



CONDUCTING SURVEYS AND FOCUS GROUPS

The purpose of conducting polls and focus groups is to develop an effective strategy and message.

POLLING

I Overview of Polling

- A series of mostly closed-ended questions, designed in consultation with the client, asked of a scientifically chosen random sample of respondents, generally over the telephone.
- The client receives marginals (the percentage of the entire sample who choose each response option for each question), a strategic analysis of the data in a written report, and a book of cross-tabulations (percentage tables that indicate how subgroups of the population feel).
- The cost of polling varies according to the length of the questionnaire and the number of respondents interviewed (see section below entitled “Conducting the Benchmark Poll: Sample Size”).

II Purpose of Polling

- To help you develop and deliver a message that will reach the public or organization members and move them in your direction.
- To build support among members and the general public by releasing polling results that show support for your organization and its positions.
- Strategic polls conducted for candidates and organizations are different from newspaper polls, in that the former focuses on how to *change* people’s opinions, whereas newspaper polls focus on *predicting* the outcome of the election or taking a snapshot of the public at a given time.

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III Kinds of Polls:

- *Benchmark poll*: the most comprehensive poll, conducted early in the campaign or at the beginning of a project, to develop the message and strategy. This poll varies from a 10 minute survey of 300 people, costing as little as \$7,000 to a 20 minute survey of 600 people, which costs between \$25,000 and \$30,000. The benchmark poll should be done before your campaign or project begins to present its message to the public or to organization members. The benchmark poll is often the only poll conducted for lower-budget projects. See the section below entitled, “Conducting the Benchmark Poll.”
- *Message-refinement polls*: additional polls, usually shorter than the benchmark poll, conducted during the campaign or project to refine the message and targeting based on going developments.
- *Tracking polls*: shorter, five- to ten-minute polls conducted during the campaign or project, whose purpose is to monitor the effectiveness of your message and media, as well as that of your opponents. Tracking polls help you decide whether to adjust your message in any way. Ideally, tracking polls are conducted over several days (for example, 100 interviews per night for 5 days) to watch for changes in public attitudes. Often they are done in two or three nights.

IV How much should you spend on polling?

- If you spend too much on polling, you will not have enough money left to get your message out.
- If you spend too little, you may arrive at the wrong message, or you may direct your attention to the wrong people.

V Conducting the Benchmark Poll: The Sample

- Decide what kind of respondent you need to interview — do you need likely voters in a high turnout election? Do you need voters for a low turnout election (such as a primary)? Do you need all members, including retired members and support staff?
- Respondents must be chosen randomly, so that your survey results are representative of the entire voting or member population. If the sample is not good, the survey results are useless.
- Random-digit-dial (RDD) samples of the public are generally better than those from voter registration lists because you can reach voters with unlisted telephone numbers and because the sample reflects recent changes in the population that might occur with population growth or recent voter registration drives. Surveys with RDD samples are more expensive because interviewers spend time dialing non-working numbers and reaching unregistered voters.
- Accurate voter registration lists are reasonable for surveys targeting voters in low-turnout elections. Depending on how complete the list is, you may need to look up telephone numbers, or hire someone to do so.
- Because the sample is a randomly selected subset of the population, there is a possibility that the sample results will differ from those of the actual population by a small amount. The difference between the sample results and results we would obtain if everyone in the population were interviewed is called “sample tolerance,” “sampling error,” or “margin of

error.” Surveys with larger sample sizes are more accurate and more expensive. See the section below entitled, “Sample Size.”

VI**Conducting the Benchmark Poll: Sample Size**

- The size of the sample is not determined by the size of the population once the population exceeds 8,000 people. Think of it as drawing blood from a baby and a Sumo wrestler. In both cases, you get the information you need with a sample of one teaspoon of blood.
- The minimum size sample worth conducting, for even the lowest-budget project, is usually 300. With a sample of 300 respondents, on a question where people are about evenly divided, the margin of error is $\pm 5.7\%$. This means, for example, that if 52% of a sample of 300 believes “X,” you can say, “I am 95% certain that between 46.3% and 57.7% of the actual population believes ‘X.’ “
- Statewide surveys usually interview 600 to 800 respondents.
- Decisions about the size of the entire sample depend on your budget as well as the size of the smallest subgroup about which you want to make a reasonably accurate statement. For example, statements about how the general public feels, based on a total sample size of 400, are fairly accurate. However, you may want to compare the attitudes of men and women, in which case generalizations are based on samples of 200 people. If you want to further target your message (such as to college educated women under the age of 50) your sample size for that subgroup becomes much smaller and your margin of error becomes correspondingly larger. Generally, you need at least 75 respondents in a subgroup to say anything reliable about them. The margin of error for a subgroup of 75 respondents is about $\pm 12\%$. Allowing for budget constraints, a larger sample size is important mostly because it allows you to more effectively target your message to specific groups.

VII**Conducting the Benchmark Poll: Constructing the Questionnaire**

- The persuasive messages tested in the poll must emerge from solid preliminary research. The poll can tell you which of 4 or 5 possible messages and attacks will be most effective in moving particular groups of people. However, you must help the pollster narrow the numerous possibilities to 4 or 5 key messages to present in various forms to respondents in the survey. As mentioned before, focus groups can be helpful here.
- Ask questions that give you the following information:
 1. What is the general mood of the general public or of the membership? Are they angry, distrustful, confident, optimistic?
 2. What are their biggest worries and issue priorities?
 3. Does the public know of your organization, and if so, how do they assess your strengths and weaknesses? Do people identify the organization with particular issue positions?
 4. What attributes or issue positions are most important to the public (or to your members)?
 5. What are the respondents’ positions on issues that may become important during your project or campaign?
 6. Present the respondents with information and determine whether the information moves respondents toward or away from your position.

7. Ask the relevant demographic questions for the public or for your members—usually geographic location, age, sex, education, income, party affiliation or political ideology, and sometimes occupation, ethnicity, religion, presence of children.
- Some general guidelines on writing questions:
 1. Ask one question at a time. If you ask the respondent to answer two questions with one response, you are not sure which question there are answering.
 2. Keep the questions simple, clear and short. The response choices should be realistic and cover all the responses someone may wish to offer.
 3. Measure the respondent's intensity of feeling by offering 3 to 5 choices rather than dichotomous "agree/disagree" or "yes/no" choices.
 4. Ask questions that differentiate people from one another. A question where 90% of the respondents choose the same response is a wasted question.
 5. For important information, include several different questions that measure the same attitude.
 6. Avoid biased and loaded questions.
 7. Avoid questions with double negatives. Try to avoid asking whether the respondent agrees or disagrees with a phrase with "not" in it.
 - Questions and information presented early in the interview affect answers later in the interview. Therefore:
 1. Ask general questions early and more specific questions later.
 2. Ask a favorability question and any job performance questions early, before respondents are presented with information that may alter their opinions.
 3. Ask another favorability question at the end of the survey to help identify respondents who move during the interview and therefore are persuaded by your message.

- A typical introduction and screen for a survey of likely voters might be:

Hello. My name is _____ and I am calling from _____, a national public opinion firm. We are conducting a brief survey about issues facing people in Michigan, and this number was selected at random. According to my instructions, I am to interview the youngest man [ALTERNATE WITH: YOUNGEST WOMAN, OLDEST MAN, OLDEST WOMAN] in your household who is registered to vote at this address. Would that be you? [ON FIRST TWO NIGHTS, CALL BACK TO REACH DESIGNATED PERSON] Would that be you?

[SCREENER] How likely are you to vote in this November's elections for President, Congress and state legislature. Are you almost certain to vote, will you probably vote, are the chances about 50-50, are you unlikely to vote, or are you definitely not going to vote?

Almost Certainly	1
Probably	2
50-50	[TERMINATE]
Probably not	[TERMINATE]
All Other	[TERMINATE]

1. Many believe that asking for the youngest person yields a more representative sample because young people are more difficult to reach than older people. Other pollsters prefer to ask for "a person 18 or older in your household who celebrated a birthday most recently." Still other pollsters prefer to alternate between the youngest and oldest person of each gender.
 2. Quotas are recommended for gender and geographic areas. At the analysis stage, census data and expected turnout statistics for particular subgroups can be used to weight the data according to age and ethnicity. This extra step usually improves the accuracy of the survey.
- Some standard questions used in surveys for candidates and organizations, whose results can be analyzed in the context of many other races and projects include:

1. General Mood:

Q. Do you feel things in your local area are generally going in the right direction or do you feel things have pretty seriously gotten off on the wrong track?

This question is a good measure of whether people are in the mood for change or favor the continuation of the status quo. Depending on the project, you may want to ask about the direction of things in their state or the nation.

2. Respondents' position on an issue for an organization or a candidate for an election:

Q. Would you favor or oppose continuing the television, radio and billboard campaign to improve the image of public schools on a long-term basis?

[IF FAVOR/OPPOSE, ASK:] Would that be strongly or somewhat [favor/oppose]?

Undecided people will generally support the status quo.

Q. If the election for _____ were held today, and the candidates were _____, the Democrat and _____, the Republican, for whom would you vote, for _____ or _____?

An incumbent is in trouble if he or she gets less than 50% of the vote. If the incumbent is below 50% the week before the election, he or she will probably lose. Undecided voters at the end of a campaign break heavily in favor of the challenger in a candidate election, and vote "No," for the status quo, on a referendum.

3. Favorability Question:

Q. Next I'm going to read you the names of several people and organizations who are active in politics. I'd like you to rate your feelings toward each one as either very positive, somewhat positive, neutral, somewhat negative or very negative. If you are not familiar with a particular name, just say so and we will go on.

The ratio of favorable responses to unfavorable responses should be about 3 to 1 or better for an incumbent politician or well known organization. Less than a 2 to 1 ratio suggests an incumbent is in trouble.

4. Job Performance Question:

Q. How would you rate the job _____ is doing in representing your interests—excellent, pretty good, not so good or poor?

An organization or incumbent candidate should have a ratio of at least 1.5 positive ratings to every 1 negative rating.

VIII Conducting the Benchmark Poll: Interviewing

- Your volunteers are better used for almost anything else except interviewing. Hire a professional phone bank.
- Unless you need the results immediately, the interviewing should be done over 3 to 5 days. Surveys are more accurate if interviewers call back “live” numbers to try to include people who are hard to reach. While this takes time, trying to reach the same person several times ensures the sample is truly random and is thus representative of the population as a whole. Depending on the time of year and other local factors that effect whether people will be at home, between 30% and 60% of interviews are conducted on the second or third attempt to reach the respondent.

IX Conducting the Benchmark Poll: Analysis

- The analysis should focus on identifying the people who support your position, those who are against you, and those who are persuadable. Persuadable people are identified by a combination of several questions that probe their opinions. They are described in terms of their geographic location and other demographic variables as well as their attitudes. The project or campaign can then target its efforts on base supporters and people who can be persuaded. A similar strategy is used to identify persuadable members of an organization.
- The most effective message for moving persuadable voters and members is best determined by examining the cross-tabulation tables in conjunction with correlation analysis and a form of multivariate analysis, such as regression or cluster analysis. Multivariate analyses suggest the relative importance of several factors to the respondent's decision. However, sometimes the key factor that separates supporters from the opposition is different from the key factor for those who can be persuaded. Therefore, multivariate analysis, correlation analysis and the cross-tabulation tables should all be examined, to determine the message that will convince those that can be persuaded to support your position.
- When the sample size is large enough (preferably 600 voters or members), the respondents can be split into two groups, with each half hearing a different message or different statement.

The results for sample “A” and sample “B” respondents are then compared to determine which message is more effective.

FOCUS GROUPS

I Overview of Focus Groups

- Eight to twelve participants, sharing important political or demographic characteristics, are randomly recruited and offered a \$35-\$60 incentive to talk for two hours with a moderator.
- The moderator asks questions from a discussion guide agreed upon by the client and consultant.
- Clients watch the session behind a one-way mirror. Clients also receive a transcript, an audio tape, and/or a video tape, along with a written analysis of the session.
- At least two focus group sessions should be conducted, and four to six sessions are preferable. Focus groups need to be homogeneous enough that participants will feel comfortable sharing their feelings. Therefore, using more groups allows you to study more demographic segments of the electorate.
- The cost of focus groups is between \$4,000 to \$6,000 per session.
- Focus group research is *qualitative*: the responses of participants are not coded and quantified because it is not valid to generalize from the results of the relatively few focus group participants to the population in general or to organization members.

II The Purpose of Focus Groups

- To generate ideas that can then be tested on the population in a subsequent poll.
- To explore in detail the nuances of, and rationale for, respondents’ answers in a previous poll.
- To test people’s reactions to your project or campaign’s media and direct mail pieces.

HIRING A CONSULTANT

- Who in the company will actually do your work and what is their background?
- How many other clients do they have and will your campaign or project get the attention it needs?
- Ask about the company's sample, interviewing procedures, and analysis methods. Ask to see a typical report.
- Does the price include a comprehensive written report with strategic advice or only tabulations of the data? Will someone meet with you to present and discuss the survey and focus group results, and the recommended message and strategy?
- Is there a retainer? To what extent does the pollster expect to be involved with the campaign or project? Are there further charges for future conversations and additional computer runs?
- Does the firm have experience with political and membership surveys and focus groups, or do they conduct mostly newspaper polls and market research surveys?
- Are you hiring only a reputation or are you hiring a firm who will do quality work for you? On the other hand, are you being penny-wise and pound-foolish by hiring an inexpensive firm that takes shortcuts that compromise the quality of the data and analysis?