

# From the Field

## When Push Comes to Shove

*A polling industry call to arms*

By Karl G. Feld

As the smoke from the 2000 elections continues to clear, we begin to sort fact from fiction to learn how to do it all better next time. One important question for researchers in 2002 will be how to deal with the inevitable “push polls.”

There has been little consensus in the political community as to what a push poll actually is. In a 1995 press release, The National Council on Public Polls (NCPP) defined a push poll as

*...a telemarketing technique in which telephone calls are used to canvass vast numbers of potential voters, feeding them false and damaging ‘information’ about a candidate under the guise of taking a poll to see how this ‘information’ affects voter preferences. In fact, the intent is to ‘push’ the voters away from one candidate and toward the opposing candidate.*

This definition closely matches those used by the American Association for Public Opinion Research (AAPOR), the American Association of Political Consultants (AAPC), and the Council for Marketing and Opinion Research (CMOR). However, each organization has its own variations in the ways in which it distinguishes legitimate polls from push polls:

- All three specify that legitimate polling firms open each interview by identifying the name of the firm or the telephone research center. However, CMOR has held, and AAPOR members have unofficially observed, that the candidate or organization sponsor-

ing the survey need not be identified. Push pollsters generally provide no name or a false name, a characteristic noted by all three organizations.

- According to AAPC and AAPOR, research firms conducting legitimate research interview only a small random sample of the population, typically ranging from 200 to 1,000 interviews. Push polls try to reach what AAPC calls a very high percentage of voters, usually at the close of the election campaign. CMOR has defined

AAPC’s “high percentage of voters” as any sample numbering over 1,000.

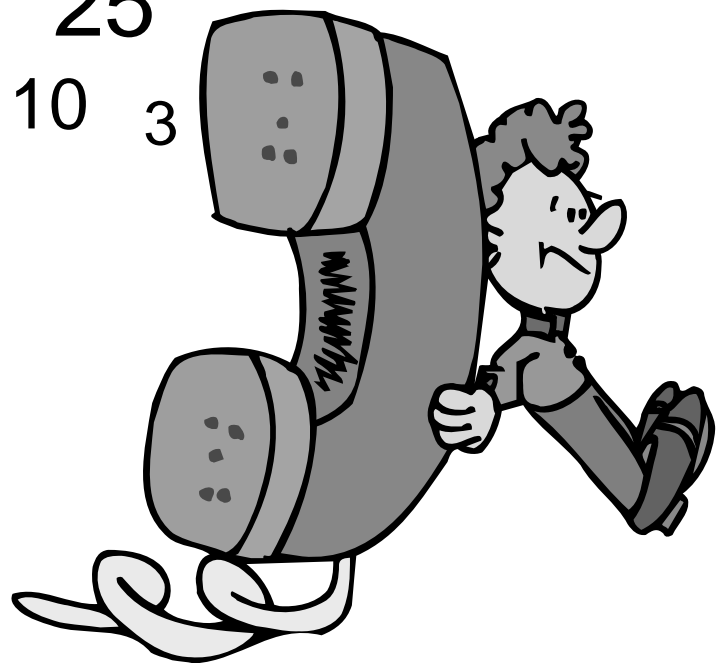
- AAPC and CMOR state that legitimate interviews generally range in length from five minutes to over 30 minutes. Push poll interviews typically last 30 to 60 seconds by AAPC’s definition, and 20 to 30 seconds by CMOR’s.

- CMOR observes that push polls are usually conducted by campaign workers or telemarketers, rather than research interviewers.

- AAPOR further distinguishes push polls from research by observing that data from the former are rarely or never saved or analyzed.

Leading opinion researchers of both parties, and all professional organizations with political poll-

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*Karl G. Feld is vice president, research services, human voice, Inc., a Western Wats Center Company.*

## “The use of push polls has spread throughout all levels of US politics.”

ster memberships, have condemned the practice of push polling. In the words of Republican pollster Ed Goeas of the Tarrance Group, “When political researchers put a survey into the field they do so using recognized scientific techniques to find out what the public is thinking or feeling. Push polls, on the other hand, are meant to inform the electorate with no accountability.”

The practice of push polling violates the code of ethics to which members of AAPC, CMOR, and AAPOR agree upon joining. The NCPP has issued a statement to the effect that it does not recognize push polls as legitimate research.

Journalists, university professors, employees of research firms, staffs of local and statewide candidates, and even members of Congress have made statements about push polling which reflect their lack of understanding of how it differs from legitimate research. The perplexity usually occurs because push polling tends to be confused with the frequent and proper use of survey questions designed to test negative campaign messages. F. Christopher Arterton, Dean of George Washington University’s Graduate School of Political Management, calls this latter practice “push questioning.”

Push questions are generally recognized as a valid research tool. They are widely used throughout the research industry, whereas push polling is not. In a February 2000 article in *The Hotline*, Charlie Cook of the *National Journal* observed that

... there are legitimate polls that can ask push questions, which test potential arguments against a rival to ascertain how effective

those arguments might be in future advertising. In many cases, these push questions [contain] attacks on the candidate sponsoring the poll, to test how vulnerable that candidate may be against anticipating attacks from the other party. These are not only legitimate tools of survey research, but any political pollster who did not use them would be doing their clients a real disservice.

Questions used in push polls often sound similar to those used as push questions—an intentional camouflage on the part of push pollsters. As a result, many respondents, political opponents, and journalists often lump push questions and push polling together. Their uninformed or misleading statements do little to clarify the confusion in the electorate’s mind. Today, pollsters are often accused of conducting push polling when they are, in fact, conducting legitimate research.

One result of this befuddlement is that the research industry has lately been threatened by various legislators and civic groups who seek to restrict both political telemarketing and research. The usual demand, varied by state, is that the person or organization paying for the poll and the company conducting the interviewing be required to identify themselves at the beginning of any telephone conversation. Push polling is explicitly cited as the reason for this legislative hazing. Should any of this legislation pass, the mandatory disclosure statements will severely bias the collected data, as respondents will be predisposed to respond to survey questions (or refuse to participate altogether)

based upon their sentiments toward those doing the polling.

The blurring of push polling definitions by media and campaigns is also detrimental to survey response rates. Along with continued “sugging” (*Selling Under the Guise of research*) and “frugging” (*Fund Raising Under the Guise of research*), push polling accelerates the current rate of decline, as Democratic pollster Mark Melman observed in a 1996 interview with John Nielson broadcast on National Public Radio’s *All Things Considered*. Michael Traugott, last year’s president of AAPOR, made a similar statement in the wake of the February 2000 controversy over alleged push polling by the Bush primary campaign. He declared that “[Push polls] breed cynicism about politics, and we believe they contribute to declining response rates for polls.”

Inevitably, push polling will remain a campaign tool. In his new book, *Elections Polls, the News Media, and Democracy*, Traugott observes that the use of push polls has spread throughout all levels of US politics. Research for Larry Sabato and Glenn Simpson’s *Dirty Little Secrets: The Persistence of Corruption in American Politics* revealed that 35 of 45 candidates interviewed in 1996 claimed they had been victimized by a covert negative phoning campaign. Sabato and Simpson also give details of numerous cases in which the technique had been used by both candidates’ campaigns, or by advocacy groups, without a candidate’s knowledge or consent.

Educating active political campaigners and consultants on the differences between push polling and push questions will do little to change the behavior of those conducting push polls. Even experienced campaigners in national races have indicated they care little about adhering to the standards and guidelines set by professional organizations. Eighty-one percent of leading political pollsters

polled in a 1998 Pew Research Center study thought that association guidelines had little effect on their peers, and 54% admitted the guidelines had little effect on their *own* behavior!

So what can researchers do as an industry to protect themselves and the quality of research they do from the harmful side effects of push polling? There are a number of possible recourses.

First, professional associations can be used to adjudicate disputes among researchers, candidates, journalists, and respondents. During the 2000 elections, the NCPP established a Polling Review Board comprised of recognized authorities in public opinion research expressly for this purpose. A review board or similar organization to standardize and clarify the definition of a push poll would provide research firms with a third-party defense against the uninformed and the slanderous.

Second, CMOR has established the Caller Hotline Research Information Systems, or "CALL CHRIS," where consumers can learn more about a specific interview or surveys in general. Frontline data collectors can refer respondents who do not understand the difference between push polling and push questioning to this interactive voice information system, or to CMOR's website at [www.cmor.org](http://www.cmor.org). Both services will provide further clarification on push polling by a third-party source. Wider use of these resources will also serve to increase respondent confidence in the legitimacy of a particular survey, head off potential misinformed complaints, and make a small contribution to preventing the further erosion of cooperation rates.

Researchers can also support the activities of the various organizations that fight on their behalf in the legislative arena. CMOR and AAPC have led successful campaigns to amend or defeat draft legislation restricting telephone contacts. Their efforts have advanced legislation against push polling while protecting research in many states. The financial support and membership of researchers in these organizations will continue to advance the cause of research.

Finally, these same organizations, as well as the NCPP and AAPOR, should be encouraged by their research membership to educate *consumers* of polling information actively and publicly through outreach initiatives. The

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NCPP took a first step in this direction with its March 2000 meeting on "Monitoring Polls & Poll Coverage." AAPOR also took a stand last year with a *New York Times* article on the subject by Michael Traugott. Special attention should be paid to influencing course work at political management and journalism schools. It would also be useful to provide clear talking points to frontline data collectors so they can respond to poorly informed research consumers in a knowledgeable fashion.

So much for taking care of the present. What about dealing with the problem of push polling in the years to come, as it makes its way online?

The internet has a bright future in politics, part of which will include web-based surveys and, inevitably, the web's own version of push polling. There is already a great deal of literature on the poor quality of most online surveys, including problems with the way some of these "surveys" are written. Many are not surveys at all, but rather attempts to fundraise or smear opponents, much as push polls do.

A prime example is the weekly web "survey" hosted until the beginning of February 2000 on the site of the Democratic National Committee (DNC). As described by all industry definitions of push polling, it was designed to reach the many thousands who would log onto the DNC site. The survey also asked leading questions with slanted wording. It is not known whether the data collected were used in a manner consistent with push polling; however, the combination of the two other features would suggest that the survey was intended to inform and influence, rather than test messages and create data.

As online survey research becomes more prevalent, professional organizations are also changing with the times. For the 2000 election season, the NCPP's Polling Review Board intentionally included Humphrey Taylor of Harris Interactive. This gave the board an authority on cyber surveys useful in adjudicating web push polls, much as it does telephone pushing. In addition, educational efforts by NCPP and AAPOR are beginning to include discussion of this growing medium, as the 2000 and 2001 AAPOR conference schedules indicated.

Encouraging the efforts of AAPOR, AAPC, CMOR, and the NCPP will somewhat mitigate the effects of inevitable future push polls. The more researchers use these resources, the greater their credibility with voters and consumers of research data will be. ●