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Online Polling Provides Cost-Effective Local Content

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Online polling has come a long way from the interactive questions many stations have on their Web sites.

As polling companies continue to refine their methods of online sampling, and more people get connected, this method is sure to gain in popularity.

Online polling now in fourth year at KGO

KGO-TV, San Francisco, is a pioneer in online polling and regularly uses it to produce important and unique hard news.

"Online polling allows us to poll our market more frequently than we ever could if we were doing traditional telephone surveys," says News Director Kevin Keeshan. He believes this is the future.

"The rejection rate of telephone polling now is nearing 80 percent. You must ask yourself whether you are really getting a good cross-section of your market if you use telephone surveys," says Keeshan.

San Francisco is a good place for online surveys because there is such a high penetration of Internet users.

"It is more likely that a market like ours would have an easier time of getting a good cross-section of the community," he explains.

"It is very progressive and the way of the future.

"Other polling companies are seeing the same thing we are: people are more likely to participate in a poll if it's by e-mail than if it is on the telephone at dinnertime."

**Kevin Keeshan
News Director, KGO-TV**

5,000 participants recruited

They have a pool of 5,000 people who are rotated through the various polls.

"We are constantly promoting it, and people are continually joining and dropping out," says Keeshan.

A cross-section of people has been recruited using on air spots, news stories, the

station's Web site and spots on some of KGO-AM's programs. They reach people from a variety of sources, not just individuals who watch the news or visit the Web site.

"We found early on that people are very appreciative of the opportunity to participate in something like this. How many times have you seen a poll and wondered why you were never called for a poll or why your opinion was never asked on the topic?" he asks.

Pollster: This beats the telephone

Pollster Richard Hertz believes the data from online polling is more accurate than telephone surveys.

"The major technical advantage online is that you get a broader representation of people age-wise. Phone surveys are skewed more and more towards elderly respondents," he says.

Older people are often the only ones home or the only ones willing to take the time to do a telephone survey, he says.

"Every year during the past decade, the sample has gotten older and older, and pollsters have had to make more and more phone calls. It became clear to me that the phone was dying as a medium," he says.

"This is absolutely no different than the change the industry went through starting in the early 50s when they converted from in-person interviews to telephone interviews. It took a while for phone surveys to become accepted. Now we are doing the same kind of conversion to online," says Hertz.

Another problem is the number of people who don't have land lines and who rely on cell phones.

"It is a problem that is only getting worse. You are excluding a big block of the population because of that," he adds.

There are pollsters who are staying with their traditional techniques.

"There are people in the polling industry who are going to die with a phone cord wrapped around their neck. They believe you can't do polling online because it is self-selecting. But there is no question that most people would prefer to be polled online, and there is no reason to poll people in a method other than the one they prefer," he says.

Hertz believes that online polling becomes viable when online penetration in a community hits 60 to 70 percent.

"There are reasonable questions to ask, including when is there enough online penetration for it to be effective. It depends on the area you are in. The Bay Area has a high percentage of people online --- well over 80 percent," says Hertz.

"You must be conscious of the people who are under-represented. It used to be age. Older people were less likely to use the Internet. But that has disappeared, because older people are communicating with their kids and grandkids, buying their medicine and getting information online," he says.

One group that could be significantly under-represented is the lower income residents.

"The Internet still seems to be a place where people of very low incomes aren't likely

to be on as much as people who have a higher income," he says.

The polling company has gone to great lengths to make the sample representative of the market.

They use statistical weighting to adjust for any imbalances.

"We do less statistical weighting with our online samples than we do with our phone samples, because we don't have to deal with the incredible age-bias on the phone sample," he adds.

Registration is easy

People volunteer and pre-register to be part of the panel.

Eight to ten questions are used to gather background demographic information.

"We ask for fairly non-invasive information. We don't ask for income, for example. We don't want to create any barriers that are going to scare people away," says Hertz.

The users are also asked if they are willing to participate in news stories about the poll and whether they are willing to answer news content polls.

Coverage is fine-tuned with news content surveys

The news content polls ask people how the station is doing in terms of covering topics of interest to them.

An issues poll is produced twice a year.

Keeshan explains, "It's almost like a community ascertainment type of situation, where we can gauge what people are thinking about, what they think is important. It starts with a set list of issues we develop and poll them on, but we also have open-ended questions where they can give us story ideas and concerns they have. They can tell us what they'd like to see in a newscast and how a newscast can better serve their interests. It is a very valuable tool in that respect."

Hertz says the open-ended comments are very interesting in the regular polls.

"When you ask someone 'How long did it take to find another job? Six months? One year? Two years?' That kind of thing doesn't tell you nearly as much as the stories people send in. People say things like they had 200 interviews and nothing came of it," says Hertz.

When there is a poll, a link is e-mailed to some of the people who have signed up.

The pollsters avoid their messages being classified as spam by the Internet providers by being on the participants' approved lists.

Not everyone in the pool is asked to participate in every poll.

While it might take a week or more to get 300 completed interviews for a telephone survey, 90 percent of the responses to these online polls are returned within 24 hours.

In fact, Hertz says they have to be careful about the speed being too fast. They don't want to turn it into an instant poll, unless quick response is specifically what the news manager is looking for.

About 1,200 to 1,400 people participate in each poll.

"It is much more expensive to do a telephone survey, because you have to make so many more calls today because of the refusal rate," says Hertz.

It has become almost prohibitive for many news organizations to do a traditional survey, because they don't have that kind of money to spend.

The cost savings are so great that Hertz says where KGO-TV used to do four polls a year, mainly around election time, now the station is doing 20 to 25 polls.

Some polls are recurring tracking polls, such as the poll on the economy that is done every six months.

"We ask the same questions each time, and we keep going back to them to see what the trends are and to see where people's attitudes are changing," Keeshan explains.

"It has been especially valuable with the gasoline price situation. We found more people are making adjustments in their routines because of the price of gas," he says.

Not only does the poll give them a factual basis for a local news story, respondents have an option to give permission to be contacted for television interviews.

When people register they can opt in.

After each poll, a list of e-mail addresses is generated.

"We'll send e-mails to those people asking them to be part of the story, so the people we use in the poll stories were participants who actually responded to the poll," says Keeshan.

For more information:

You can reach Richard Hertz at 707-775-3333 or email info@hertzresearch.com.

KGO-TV ABC 7 Listens

Poll: People are wary of economy

Many people are coping financially but are very concerned with where things are going economically.

Only about one-third of those surveyed said that things were going well for them financially. A smaller number (26%) felt things would be better for them and their family a year from now.

Just one-fourth (26%) can easily afford to cover their needs and buy extra items.

Overall, which of the following best describes your current economic situation?

It is easy to make ends meet and pay for extra things you want to buy	23%
You can make ends meet but are holding back spending on nonessential items	56%
It is difficult just to make ends meet	20%
Not sure	01%

Many people fear inflation. The incredible cost of filling the gas tank, medical care, and housing top the list of current concerns.

Please indicate which of the following if any, are significant problems for you and your family.

Your wages/income not keeping up with the cost of living	60%
Cost of gas	56%
Cost you pay for health insurance	38%
Cost you pay for prescription drugs	22%
Cost of housing	40%

There were several questions about home ownership. Two-thirds of those who don't own feared that they will not be able to someday purchase a home in the Bay Area.

Field: July 15th - 19th, 2005.
 Sample: 1,227 Bay Area residents.

There was the same uneasiness when the station sampled opinions in January.

Well above one-third --- approaching half (42%) --- were concerned they were going to lose their job or take a major hit in earnings.

How concerned are you that you will lose your job or suffer a significant loss of income in the next year?

Very concerned	12%
Concerned	30%
Not very concerned	35%
Not at all concerned	23%

One third (35%) had sustained an economic loss in the past three years.

Have you been laid off from a job or suffered a significant loss of income during the past three years?

No	65%
Yes/Lost job	16%
Yes/Suffered significant loss of business income	19%

Sample: 1,295 Bay Area residents
 Field: January 4th - 9th, 2005

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