

We need to be aware that for many Britons this downturn has been so far, in Michael Portillo's words, a "phoney recession". Though unemployment has risen, most people have kept their jobs, and homeowners have largely been better off due to falling interest rates.

What has happened though has been a psychological recession, where influenced by media coverage and social chatter, consumers have felt a great sense of anxiety – a worry of the unknown. In our survey, eight out of 10 Britons say they have changed their behaviour as a result of the recession, but in a revealing contrast, 47% of them feel their actual financial situation has worsened due to it. Consumers are responding to the fear of the recession as well as the financial reality.

Arguably, however, consumers do have reasons to be fearful, even if the impact has not yet been fully felt. The coming year is likely to see continued economic difficulties, with UK – along with other Western European markets – taking longer to come out of the downturn than the BRIC countries or the US.

No matter who assumes power on May 7th, very hard choices are going to have to be made about public spending – cuts will have to happen regardless of campaign spin. Savings levels remain very low, as are levels of pension provision. The implication for qualitative researchers is to keep exploring when the 'phoney' recession gains a sharper and real edge.

Given the confluence of business and politics in this election, and the perceived loss of trust, what other trends can we expect to see? One shift to bear in mind is further devolution of power to consumers and voters. In politics, this development is relatively straightforward – expect to see electoral reform and greater localism, and innovations such as primaries and chances for voters to recall MPs.

In business, this devolution will be more subtle, but the trend towards using social media platforms for feedback will grow (and in doing so will challenge many market research platforms), as will ever-increasing demands for openness and transparency – whether that is from NGOs or investors. Regardless of the electoral cycle, decision-making for corporates and politicians will be increasingly 'public' and open.

¹The AlixPartners 2009 European Economic Outlook Survey, conducted by Brunswick Research. A nationally representative quota sample of around 1,000 adults aged 18+ in each of France, Germany, Italy, Sweden and the UK were interviewed online between August 19 and 31, 2009

