

# Microtrends may be small, but that doesn't mean they are important

Tim Wilson reviews

## *Microtrends: The small forces behind today's big changes*

by Mark J Penn  
with E Kinney Zalesne  
(Penguin, 2007, 448 pages)



On January 20, 2009 it will be clear whether Mark Penn is a brilliant political strategist, or just a statistician with an eye for the unusual. Penn was, until early April, a central figure in Senator Hillary Clinton's campaign for the US Presidency and devised much of her strategy around the intellectual underpinnings of *Microtrends: The small forces behind today's big changes*.

Penn bases his microtrends theory on 'the idea that the most powerful forces in our society are the emerging, counterintuitive trends that are shaping tomorrow right before us'. *Microtrends* attempts to identify the small steps in the big processes of change throughout American society and connects them to broader themes of change—from why interracial marriage has become more acceptable and how obscure social groups are being brought together through the internet.

And what he identifies is the explosion of diversity within American society. It is a reference guide for a vast assortment of microtrends in contemporary society. While it can be read cover-to-cover, it will probably serve the reader best as one of the select few books that can be quickly cited for counter-intuitive points.

Penn also uses *Microtrends* to ex-

plain that, despite their often counter-intuitive nature, decisions by individuals are rooted in rational thought.

But for the most part, Penn's book is simply a collection of sampled data with supporting analysis. Typical microtrends include the political and religious attitudes of 'moderate Muslims', to the effect of 'late breaking gays' on their heterosexual spouses, to the explosion of 'uptown tattooed' Republicans.

The book consists of small chapters that identify and analyse each microtrend bookended by introductory and concluding chapters that justify the need to understand, and the challenges posed from, emerging microtrends.

One of the earliest and most interesting chapters focuses on the increasing trend of one in three women between 40 and 69 dating younger men; without the social stigma of 'dirty' old men dating younger women. Penn identifies three of the primary drivers are divorce, professional success and sex becoming for more mature women what it has always been for younger men—recreational.

And women are not the only ones becoming more sexually liberated.

The accessibility and anonymity of the internet has delivered an increased consumption of pornography. As Penn puts it, pornography, not baseball, is becoming America's past time. Penn also details the rise of the 'do-it-yourself doctor'—individu-

als who now self diagnose and treat themselves, evidenced by the growth in sales of over the counter medicines without consultation.

And a trend similarly reflected in Australia where the elite classes no longer care about the 'economic and strategy challenges' faced by their society driven by an increased distance from engaging in the day-to-day realities and challenges of modern life.

Penn writes that 'while today's elites are reading Tom Friedman's *The World is Flat*, the rest of America is living it'.

Penn uses the book to detail the challenges for political candidates in America, identifying that an explosion of individual differences and personal expression has significant political consequences.

There is no doubt he is right. The coalitions that make up the US Republican and Democratic parties will become increasingly strained as people demand that their political parties reflect their individual political tastes and preferences.

The microtrends thesis also presents another challenge for politicians.

Should political leaders try to lead social trends, or merely follow them?

Penn never directly addresses this issue in the book, but based on his logic in *Microtrends* it would be hard not to interpret that the political class of America should be poll driven when charting a vision.

Penn identifies the fragility of American society, and justifies classical liberalism as the only political and philosophical system that can hold society together while respecting individualism.

But after reading *Microtrends* there can be no doubt that there is no such thing as 'One America'.

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*Tim Wilson is Director, Free Trade and IP Unit at the Institute of Public Affairs.*