

From “CATI” to “CATS”

An Interview with Jay Leve

Public Perspective: It doesn't seem all that long ago that we were first hearing about “CATI,” computer-assisted telephone interviewing, a technology that allowed interviewers to enter data directly into computers for quick tabulation and analysis. Now we're hearing about “CATS,” completely automated telephone surveying. This is a technology that the polling industry is just beginning to look at and one with which you've already had some success. Tell us about your experience with completely automated telephone surveying.

Jay Leve: Let's say that in round numbers there are two dozen steps that any pollster goes through to conduct a piece of research. Twenty-three of those 24 are identical here at Bullet Poll. That means we draw samples the same way, we frame the research the same way, we ask the questions the same way, we analyze the results the same way, we stratify the sample the same way, we report the results the same way and we talk the client through the results the same way.

The one thing that we do differently is, instead of having a live voice ask the questions, we use the recorded voices of a local television anchor. We think that the voice of a trusted anchor is a powerful tool that can be harnessed and used to the advantage of opinion research. Right now our interviewers are people like Chuck Scarborough in New York, Ken Matz in Philadelphia, Mort Crim in Detroit, Ann Martin in Los Angeles, Steve Smith in Houston, and Ann Bishop in Miami. These individuals are some of the most respected people in their communities—broadcasters who may make between one and two million dollars a year, who are articulating and voicing our questions.

PP: Tell us how the system works.

JL: With CATI, a computer dials the telephone and once there is a connection from the computer to the human, a live interviewer then gets on the line and introduces him- or herself and attempts to win cooperation from the respondent. We do the identical thing. The only difference is that when the connection is made, instead of switching to a human operator who is sitting at the console, we play a piece of audio that has been recorded and respondents hear the voice

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of someone who is well respected and trusted in their community.

PP: Then, I take it, as questions are delivered, respondents are instructed to use their phones to record their answers.

JL: Exactly. People respond by pushing buttons on their phone. Responses are immediately recorded in our call computers exactly the same way as they would be if we were using a CATI system and the operator had in fact pressed the number 1 key on his computer keyboard instead of the respondent pressing the number 1 on his telephone. Respondents with rotary telephones can be invited to speak their answer choices, if the client so requests.

There are benefits to this methodology. For example, we know that when

our anchors are asking questions, every respondent hears the question the exact same way. Traditionally, you might have 50 or maybe even 100 interviewers sitting at consoles and each one asks the question with a different inflection—despite how many times you've told them not to do that. That is the reality. Then, after the first few calls, interviewer fatigue begins to set in. Eventually, interviewer bias creeps in because they've now heard 50, 60 or 70 people answer this question, and they think they already know what the respondent will say. This begins to show up in the speech pattern they develop. What we know is that if we call 600 people tonight and ask them a question, they will all hear it the same way with the same inflection—exactly the way we want them to hear it because it will be enunciated by, for argument's sake, the city's greatest communicator.

PP: You have just spoken to the issue of consistency in question delivery using CATS. Are there other strengths that this technology has over more traditional methods of polling?

JL: I will answer your question broadly, if I might. No one would look at computer-assisted telephone interviewing and say that it's intrinsically bad or intrinsically good. It is just a tool and the way in which it is deployed determines whether in fact it is used for good or evil. Therefore, in the hands of a terrific research group CATI is great. In the hands of ham-handed amateurs, CATI can be used for the most invidious purposes, like selling under the guise of research.

My company, Hypotenuse, has developed a proprietary technology called Bullet Poll. That technology is neutral. It is just a tool. It could be used for evil, which is to say that we could

take that technology and use it for telemarketing. We don't. We have never done telemarketing and don't intend to. Or it can be put to great use. For example, shortly after the bomb went off in Oklahoma City we made 12,000 phone calls for the American Red Cross looking for electrical generators and type O negative blood. That's one of many socially responsible uses of our technology.

As of this morning, the Bullet Poll service is active in at least 99 separate television markets. We have completed 1,400 pieces of research, 700 in the past year, 70 in the past ten days. The people we work for are companies like NBC, CBS, Hearst, Media General, Viacom, Post-Newsweek.... These are the largest media companies in the country, all of which own television stations under exclusive long-term contract to Bullet Poll. Every one of those organizations puts its FCC license on the line when it airs our results. If this was either: a) unreliable, b) a gimmick, c) a novelty, we would never ever have gotten to 99 stations and we certainly would never have received a renewal from any one of our stations. Instead, the situation is just the opposite. Most of our stations are renewed through 1997.

Often, a researcher will come to us and say, "we were thinking of using some other firm to do our calls, but could you do them instead?" The answer is "yes." Then they will ask, "where do you draw your sample from?" My response is, "where would you like me to draw my sample from?" We do business

with both Survey Sampling and with Genesys. If you have a particular preference, we will use it. When they ask, "when do your calls go out?" My answer is "when would you like the calls to go out?" When they ask, "how many call-backs do you do?" I say, "how many do you want me to do?" I can redial "no answers" 100 times, 5,000 times. My computers will do anything. There is almost nothing that a pollster can conceptualize that our technology cannot do.

One more thing: Many times over the last two years people have called to ask if we could do open-ended questions. I had to say, "no, that is the one thing we cannot do." Finally we got tired of turning away that business so we built the required technology. Now, in addition to asking respondents to answer questions by pushing keys on their phones, we can say, "tell us why you feel this way." We simply open a microphone and they talk to us. This has added a whole new dimension to Bullet Poll.

In research employing traditional survey methodology, responses to open-ended questions are recorded by interviewers who are trying to write as fast as the respondent is speaking. Our technology is superior. The real sound bytes that we send back to the stations are electrifying. With permission, they put the actual respondent's voice on the air and it just brings the research to life. What we think we have created here is basically a real-time focus group.

PP: You have already addressed some of the criticism of the CATS technology for public opinion polling. Let me mention a few other things specifically and give you a chance to speak to them. First, there is, as I understand it, a very narrow interviewing period associated with the majority of news polls that you do. Does this introduce a bias in the sample that you achieve?

JL: When we went to Survey Sampling two years ago and said we would like to be able to draw samples *instantly*, their concept of instantly was... "what

are you talking 24 hours?" And I said, "no, more like 24 seconds." They literally built a technology, which we were the first to take advantage of, that allows us to draw samples instantly. That means when I need a sample of the Dayton, Ohio viewing area, or Santa Barbara County, California, or the city of Fort Lauderdale, Florida, I am literally able to draw a valid sample at a moment's notice. Second, we make calls on whatever basis makes sense, so there are occasions, for instance, when we make calls over four consecutive nights. However, most Bullet Polls are, in fact, conducted on the news cycle that we now live in.

Here, two examples are worth mentioning. First, both Federal Express and UPS within the last few weeks have announced same-day package delivery. In the world that we now live, overnight is no longer fast enough. People want packages to get there in four hours. Second, talk to anybody who runs a politician's campaign and what they will tell you is that the cycle of news is no longer a day. Instead, it is measured in several hour increments. That is to say, if your candidate makes an announcement at noon, you pray to God that what he had to say is still considered newsworthy at 5:00. So the idea that polls, which are trying to measure a moment in time, must by definition be conducted over an extended period of time, we think is open to challenge.

On a typical breaking-news Bullet Poll, we start making phone calls at 6:00 pm and stop at about 9:00 pm. This produces a great snapshot of what is going on in that community, at that moment, and that is how we present it. Now, if I were doing a study about mortality rates from breast cancer, I could not defend this methodology. If I were asked to do such a study, I would employ different research methodologies that would extend over months and years with a respondent population measured in the tens of thousands. Those pieces of research need to be plus or minus zero. You can't afford to be wrong on something like mortality rates.

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The Polling Business

In contrast to that, let's say that last night somebody saw a UFO in Bangor, Maine and today WLBZ-TV wants to ask, "did you see the UFO?" If our station in Bangor called any one of the respected pollsters in this country, they would be told, speaking round numbers, 72 hours/\$7,200. That is a king's ransom for a station in Bangor, Maine! Instead, they call me and I promise them results for broadcast tonight when the whole town is still abuzz about whether there was a UFO or not. The cost is so small they decide to buy similar surveys by the dozens in order to keep going back into the community and asking questions.

PP: Still, there are those critics who would say that the sample achieved by the traditional pollster is going to be significantly different than the sample that you achieve, and the data much more reliable. How would you respond?

JL: If I said to my stations, "guys, we can do this a couple of different ways. I can call this evening and give you results for tonight's 11:00 news, or I can call over the next three nights consecutively but I won't have results for you until next week," they would laugh in my face. They would say, "what planet are you on?" Next week's news will be invented next week—we are talking today, tonight, this minute. The truth is that many times at 5:30 in the afternoon a very big story breaks. When news happens late in the day, the toughest news directors turn to us. They will be reporting the news, like the competition, at 6:00. But at 11:00, when the competition will still be reporting the 6:00 story, our clients will be advancing the story using exclusive Bullet Poll results.

And when they report our results they know Bullet Poll did in fact call as perfect a cross-section of people as was possible given the time constraints. There are 100 ways we could have cheated but we didn't. We went out and bought the highest quality sample. We did everything we could to ensure that the respondents were matched to the

population of the market surveyed. One might argue that had we conducted the identical piece of research Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday nights instead of just Monday night, somehow the sample might have been just an inkling better, but it's moot. It's moot because by Wednesday the news story will have evolved, and we'll be in the field Wednesday night polling on *those* developments.

PP: Have you had a chance to compare your achieved sample with the achieved samples of others and if so, how different are they?

JL: Each morning on my desk is every poll that's been released in the country in the last 24 hours. Often the stories that are being reported in the paper are the same ones that we polled on and reported to our clients one and two days ago. This provides us with a constant real-time measurement of how we do against others.

I typically do not see raw data from other pollsters. But I do study their published results. My colleagues and I pore over their work, as we continually try to improve our own. What I can tell you is that our results are consistent with our competitors, and we are not introducing either sampling or response bias.

PP: It hasn't been possible, then, for you to compare the respondent profiles from, let's say, an overnight ABC News poll with a similar survey you may have done. On the other hand you have had the opportunity to look at the responses that ABC has reported from a poll similar to one of yours and you've found the results to be extremely close.

JL: To the extent that a particular Bullet Poll sample is supposed to be 80% white, 15% black and 5% Hispanic, it will be. Not just that, I mean, to the extent it should be 7% old black men and 3% young Hispanic females and 12% white middle aged women, it will be. We are balancing in multiple matrices across multiple axes in order to achieve the best sample. If we ask income and/or education and/or politi-

cal party and/or your choice of other demographics, we balance against each one of those as well.

Bullet Poll gets a report card every time there's an election. Last month, in the Wichita, Kansas, mayor's race, we said Bob Knight by 2, and Knight

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won by 2. Last November, we said California Proposition 187 would pass 60% to 40%. It passed 59% to 41%. Others did not get that right, but we did, at least in part because we find that on sensitive questions, people who might lie to a live interviewer tell the truth to a machine. In Connecticut last year in the five-way race between John Rowland, Bill Curry, Eunice Groark, Tom Scott and Joseph Zydonyk we were dead-on accurate. We came out with a poll a couple of days before the election that showed Rowland a two-point favorite. No one else at the time had that.

Our Connecticut client, WTNH-TV, had also hired us to do election-day exit polling. At 8 pm, the moment the polls closed in Connecticut, everyone else had nothing to say, but our station went on the air immediately and said Rowland will win with 35% of the vote and Curry will get 33% of the vote. We were off by 1 point. Rowland won with 36% and Curry did have 33%. It was hours before anybody else had that kind of data. The proof is right there in front of your eyes. It's on the air every night.

PP: As I was researching the development and use of CATS I came across a column that—to paraphrase it—said: Everyone knows that falling response rates are the biggest problem we face in the profession right now. A new wave of

organizations using recorded voices as interviewers will only serve to drive response rates down further. The development of this technology could jeopardize the future of public opinion polling.

How do you respond to that argument?

JL: At the highest level I empathize with it and agree that the world turns on your ability to get people to talk to you. The great news is that our response rates, which have always been high, are soaring. I attribute that to our anchors. In New York City, Chuck Scarborough is the whole franchise for WNBC. Having him engaged in a two-way dialog with people all across the viewing area is so potent, so powerful, that respondents are thrilled to participate. It's two-way TV—today.

PP: You actually think that a familiar voice on the other end of the phone may be a boon to response rates rather than a detriment to them?

JL: It doesn't matter what market we call into. The voice of a local anchor instantly makes it clear to our respon-

dents that this is authentic, real, not a scam, that we are not selling anything. Our response rates in almost every market continue to escalate. In places where people are particularly civil, like Salt Lake City, our response rate is phenomenal.

There seems to be a need, a predisposition, to believe that we are charlatans, quick-buck artists or scamsters of some kind because so much of the out-bound-dial waters have been polluted by telemarketers with no scruples. I knew that would be everyone's first reaction when we started this company. We were told certainly we were going to pollute the waters for everybody else, we were going to screw it up, disgrace ourselves by saying that Alf Landon would beat Roosevelt, and on and on it went. Nonetheless, we went about the business of building an organization that took as much pride in its work as Gallup, Harris or Roper. The only thing we were going to try and change was the labor intensiveness of traditional polling methodology. In the final analysis we think we have replaced that methodology, not with something that is inferior but rather with something that is potentially superior.



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Knowing that it is possible for people to look at us with that first impression, I would urge them not to make the mistake which the big bosses at General Motors and Ford did in the 1970s when they looked at their first Honda or Toyota and dismissed it. They assumed that they were all the industry needed. They were the big auto makers and the world would never change. They made a terrible and tragic mistake and GM is the tiniest shell of itself as a result of the assessments it made at that point.

PP: What are the chances that this methodology will become the industry standard for telephone polling?

JL: I think there will continue to be all kinds of polling methodologies and, in fact, I would argue that the lion's share of the great research done in this country, whether it be mall-intercept, face-to-face work, or thoughtful and complex profiles of people that employ 45-minute questionnaires, will continue to have a critical human component. But at the table called "public opinion research," we do have a place, and our methodology *can* be trusted.