

With the forthcoming General Election potentially being the UK's biggest ever exercise in predicting consumer behaviour, anything that undermines belief in the voracity of research into consumer behaviour is undesirable, says consumer research specialist Engage Research.

How much would you wager on the outcome of the impending General Election?

The Election, expected to take place on May 6th, could be the closest for nearly twenty years. Voters are widely tipped to turn their backs on politicians of all parties, disillusioned by what they perceive to be questionable behaviour by members of parliament. Some predict a first hung Parliament since 1974 and the possibility of a second General Election in less than a year. Others predict a record low turn-out and apathy the great winner.

Expect, tipped, perceived, predict. There may be plenty at stake for the nation but once again market research is preparing to come under almost as much glare of the national spotlight as the three party leaders. No doubt the media will reflect again on the 1992 General Election, when the polls' performance was the worst in UK polling history, underestimating the Conservative lead over Labour by nearly 9%.

Why does that matter to marketers? Because, with the forthcoming General Election potentially being the UK's biggest ever exercise in predicting consumer behaviour, anything that undermines belief in the voracity of research into consumer behaviour is undesirable. After all, a sound fundamental understanding of consumer behaviour and market dynamics is what underpins the most successful marketing strategies.

Pollsters are dealing with 'brands' that elicit extreme responses: complete loyalty, extreme emotions (usually anti) or apathy. It is rare that commercial brands elicit such strong emotions - even in the case of a product recall - and, therefore, the actions and perceptions of consumers with which we deal are often not so straightforward. Political parties are susceptible to consumer disaffection and sudden reactions to events in a way that a breakfast cereal or a beer rarely would: MPs' expenses, war, economic developments and the personalities of the party leaders.

In the commercial rather than political arena, we have the benefit of more shades of grey than stark blacks and whites and the ability to benchmark research findings against a brand's in-market performance. We can judge degrees of loyalty or support for a brand that doesn't rest on a single "are you going to vote for them or not" question but instead may answer questions about when to invest, when to launch new products and services or make acquisitions and, in so doing, provides greater insight into the consumer's motivation.

The result is usually tangible evidence that supports the research findings, rather than just the findings themselves. Often it is this supporting

information that enables brand managers and marketing directors to make smart decisions or to get their timing and strategy right.

Whilst we are confident our colleagues in the polling organisations will perform well in the forthcoming election, it should be remembered that polling - accurate or not - is not the be-all and end-all of predicting consumer behaviour. For marketers rather than politicians, regardless of what happens on May 6th, it remains a sophisticated, scientific approach that continues to help brands engage with and understand their consumers.