



Follow along with the winners for a year, and trace an inspirational chronicle of creativity, struggle, and triumph.

### **Tracking the Consumer**

For Herb Sorensen, shopping is a science. He sticks GPS-like tracking devices to shoppers' carts to follow their every move, gaining behavioral insights for such clients as Walgreens and Kraft Foods. And on November 26, at breakfast with a pastor friend, Sorensen had an idea to track the behavior of a different kind of customer: those strolling down church aisles.

## **2004 FAST 50 WINNER**

### **Herb Sorensen**

Founder/President, Sorensen Associates

Troutdale - OR US

*From Herb's original entry:*

### **Tell us what you do and the specific challenge you faced.**

Up until now, retailers only had the observational insights of Paco Underhill to guide them in better understanding how consumers shop stores. What's been missing is a large-scale, data-driven method of continuously tracking the path of every shopper at every point in his/her excursion. My firm, Sorensen Associates, has been providing consumer research for industry giants like General Mills, Alberto Culver, and Con Agra for over thirty years. We adapted a GPS-like tracking technology developed for the first Gulf War to track and measure the activity of millions of shoppers. While the identities of shoppers are anonymous, the data on their movements and buying habits is gathered and analyzed, producing color-coded maps of shopper activity that are revolutionizing the way retailers and manufacturers design and merchandise stores.

### **What was your moment of truth?**

The first moment of truth was 40 years ago when I was fascinated by a time-lapse photo of cars at night moving through an intersection. In the intervening years, I often wondered what a picture of shoppers moving through a store would look like. But the cost of producing such an image seemed prohibitive. The second moment of truth occurred when we released our first findings, and our clients couldn't figure out what value there was to the research. I could see the import of the research, but it was too bleeding edge, too new to really take hold. Meanwhile, continued R&D and early marketing of the technology were draining the company of the profits from the core business. It wasn't just the cost of what I was doing. There was also the complexity of trying to merge data from hundreds of thousands of shoppers with millions of item purchases from tens of thousands of products in a store with hundreds of displays that kept being moved around.

### **What were the results?**

We learned, for example, that shoppers who go around a store in a counterclockwise direction spend, on average, \$2 more than those who go around clockwise. Those supermarkets with left-sided entries lose sales by forcing shoppers to go against their natural tendency; they abort their trips sooner. We have successfully moved from early adoption to greater acceptance through major contracts with Hallmark Stores and Kraft Foods. New studies that reveal where shoppers go, for how long and what they purchase (and don't) are opening up new frontiers in the science of shopping.

### **What's your parting tip?**

Don't wait for others to show the way. In the words of Davy Crockett: "Be sure you're right, then go ahead!"