

those in power to publish phoney polls and suppress more accurate ones. Fortunately the international media, particularly the American media, can have considerable influence. Most governments and politicians care how the international media portray them. They want to be seen as democrats, not as corrupt officials clinging to power by manipulation and fraud. Local leaders and the media will repeat reports from leading US newspapers. Worth noting, it was a British, not a French, paper that exposed the manipulation of the polls in France.

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## **Achieving Quality Control in a New Pollsetting**

*By Lance Tarrance*

Since the scientific measurement of public opinion gained general acceptance over 30 years ago and the industry grew into one of the more important parts of the US political economy, there have been many challenges to the industry. One that bears watching is how the industry has evolved into a "manufacturer-supplier" organizational structure, thus significantly departing from the first generation of private survey research companies. The term "full service research firm" needs redefinition and perhaps reexamination particularly from a quality-control standpoint.

Today we are seeing a new generation of pollster-strategists who not only ignore membership in the older, more traditional professional associations like AAPOR, but also use a network of "suppliers" for their sample construction, their field interviewing, and even their computer coding and processing. This departs from the first generation of survey research companies that believed in an integrated "in-house" organizational structure to control non-sampling errors and supervise quality control (although most large firms decentralized their phone banks more than a decade ago). In a word, the industry has moved from one that was largely "vertical" in operational theory to one today that is more "horizontal" or even "spoke-wheel" in management style. For example, a typical new generation research company has a small staff (five or less) but works with a client in Chicago, has a sample designed by a company in Connecticut, has the study fielded and collected by a firm in California, and has the data processed by still another company in Atlanta.

This new generation of researcher-strategists "farm out" to selected suppliers for a variety of sound economic and business reasons, but it is nonetheless a concern for the industry. In the past, most professional survey firms never used "outside" suppliers unless over-booked and time-constrained. This management notion to avoid subcontractors was well ingrained because it raised costs, delimited quality control, and unleashed security problems. Today, things have

certainly changed as low-overhead polling firms, usually "spin-offs" from larger companies, have emerged almost overnight to perform data analysis for clients from a network of trusted suppliers who may be located almost anywhere but at the company's place of business.

**“ ‘Farming out’ research components to diverse suppliers needs evaluation by the industry and deserves more focus by people who serve on standards committees. ”**

This trend has its benefits and even may be just a logical part of the globalization of the technology revolution. Some of the advantages are lower initial risk or start-up capitalization costs, "marketplace" cost competition between niched suppliers, and self-acculturation of new technology in equipment and learning. In addition, these "new" pollsters perhaps can save time and thus extend their consulting, strategizing, and developing of new clients. On the other hand, there are dangers as well: less quality control management, more dependence on an outside network of unconnected suppliers, nonconformity of scientific standards, data security concerns, split field work, and less accountability for detecting and correcting non-sampling errors. And lastly, costs will most likely keep going up.

There is hope that this supplier model of management can work in the future. There appears to be more trusted technically-trained suppliers who are also spin-offs from larger companies, there is an acknowledged need for a designated "inside research director" with the technical skills to work with the various suppliers, and there are more people entering the labor force who have mid-level training in quantitative methods who can staff the supplier companies.

However, "farming out" research components to diverse suppliers needs evaluation by the industry and deserves more focus by the people who serve on standards committees.

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managing director, Burson Marsteller*

## **Looking for Answers in Less-Lighted Areas**

*By Murray Edelman*

There is an old story of a woman observing two men on their hands and knees under a street light, looking carefully at the sidewalk. She asked what they were looking for and was told that a ring dropped in the dark area where she was standing. She responded: "If the ring dropped over here why are you looking over there under the street light?" One of the men answered: "Because there is more light over here."