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Let's Put Meaning
Into Public Relations Research

Remarks By

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At A
Breakfast Meeting For Public Relations Educators
Sponsored By
The Institute for Public Relations
Grand Hyatt Hotel
Washington, D.C.

August 8, 2001

Public relations professionals love polls.

They love to review polls ... to talk about polls ... to conduct polls ... to rely on poll findings for PR program planning and evaluation ... and -- when the results are to their liking -- to publicize polls.

I think that you will agree with me that it seems to be a given nowadays in public relations -- as well as in other segments of society including the business and the government sectors -- that before anybody does anything at all they feel a need to take a look at what the polls have to say about the matter. As we all know, we are literally drowning in poll data.

Open your daily newspaper and you are almost certain to find somewhere in its pages the results of the latest poll on some issue or topic. If you read *USA Today*, you probably will find the results of half a dozen different polls, all in the same issue. Turn on your radio or TV, and, sure enough, there are more poll results. Go on-line to your favorite website, and, more often than not, you're bound to see reference to some poll results. Read the trade publications in your field -- magazines and newsletters such as *PR Week*, *PR News*, *PR Reporter* and *Jack O'Dwyer's Newsletter* -- and there are certain to be even more polls, this time related to your chosen field of endeavor.

And as you -- like me -- look at all of these polls, I wonder if very often you do not end up reaching somewhat the same conclusion that I often reach: namely, that the more you seem to "learn" from the polls, the less you actually seem to "know" and "understand" about people's real views and concerns, and the more confused you may end up getting.

I realize that this may sound like heresy coming from someone like me who has spent most of his professional career designing and carrying out literally hundreds of public opinion polls, but let me develop this further.

We all say that polls are important in our society and that, especially for those of us in the public relations field, we certainly ought to pay close attention to public opinion findings before we do anything at all in communications.

And yet, isn't it true that we snicker when a political candidate is said to be 10 percentage points behind his nearest rival in a given poll, then ends up winning a solid victory in a primary election only 48 hours later?

And don't we all shudder when we read survey results that claim voters are overwhelmingly in favor of tax relief and then find these same voters approving a state referendum for increased government spending that will lead to even more taxation?

What does this all add up to? The problem, unfortunately, can be summarized in the comment I heard a corporate executive make not too long ago to the head of a major polling organization: "It's not that I don't find your data interesting. They are. It's that I don't know what to make of them. I don't know what they mean. I don't know how to interpret and use the information."

There is an important message in all this for America's policymakers, government and business leaders in general and for those of us in public relations more specifically. That message is: Don't look to the polls, or to any other information or intelligence which you may gather either on-line or off-line, for a quick fix, for the simple answer to the difficult questions your organization or clients may be facing.

Look beyond the numbers, beyond the data, beyond the facts for the subtleties and nuances of what is being reported. Start looking for broader meaning and explanations. Don't ask yourself how do I use the information when I get it, until you are fully convinced that the information accurately reflects the views of those polled, is representative, is understandable and then is applicable to your needs.

Let's get back to the polls for a moment. A recent cartoon perhaps sums up best some of the growing concerns a number of us have about the information polls give us. In response to a poll-taker's query, a woman is seen to reply: "Oh, I'm sorry. I haven't formed an opinion on that topic yet -- I simply haven't had the chance to study the latest poll results."

Many researchers are becoming increasingly concerned about these so-called "non-attitudes" of respondents. Two sociologists -- Howard Schuman and Stanley Presser -- a number of years ago referred to a tendency of the general public to express opinions on issues and topics about which there is widespread public ignorance. There is a fine line, they wrote, "between attitudes and non-attitudes." There may even be something, they said, that we ought to be studying that one might label, "quasi-attitudes."

Only two weeks ago, there was an interesting article that appeared on the op-ed page of the *Sunday New York Times*. Adam Clymer, who covers the polling industry for *The Times*, noted that an extensive number of polls have been released, all of which give the impression that the general public overwhelmingly supports federal funding of human embryonic stem cell research.

Clymer said he is not so sure that the public has even formed an opinion on the subject, because it such a complicated issue to understand. Clymer said most pollsters were ignoring a crucial finding in a Gallup Poll, in which 57 percent of the respondents -- before the issue was explained to them -- said they did not know enough about the issue to say whether they favored or opposed stem cell research.

According to Herbert Asher, a professor of political science at Ohio State University, a no-opinion number that high may mean that what these polls are really "measuring is non-attitudes." Is the general public for or against federal funding of stem cell research? Clymer contends it's too early to answer that question with any degree of certainty. There are too many factors and variables to take into consideration. When an issue or topic is complicated and

involved, it is hard to obtain meaningful information by asking only one question in a poll.

Usually a series of questions need to be asked, and that can be time-consuming and expensive.

What concerns me is, does anyone really care whether polls are objective and scientific ... whether they are accurate ... how representative they might be of the views of the target audience groups that are surveyed ... and -- most important of all -- whether the poll findings are reliable and valid?

To be perfectly honest with you, I often cringe when I see survey findings reported, particularly in the PR trade press, because I start wondering about how the data were collected. Often I read things like this: “This survey involved distributing a questionnaire to 2,000 prominent business executives.” But then, no information is given about who these so-called prominent business executives actually were or what the sample size was or what was the response rate for the survey, or how many chose not to respond. Or, often I’ll read something like this: “This survey involved drawing a random sample of the total population under study, and, in addition, we invited those who regularly visit our web site who might also be interested in participating in the survey to fill out a questionnaire form and return to us.”

One cannot put much faith in survey findings if response rates to polls are low or skewed, or if the participants constitute a self-selected sample.

It may surprise you, but I also often cringe when I view the results of surveys designed and carried out by the media themselves. Those in the media like to claim that they are objective and unbiased when designing and carrying out their surveys, and I’m sure most of them are, but let’s be very honest with each other: Why do the media conduct polls? It’s because they want to obtain data that they can then use in news stories. Could it possibly be that the media have a hidden agenda when they ask some questions in their polls, but not others? Maybe certain questions will result in a more provocative or interesting story on a slow news day than will others.

During the more than two dozen years that I designed and carried out public opinion polls while working for two large public relations agencies, I was always amused by the pressure that the media brought on me when publicizing a poll to explain my methodology in detail and to release the responses to each and every question as well as the actual wording of survey questionnaires. I always provided that information.

Yet, how many newspapers and news magazines that conduct media polls do you know that fully explain to their readers the details of their survey research methodologies, or release to their readers the responses to each and every question that was asked in the poll, as well as the actual wording of survey questionnaires? *The New York Times* and *The Wall Street Journal* do give fairly complete details of how their polls are conducted, but not too many others give out that type of information, or ever release copies of the actual questionnaires.

On behalf of a client, I once asked a well-known daily newspaper that had published the results of its own survey on environmental issues, if I could have a copy of the questionnaire that was used in the study to enable my client to put the research findings into perspective. The newspaper told me that that was proprietary, privileged information that could not be released. How come there is one set of ground-rules for the media and another set for those who work in public relations?

There is an interesting series of articles -- quite embarrassing to those in the polling industry -- that appear in the current issue of *Public Perspective*, the official publication of the Roper Center for Public Opinion Research. The articles give the results of three surveys that were sponsored by the Henry J. Kaiser Foundation and carried out by Princeton Survey Research Associates. The surveys -- of the general public, the media, and policymakers -- all focus on people's views toward polling.

One article quotes Evans Witt, president of Princeton Survey Research Associates, as reporting that the general public is increasingly skeptical of the polling industry's ethics and

output. Four out of five Americans said poll questions don't give people the opportunity to say what they really think about an issue. A large majority of respondents in all three polls --- 58% of those in the general public, 61% of those in the media, and 73% of the policymakers --- believe that "poll results can be twisted to say whatever you want them to say."

Mr. Witt reported that "only a third of the public said that polls accurately reflect what the public thinks at least most of the time. A resounding 53% said that polls do so only some of the time, and 11% said they hardly ever do so."

If you are interested in reviewing these articles yourself, you can easily do so by logging on to www.ropercenter.uconn.edu/pp_curr.html.

Daniel Yankelovich, the noted pollster, said it often bothered him that people take too literally the responses given to single-item questions in polls -- such as a candidate being seen on a given day as holding a 2-to-1 lead in the Presidential election sweepstakes -- without their ever bothering to assess or put into perspective the respondent's state-of-mind at the time the answer was given or the limitations that may be built into the question.

According to Yankelovich, when it comes to complex issues, pollsters and policymakers need to know whether the views of the public are firm and settled or soft and tentative. "On almost every key public issue," he has written, "there is a process, part deliberate and part intuitive, by which people eventually settle their views. Any single opinion poll will catch the American public at a fixed point in the process. But which point is it? Percentages alone do not reveal whether people are at the vague beginning, the turbulent middle or the conclusive end of the process of making up their minds."

Although Yankelovich is on the right track, there is even more to the problem than he has identified. An article that appeared several years ago in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* put the dilemma facing all of us into better perspective.

The article was headlined: “Social Scientists, Unable To Explain Some Issues, Turning To Humanists.” The selection referred to a decision of the Social Science Research Council to turn to the humanities in an effort to find better explanations for the public policy issues which social scientists regularly study. Kenneth Prewitt, who at that time served as president of the council, noted that the social and behavioral sciences have established “a tradition of quantification with some success.” This tradition has stressed the importance of rigorous measurement and modeling in explaining social phenomena.

However, Prewitt said, having established the tradition, “we are unable to make sense of some of the things that we ought to make sense of.” As a result, he said, many social scientists are experiencing “a serious uneasiness -- not that quantification itself is a failure, but that it hasn’t allowed us to penetrate our subjects at quite the depth we thought it would.”

A key ingredient in all this is that social scientists and pollsters alike appear to be drowning in their own numbers, generating data with considerable speed but rarely providing appropriate explanations of what the data are all about. Survey researchers have become so infatuated with their technical virtuosity, with demographics and cross-tabulations, with their questionnaire approaches and their sampling errors, that it appears that they may be letting their statistically-oriented techniques color their interpretation of what is happening in the real world and what it all means.

Add to this all of the polls that are currently spilling out of websites and the internet, not just in days or hours but often only in a matter of a few minutes. With this tremendous glut of poll numbers piling up on the desks of PR practitioners around the world, one is reminded of the famous line from the Ancient Mariner, “water, water everywhere. Nor any drop to drink.”

Just as I, as a researcher, have to concern myself with this growing lack of meaning in what the polls and data tell us, so also -- I feel -- do those who are public relations professionals have to concern themselves with this dearth in truly useful and useable information.

Too many in public relations, I contend, have a tendency to accept at face value everything pollsters tell them. They fail to recognize that poll findings and selected facts are only artificial and one-dimensional measures in a multi-dimensional world. A given poll, for example, is only an isolated snapshot. More often than not, its picture is out of sync with reality. At best, the image represents only a very thin slice of life.

There are any number of issues for which the will of the people is either unclear, misread, ignored, or plain wrongheaded: human embryonic stem cell research ... gun control ... global warming ... taxes on corporate profits ... accountability in the schools ... abortion ... privatization of social security are just a few. In all cases, polls can, and have, shown an impressive variety of conflicting wills on these subjects, depending upon which questions were asked to whom and when.

It also has to be kept in mind that very often the public is of two minds on the same issue. Ask yourself if you would not vote one way one day and another way another day simply because you have suddenly come to see a different side of the same issue that was not apparent before.

It's the subtleties that we need to bear in mind when we review survey findings and other information we receive. Consider this: Asked to describe the major causes of cancer in America, one poll found that 51 percent of the public blamed chemical food additives. Stop here and you have a whopping statistic that cuts through much of the food industry's efforts in recent years. But think about this: How much of the tabulated responses were based on hearsay, or fear, or only a smattering of information? To what extent did the pollster really try to find out how much information John Q. Public knew, or even cared, about the subject? That information might significantly change the meaning of the poll's findings.

These are all things that public relations professionals have to take into consideration as they weigh how best to use the information at their disposal. That's why I keep emphasizing the importance of looking beyond and behind the data for meaning.

Part of the reason why poll data are not as helpful as they ought to be is because pollsters often do not interpret and explain the figures as well as they could. Pollsters have an obligation to report far more than just numbers when they give survey results. They have got to explain the meaning behind the numbers -- the shadings, the nuances. But a good deal of the fault also lies with public relations practitioners themselves and with their bosses, the policymakers. Too often they tend to want the fast answer, the bottom line, or whatever the easily digestible response to a complex situation is being called these days.

In my view, part of the solution to the problem I have identified rests with those of you in the audience, the public relations educators who help shape our field from a theoretical perspective. PR educators such as yourselves ought to force commercial researchers and pollsters such as me to do far more than just analyze our data -- that is, break numbers down into little bits and pieces of information. You ought to work with us to start synthesizing our findings, putting all of the pieces back together again in a systematic pattern so they make sense as a whole and do not have to stand or fall as isolated phenomena.

What I'm talking about is what the philosopher Immanuel Kant had in mind when he dreamed up the term "synthesis" in the first place -- the action of combining and unifying isolated data into a cognizable whole. That's what all of us in PR, whether we're on the research side, on the public relations practitioner side, or the public relations educator side, ought to be doing with the information at our disposal.

In plain English, what I'm saying is let's step back from the information that we receive. Let's examine the information and poll findings from as many vantage points and differing perspectives as possible. Combine many different information-gathering approaches to get a

full picture. For example, a close look at what appears in the daily press, on television and on the internet can be an effective complement to poll-taking. Probing case study research at the community level, or focus group sessions in which clusters of individuals can freely exchange ideas in an unstructured way, also can determine why people respond as they do. In certain situations, examining the journals and monographs of thought-leaders and scholars can supplement in-depth surveys of opinion-leaders.

The additional probing can help provide the meaning that is the real purpose of the entire effort. And, let's not forget about good old common sense and judgment. We all know that some data and information have more value than others. Public relations professionals and educators, working with pollsters, should begin to encourage the disuse of much of the survey findings we see. We need to treat polls more like evidence in a court of law -- disallowing incomplete or clearly skewed findings and encouraging the jury to use its own judgment in reviewing the admissible evidence.

In the agencies where I worked, whenever we talked about the studies that we carried out, we always referred to the fact that we were conducting "action-oriented research." By that we meant that we did studies in which the findings had immediate utility and application, and hopefully, meaning for our clients.

Information has an action-oriented element to it, if it gets at the essence of the problem, if it has meaning. Then it is obvious how it can be used. With good information available, with findings that put problems into clear perspective, public relations programs almost begin to write themselves because the solutions seem to jump out from the meanings that emerge.

So my message today is this: Public relations professionals and educators, working together, should start looking for meaning in the information that they collect, use and disseminate. Take a step backward before you plunge into your work. Don't just analyze your

data, synthesize it as well --- that is, pull it together and examine information as a whole. Try to get a handle on the big picture.

That's one of the functions of a public relations professional --- to seek out explanations and develop meanings for the information at hand. It's time for all of us to put meaning into public relations research.

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Dr. Lindenmann is an independent consultant, specializing in public relations research, measurement and evaluation services. He recently retired from Ketchum, the international public relations counseling firm, after creating its Research and Measurement Department and serving for 12 years as the company's Senior Vice President/Director of Research. Prior to that, he spent two years as manager of the New York City office of Opinion Research Corporation and 10 years as president of Group Attitudes Corporation, the research subsidiary of Hill and Knowlton, Inc.

During his career, he has supervised the conducting of more than 1,500 public relations, public affairs, marketing, and advertising research projects, most of them for large corporations, financial service organizations, trade associations, government agencies, utilities, education and health groups and charitable organizations. He also has had an extensive amount of experience in designing and carrying out research projects aimed at measuring and evaluating the effectiveness of public relations programs and activities. In 1999, he served as the first chairman of the Institute for Public Relations' newly created Commission on Public Relations Measurement and Evaluation.

A sociologist with a Ph.D. from Columbia University, Dr. Lindenmann has lectured extensively and has conducted seminars and/or workshops on public relations research, measurement and evaluation not only in the United States, but also in Austria, Canada, Denmark, France, Germany, Great Britain, Hong Kong, Italy, the Netherlands, Puerto Rico, Singapore, and Spain. He can be reached at his home address at 4 Wren Court, Lake Monticello, Palmyra, Virginia 22963-2126. His telephone and fax number is: 804-589-5822. His e-mail address is: lindenmann@cstone.net.

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