

Representing the Views of Multi-Lingual Populations

By Susan H. Pinkus

There are many challenges the survey research industry currently faces—pseudo polls (i.e., the Internet and call-in surveys), declining response rates, proliferating non-voice phone lines for modems and faxes, and, of course, the cellular phone phenomenon. But the greatest challenge to the *Los Angeles Times* Poll is conducting surveys in California that accurately represent the multi-lingual population and yet still maintain the integrity and statistical reliability that deadlines and the *LA Times* demand.

The *Times* Poll has been criticized by the state's Asian-American community for allegedly excluding Asians from samples. They have reached this conclusion because poll stories usually report only the attitudes of whites, Latinos, and blacks when racial and/or ethnic subgroups are discussed. Asian-Americans don't realize that English-speaking Asian-Americans are included in every sample if they are part of the population being polled. In order to curb some of the criticism, the *LA Times* has reached out to Asian-Americans by holding town-hall meetings with community leaders to hear their concerns and discuss polling methodology. We have explained that we never cite a subgroup with less than 100 respondents in a cell and Asians usually fall into that category. Although the Asian community has increased sharply in California, at about 10% they remain a relatively small share of the adult-age population. And when looking at voters and likely voters, the incidence of Asian-Americans declines further.

The language barrier is another hinderance. Unfortunately, time and budgetary constraints make it nearly impossible to offer the questionnaire in languages other than English and Spanish and, therefore, we only interview Asian-Americans who speak English. In separate *Times* polls of Asians, many respondents said they would prefer the survey be in their language—45% of Chinese-Americans, 46% of Filipino-Americans, 89% of Vietnamese-Americans, and 91% of Korean-Americans.

Achieving this result would require finding interviewers who speak Cantonese, Mandarin, Tagalog, Vietnamese, Korean, Japanese...you get the point. Not only would we need multi-lingual interviewers, we would also need the surveys translated into all these languages. We recently completed a comprehensive survey on education and wanted to analyze parental opinions by the state's major ethnic and racial groups. The portion of the sample reaching Asian parents had to be "farmed out." The survey was translated into five languages and netted 150 completed interviews; it took two weeks and cost \$25,000.

1. Are neutral questions really the best way to get at opinion, or would we be better served with loaded questions designed to see whether the public could be polarized on each side of an issue and how many people would shift sides depending on the question? This idea occurred to me when reviewing the many questions on abortion. Each set of questions produces different divisions about the size of the pro- and anti-abortion groups. The loaded-question approach might get at intensity of opinion as well as direction.

“ The key to progress, innovation, and development of something better is approaching familiar problems with methods we have not used before, or tackling problems we could not solve before. If something significant seems impossible then it is worthy of attention. ”

2. The way we determine likelihood of voting in election polls does not work. I have yet to see a good likely-voter screen for low-turnout elections like primaries. What the likely-voter screen really does is compensate for an inability to measure the correct number of registered voters. Independent measures of registration show that there are fewer registered voters than most election-poll results show. We also know that almost everyone registered to vote where they currently live votes in presidential elections. If polls measured registration correctly, we would not need a likely-voter question for presidential elections but we would need a measure of likely voters, which we do not have, for other elections.

3. Improving survey response rates is a laudable goal. Most survey analysts treat nonresponse as random. Rather than trying to improve response rates, another, perhaps more fruitful approach, is designing experiments within on-going surveys to measure the relationship between response rates and characteristics we are interested in. For example, we could analyze the differences among results on successive calls to households that had not previously responded. After four calls a subsample of nonrespondents would continue to be called for as long as there was nonresponse, maybe up to 20 attempts to complete an interview. Those who refuse could be called back more than once as is now the practice. From this we would learn if the effect of nonresponse was random or if it introduced bias.

Many more survey research practices are taken for granted. We should challenge them and be willing to change.

*Warren Mitofsky is president,
Mitofsky International*

The Biggest Hurdle for the Polls is...

Some polls require examining an Asian subgroup and, in those cases, we do take on the extra expense needed for increasing our English-speaking Asian-American subsample. For example, when we polled in the Los Angeles area after the verdict in the Rodney King-beating trial and the riots that ensued, obtaining opinions and attitudes of the Asian community was important. The poll took three extra days in the field. However, when we are on tight deadlines, it is virtually

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impossible to extend the poll those extra days.

It takes more time because the Asian-American population is not concentrated in one area and oversampling this group produces poor results. Locally, Asian-American communities are less ghettoized than other major ethnic and racial groups. According to the 1990 census, only five of the 756 census tracts in LA contain an Asian/Pacific Islander majority, just 21 are at least one-third Asian, and only 51 are one-quarter Asian. By contrast, there are dozens of majority black, white, and Latino census tracts.

The *LA Times* is sensitive to the needs of southern California and wants to curb some of the Asian-American community's criticism. Thus, the *Times* Poll started a series of surveys to separately interview the top five Asian communities in this region. So far, each survey has been well received and appreciated by the Asian-American community.

As the *Times* Poll continues, we will still be investigating ways to solve this problem locally and statewide.

*Susan Pinkus is director,
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Harnessing the Internet

By John Zogby

The survey research industry has faced a number of challenges over the years, several of which have been technology-related. With the wider dispersion of the telephone in the 1960s and 1970s it became possible (even easier, more time sensitive, and less expensive) to conduct accurate polls by telephone. During the same period, the computer has made it possible to quickly tabulate opinions by a variety of demographics and other characteristics.

While the telephone and computer have dramatically improved the work of survey researchers it has also brought a new set of problems. Are we really speaking to the person self-described? Are we able to capture the same nuances and “body language” as in a face-to-face interview? What about the households without phones or with unlisted numbers? Has the computer made our work too quantitative and less human?

The challenge for the late 1990s is harnessing the Internet for accurate, credible survey research. Currently, the population with Internet access is still too small and ungainly to produce any representative sampling. And while it promises to grow by leaps and bounds, questions about the Internet's usefulness for pure research will linger. Will as many poorer (and not so poor) households be on the Internet as can be reached by telephone? Who will actually answer the survey? Will the respondent be the 36-year-old man as described or will it be his 14-year-old son or daughter? And what about questions of privacy and confidentiality?

Some of these issues ought to be resolved by more technology—for example, identification numbers, blocks to ensure that only one person per household can respond, and barriers to further access to responses from outside groups. And some surveys, including our own at Zogby International, indicate that the Internet may be more widely dispersed across income and racial groups than we previously thought.

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One thing is clear: the Internet will increasingly be a part of our future. We will have to come to grips with it. Will it be the boon to the industry that the telephone and personal computer has been? Or will it actually create more headaches than it is worth?

Continuing effort has to be made to efficiently integrate this new research tool on a trial basis with other methods already in use. Developments are moving rapidly so many of us need to work hard to stay on top of them.

*John Zogby is president and CEO
of Zogby International*

