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The Grass Is Greener -- On Our Side Of The Street

by Jon Last, Tuesday, March 8, 2011 7:55 AM

One of my favorite movies is the old Peter Sellers classic, "Being There." Sellers plays Chance, an illiterate live-in gardener who, upon the death of his wealthy proprietor, is cast into a real world that he has been totally sheltered from. A comedy of events brings him inside the power circles of U.S. political might, where his literal musings about the coming "growth of the garden in Spring" are misinterpreted as brilliant metaphor for the future of the U.S. economy.

We could all use a helping of "Chauncey Gardner" right now, and the findings from our latest sports fan omnibus reveal some potentially good news. Like Sellers' protagonist, our study reveals an interesting paradox. There's an uptick in sports fan optimism, relative to the results of this same study in recent years. Yet, concurrently, fans still perceive the lingering effects of the economic downturn. In a phrase that Gardner might have said, "The grass may not be greener on the other side, but we (sports fans) see ourselves as breaking out of the malaise and inertia."

Case in point, consider that for the first time in three years, more than half of the over 1,000 fans that we surveyed, strongly agree with the statement, "This year will be a better year for me than last year." Couple this sentiment with three-year highs in sports fan perceptions of being more self indulgent, less price sensitive and abundant optimism about one's retirement prospects, and clearly the clouds may be lifting.

Even more encouraging is a slight reversal in the housebound "cocooning" we'd evidenced in recent years. Whereas just under half of sports fans surveyed last year strongly agreed that they were spending more time at home than they had in years past, less than a third feel that way in the winter 2011 survey. There are also strong upticks in plans to take a major vacation, feeling better about one's personal financial situation and a renewed desire to spend time with friends and business associates rather than just with family.

But it's intriguing is that these self expressions of renewed optimism are in contrast with respondent perceptions of the world around them. At the same time that we observe the positive signs above, survey findings continue to trend in the opposite direction across a number of statements including whether the U.S. unemployment rate has hit bottom, whether people will go back to spending freely on luxuries again or if the world seems a safer place. Sports fans are still time-starved. Technology, while rampantly evolving to allow constant updates, has become more than they can keep up with.

So, before we boldly go back into boom time mode, recognize that these shifting attitudes are not without what I believe to be a still systemic transformation that will need to be factored into how we position our offerings for successful marketing as we forge ahead. While these leading-edge consumers are perhaps ready to break out of their shells, it will not be without lingering realization that all is still far from well both stateside and around the globe.

It will also be accompanied by a new understanding that while the "survivors" have learned how to make it work in a new and more grounded economy, the surrounding carnage remains. That's why I would maintain that the incorporation of meaningful and "grounded" experiences beyond just extravagant rewards will be the more impactful. Those brands that can resonate across these dynamics may indeed have reason for optimism in the months ahead.

0 comments on "The Grass Is Greener -- On Our Side Of The Street ".

Dianna Gray from **Univ. of Northern Colorado** commented on: March 9, 2011 at 5:37 p.m.

The results of this study are heartening; however, it's still too soon to call out the cheerleaders. I do agree that there is still the need for a systemic transformation in regard to better understanding our customers and providing meaningful ... and valuable sport experiences.

Thanks for your insights.