

ENVIRONICS

RESEARCH

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A Social Values Journey Down Memory Lane

At the American Marketing Association's Spring Gala, Michael Adams will be inducted into Canada's Marketing Hall of Legends. The Hall of Legends honours Canadians who have dedicated their professional lives to pursuing excellence in marketing; it recognizes creatives, enablers, builders, and mentors who have had a tremendous impact on marketing throughout their careers. The award celebrates visionary leadership and lifetime achievement.

I first met Michael in the early 1980s, when he was one of a number of researchers helping the Toronto Transit Commission understand the complicated motivations that led people to get out of cars and use public transit. Michael always differentiated himself in appreciating both the wider context – in this case, the barriers people faced in changing their habits and how transit could improve the quality of urban life – as well as the specific role public opinion insights could play in helping organizations pursue their goals.

Over his career, Michael has used his ability to collect and analyze data on the key issues to encourage public debate and inform decision makers. He has turned his attention to a range of domestic issues facing Canada – like national unity and immigration – and also to international issues, such as the role Canada should play in Afghanistan and the differences between Canada and its neighbour to the south. In all these areas, Michael has helped people understand the populations they are interested in and plan their next move based on the evidence.

Marketers, political strategists, business leaders, and many others all share a desire to understand what their populations of interest are thinking. It doesn't matter whether they are looking at people as potential customers, voters, or investors – understanding what's on people's minds is critical to helping leaders decide how their organization needs to act and communicate in order to win over the groups that are important to them. I've been with Michael at countless meetings over the years where he has empathized with these stakeholders and helped make the necessary intellectual connections.

The rise of Social Values as a new lens on society

Since the early 20th century, public opinion research has been an effective tool in helping leaders make decisions and helping ordinary people understand their society. But over the decades, certain events caused researchers to ask whether there wasn't some tool that could be more powerful and more prescient.

One famous example: the social unrest in the late 1960s, precipitated by the US war in Vietnam but felt in many parts of the world, crystallized some researchers' sense that public opinion surveys didn't tell a rich enough story. Sociologists struggled to understand the social change that gave rise to events like the student protests in Paris in 1968 and changes in sexual norms in Scandinavian countries around the same time. Researchers like Alain de Vulpian (Paris), Hans Zetterberg (Sweden), Werner Weiss (Switzerland), and Dan Yankelovich (USA) worked together to advance new systems for measuring the evolution of Social Values, which were at the root of changes that were bubbling to the surface in western societies at the time.

Michael appreciated this work and the gaps it filled. One of my first activities after joining Environics in 1988 was participating in meetings Michael arranged with the various research groups who were using values measures to deepen their understanding of social change.

Eventually, Michael collaborated closely with Alain de Vulpian in Paris and Alain Giguere in Montreal to bring the Social Values analytical lens to Environics Research. It was a way of tracking social change and digging deeper into the mental postures behind the opinions, attitudes, and behaviours of individuals. This approach has been extraordinarily powerful for marketers, strategists, and other decision makers – whether they're focused on consumers, citizens, or other stakeholders. The Social Values methodology also gave rise to *Sex in the Snow* and six other books. It drives much of the research and in-depth analysis that Environics Research is known for across many sectors of the Canadian and global economy, including pharma, retail, automotive, financial services, tourism, and health and wellness.

Michael's books were required reading in many university social science courses and remain so to this day. The generational segmentation reports inspired by work done for *Sex in the Snow* are downloaded by students every day from our website.



Michael giving a presentation to students in 2011 on how Canadians see themselves and their country.

This work has enabled ground-breaking projects on a wide range of topics. Environics Research has used the Social Values approach with clients in 26 countries.

When Jan Kestle brought her proposal to found the company that became Environics Analytics, a firm that would build a unique geodemographic segmentation system, we all saw the potential of incorporating Social Values into the model. The Social Values approach that Michael brought to Environics was a key factor in the ability of Environics Analytics to bring its geodemographic models to life. Social Values are building blocks in the narratives that enable Prizm segments to take shape.

Like the flutter of a butterfly's wings that can influence weather patterns across the globe, the work Michael championed has set off a ripple effect—enabling countless others to understand their audiences more deeply and act with greater confidence. By advancing tools and frameworks for measuring what people value, he has empowered leaders across sectors to navigate complexity and change. The insights generated by this work have informed marketing strategies, public policy decisions, and community planning—not only in Canada but around the world. His legacy is not just in what he discovered, but in what others have been able to discover because of him.