

Our Greatest and Most Frustrating Challenge Is How to Increase the Rate of Public Participation in Polls

by Harry W. O'Neill

In April, 1995 the Council for Marketing and Opinion Research (CMOR)—an industry association funded by both providers and users of survey research—sponsored a national telephone survey among the adult public for two purposes: (1) to ascertain the current level of refusal rates and evaluate the effects of several variables on refusal rates and the willingness of respondents to participate in future surveys, and (2) to evaluate the public image of surveys and the survey research industry.¹ This study was meant to serve as a benchmark for future research, and perhaps generate data that could be used to formulate general guidelines regarding the most productive means to increase public participation in and support for survey research.

The Interview Experience

Underlying peoples' attitudes toward surveys, of course, is their past experience as survey participants. Unquestionably, people who have been respondents to surveys have a positive reaction to the interview experience. With respect to their *last survey participation*: 87% say the interviewer was courteous and pleasant, 84% say the questions were easy to understand, 83% say the purpose of the survey was explained to them, 79% say overall it was at least a somewhat pleasant experience, 78% say the interviewer was professional, and last but by no means least, 78% say they would be at least "fairly willing" to participate in a survey again.

The above responses outline the positive feedback. There are, however, some significant concerns that present a challenge to our industry. For instance, only 50% of people who have been survey respondents say they were contacted at a convenient time (the main reason, by far, for refusals), only 43% say the subject matter was interesting, and a full 37% say the interview was too long.

As our industry continues its efforts to improve its image and differentiate legitimate survey research from telemarketing, we should note two problem areas that require immediate attention. Regarding their last survey participation, only 51% of respondents report that they were informed their responses would be confidential, and only 50% indicated that they were told that no one would try to sell them anything as a result of their participation. It seems legitimate survey researchers need to be more diligent in informing their respondents of these key factors.

Attitudes Toward Surveys

Respondents were read ten statements about surveys *in general* (not in reference to their last participation)—six of the statements were favorable and four unfavorable. For each, they were asked whether they agreed or disagreed (see Figures 1 and 2) The good news for our industry — all six positive statements show majority agreement.

The message of the usefulness of survey research seems to have registered. Large majorities of the public agree that surveys provide an opportunity for consumer feedback about products and services, and a chance for citizens to voice their opinions regarding public policies and political activities. In general, our industry is seen as serving a useful purpose.

Continuing the positive news, most people also believe that responding to surveys is in their best interest, that it is an interesting experience, and that survey researchers do maintain the confidentiality of their responses. Further, sizable majorities *reject* the idea that survey participation is a waste of time and that surveys are an invasion of privacy. Although a majority of the public hold these positive views, the feelings are certainly not unanimous. Anything short of 100% should be of concern to the industry.

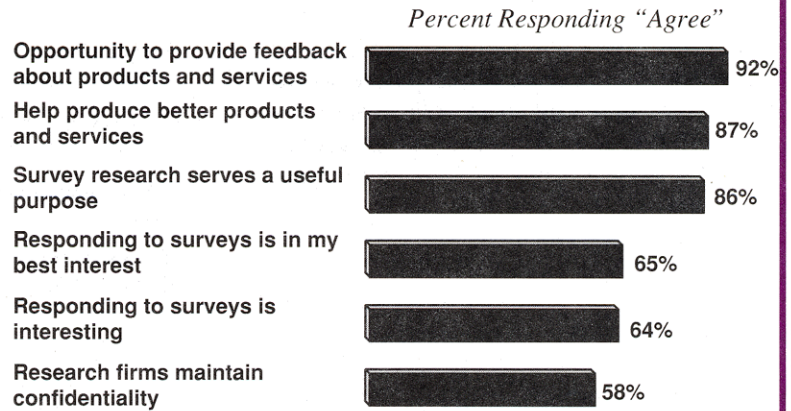
As one would expect, the public does have some complaints regarding survey research. Almost half of Americans, for example, feel surveys are often too personal. Even more serious, it is still strongly believed that surveys are used to disguise a

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Figure 1

Public's Evaluation of Surveys

Question: Now I'm going to read a list of statements which some of the people we've talked with have said about polls or research surveys. As I read each statement, please tell me whether you agree or disagree with the statement.



sales pitch. This remains a tough misperception to combat, although new federal telemarketing rules should help. These rules, among other things, require telemarketers to state up-front that they are making a sales call, the nature of the product or service being offered, and its cost.

Market vs. Political Surveys

Conventional wisdom—at least from my biased perspective as someone who has spent much of his career in policy issues and political research—is

“ *While refusal rates are discouragingly high for most general public surveys, there may not be an especially large, hard core of refusers to all surveys. In this study, 37% of the participants say they had refused another survey in the past year. So willing respondents come and go; we just can't get them all together for any given survey.* ”

that people prefer surveys about politics and issues over those dealing with products and services.

However, by a margin of four to one the public opts for marketing surveys over surveys about politics and issues (47% to 12%, respectively), with another sizable four in ten saying it really doesn't matter. As to the type of marketing study of the most interest: 70% say testing a new product idea, 69% say using a product at home and then evaluating it, 64% say product awareness and usage, 61% say tasting food or beverage products, and 48% say evaluating commercials or print ads.

Positive & Negative Reactions to Published Polls

Opinion surveys—particularly published polls and surveys—receive a mixed reaction from the public. On the positive side:

76% recognize the usefulness of polls and surveys to provide government officials with an understanding of how the public feels about important issues;

76% believe that the final published presidential election polls are at least

fairly close to the actual outcome;

75% find media stories that report the results of polls and surveys are at least somewhat interesting;

64% like to compare their opinions with those of others reported in polls and surveys, though

only 49% pay at least a fair amount of attention to the reports of political polls during a campaign.

There are, however, some significant vulnerabilities:

69% hold the view that there are too many surveys conducted on trivial subjects or issues of little value, which may diminish the attention given to our more serious efforts;

63% are often skeptical of the results of reported polls and surveys, while only 27% say they usually believe the results;

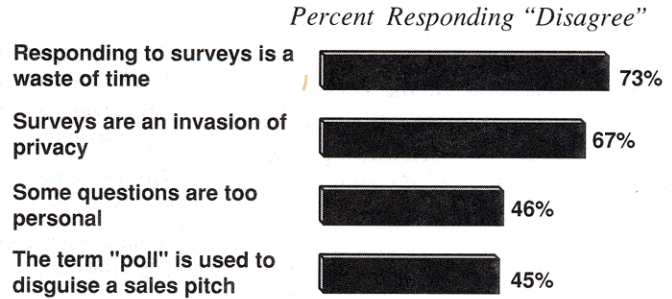
only 10% believe that polls and surveys usually are *not* biased, while 73% say it depends on the particular poll (but how can the public make the determination?);

only 47% claim to understand how in-

Figure 2

Public's Evaluation of Surveys

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interviewing 500-1,000 people can represent the whole public, which surely contributes to public skepticism;

only 51% believe survey researchers can be trusted to protect their rights to privacy—a serious issue when 87% of the public is at least somewhat concerned about threats to their personal privacy.

All things considered, our survey efforts are well received among the public, although there are some areas that need our attention insofar as how we conduct our surveys and others that call for greater public understanding of the survey process.

Participants generally feel positive about their previous survey experiences and believe that survey research in general provides a useful service to consumers and citizens. Furthermore, they believe surveys are usually administered professionally and are easy to understand. However, there is some concern about survey length, being contacted at inconvenient times, and surveys not being interesting.

With respect to issue and political polls, the picture is somewhat more mixed. Most people believe issue surveys are useful in bringing public opinion to government officials, and they also find news stories based on the results of polls and surveys interesting. Most like to compare their opinions to those of others reported in surveys, and believe our final published presidential election polls are fairly accurate. However, most Americans: a) are often skeptical of surveys, b) believe that bias is a real possibility, c) don't understand how a sample can represent a much larger population, and d) only half pay much attention to reports of polls during political campaigns. In addition, there is the discouraging finding that many people have yet to be convinced that when they partici-

pate in surveys we polling practitioners can be trusted to uphold their privacy.

There is a caveat to be kept in mind. The opinions reported in this study about survey research come from those who were willing to participate in our survey (of course, this is true of the findings of any poll). Those who refuse to participate in any survey may well harbor considerably different feelings about the nature and value of opinion research. Our greatest and most frustrating challenge is how to increase the rate of public participation in polls. While refusal rates are discouragingly high for most general public surveys, there may not be an especially large hard core of refusers to all surveys. In this study, for instance, 37% of the participants said they had refused another survey in the past year. So the willing respondents come and go; we just can't get them all together for any given survey.

Endnote:

¹ The survey was conducted by telephone among a random sample of 1,920 adults nationwide. There were three forms of the questionnaire, as interview length was a variable under study. Thus, not every question was asked of all respondents. The sample was divided into eight replicates of 240 interviews conducted by eight national survey research firms.



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