

The Big Swindle

By Ross Honeywill & Verity Byth

Every day we are misled by demographics – that essential social science that has been hijacked by spin.

Demographics, for example, tell us who's living where, how old they are, what they do for a living, and how much they earn. But they fail to tell us why. Dylan Thomas spoke in 'A Child's Christmas in Wales' of the boy who received a book as a gift that "told him everything about the wasp except why."

So it is that some demographers have entered the realm of voodoo by burdening us with labels like 'generation X', 'generation Y', and 'baby boomers'. Tags that fail to describe our desires or explain why and how we behave as complex human beings, let alone as workers, consumers and homemakers.

Sadly, every day we are assaulted by these simplistic reductions of our rich social landscape.

We call it the Big Swindle.

Richard Dawkins, eminent scientist and author of *The Selfish Gene*, famously said, 'if something is true, no amount of wishing can make it untrue'. The world is, in Dawkins' terms, a more complex place than simple lifestage labels can account for, and no amount of wishing by demographers can make that untrue.

Lifestage labels are based on only one factor — age. We all like to simplify concepts, but how can anyone seriously imagine that how old we are could determine all of our tastes, values, attitudes, and choices? And any demographer that tells you it does is part of the Big Swindle.

A new, richer way of seeing the world has recently been developed in Australia that will finally relieve us of the need to make these sweeping generalisations about the way we live, work and play. The Centre for Customer Strategy has spent the last 5 years working on what makes Australians tick by looking closely at how people make decisions about the things that matter to them personally.

It identified a new economic order or NEO. NEOs read more and are better educated than the rest of the population. They vote for the coalition but prefer the social policies of the Labor Party. They like football but love the arts. They devour the Internet, see eating as a celebration of the day not just an intake of fuel, drink more wine than anyone else but still love a beer, earn more and spend more than other Australians. And they expect more from just about everyone, including themselves.

If this sounds like you and your closest friends, then four million of you are in the process of reinventing Australia. And, whereas eight million of your more conservative cousins known

as Traditionals allow others to dictate decisions in their best interests, you NEOs will decide what is best for you.

The 194 factors that define NEOs make them living proof of the futility of seeing the world based on one demographic factor – like age – alone.

NEOs, for example, are most highly represented in the 25–39 age group so demographers would classify them as gen X. But NEOs are also fifty-somethings, teens and octogenarians.

Gen Xers, demographers tell us, are aged between 27 and 41 and are highly trained, skilled professionals who want to travel to exotic locations like Nepal, Paris and Rome. Gen Xers, they say, are connected to an unwired world, ambitious (in a new work/life balanced kind of way) and work to live rather than live to work.

But while it's true that NEOs dominate this particular age group, 37 per cent of gen Xers are socially and economically conservative Traditionals. In other words, more than one third of gen Xers don't believe they have any real influence over their own success, are less educated, and are less interested in learning new things — particularly when it comes to new technology.

Of gen Xers who are in work, and many of them aren't, 15 per cent are in non-skilled jobs, 12 per cent are clerks or typists and only 7 per cent are in professional jobs. Not to mention the 250,000 Xers who are single parents.

Thirty-five year old Australians grew up in a different era to fifty-five year olds. No question. Thirty-five year olds are focused on different life events to fifty-five year olds. No question there either. But the decisions they make rely not on age but on their mindset; their psychology. And that's where life stage alone lets us down every time.

It's time for us to recognise that the splendid science of demographics is necessary but not sufficient. And it could do without the spin.

Ross Honeywill and Verity Byth have a new book titled *"NEO Power – How the new economic order is changing the way we live, work and play"* published by Scribe Publications.