

Paid to ask

by George Brimmell

Polling for Government is big business



Ryan MacKeen

Can you imagine going through a day's news coverage without bumping into results of a public opinion poll on some contentious issue – health care, say, or gun control, domestic violence, the environment, taxes, free trade?

Polling, or Public Opinion Research (POR), is pervasive. It is all about investigating people's attitudes. It helps business develop manufacturing and market strategies and is a tool, or perhaps a weapon, for pressure groups, political parties and associations – all manner of organizations.

It helps government measure citizen satisfaction regarding services provided or promised. It's an aid to communications testing – on how to get information out effectively, and to ascertain what's on John Q. Public's agenda. It helps in designing new initiatives.

The federal government is a dedicated user of POR with a relatively modest investment of \$26 million in the last fiscal year as compared to expenditures of \$648 million on such work in Canada last year by almost 200 companies (reported by the Canadian Association of Marketing Research Organizations). Other levels of government also use polling but there are no statistics on how much they spend.

Federally, POR jobs are handled by Communication Canada and Contracts Canada, part of Public Works and Government Services Canada. Communication Canada gets the requests for work from various departments and agencies, sorts it out and advises the prospective clients. Contracts Canada takes it from there assigning the polling jobs to qualified pollsters. Standing offers are usually involved, but sometimes MERX, Canada's electronic tendering service, is also utilized.

A Communication Canada's orientation guide says POR is used to understand citizens' points of view and expectations. "The use of [POR] allows the Government of Canada to consult with and engage Canadians and other

audiences in the fields of communications, government policy and program development, as well as in the evaluation of services.” The research findings are shared throughout the government “to increase understanding of societal trends, issues and events affecting government communications.”

Communication Canada (www.communication.gc.ca) spokesman, Justin Kingsley, said that three years ago the department launched a quarterly survey called Listening to Canadians, “to find out what Canadians’ priorities are, what their needs are, what they want from government. That essentially helps guide our whole organization. And because it is a huge survey, the margin of error is insignificant.”

The department’s latest survey (5,422 adults across Canada) by Ipsos-Reid Group and GPC Research found health care remained Canadians’ top concern. The other leading top-of-mind concerns, in order, were the economy, jobs/unemployment, national security, education, poverty, debt, the environment, taxes, the Canadian dollar and immigration/refugees.

Is the main motivation behind Ottawa’s POR policy development, getting a sense of the government’s or departments’ impact, or measuring satisfaction with government services?

Jean-Pierre Lamarche, a top gun in Communication Canada’s Public Opinion Research Directorate, told *Summit* “the spectrum is very large. It depends on the department. There are some government-wide initiatives, such as service-improvement initiatives, where departments ask Canadians to assess the service they are providing – whether they are satisfied. As well, there is a lot of communications testing ... on how to communicate the information most effectively, and how to take into consideration Canadians’ concerns. It can be surveys as well as focus groups, so we have quantitative as well as qualitative work.” Last fiscal year’s \$26 million for POR went through his office.

Eighty, long-established companies shared this work – among them Environics, Compas, Earncliffe and EKOS – taking care of most of the government’s POR requirements.

Chris Baker, Environics vice-president, said the major users of POR are what he calls the “tier one group” – Human Resources

Development Canada, Health Canada, Industry Canada. “These departments are very proactive and sophisticated on [POR]. They develop a yearly plan and they usually have some good in-house capacity to analyze the findings, so they’re not as reliant on the suppliers.”

The next tier “basically use public opinion research for evaluation, in a reactive way, which is a Treasury Board requirement. It’s not necessarily to design the policies, or figure out where they want to be in three years’ time. It’s more, ‘Where are we now? Where were we last year and the year before?’”

An issue Environics annually explores for Ottawa is Canadian attitudes toward immigration policies. “We’ve been tracking this since 1977,” Baker said, for departments like Citizenship and Immigration. “We ask questions like, ‘Do you think too many immigrants are coming to Canada?’ Just until recently there was a belief that, yes, there *was* too many immigrants arriving. But since around 1994 the trend has been more accepting of immigrants.”

When asked if employment levels or the recession of the early 1990s would have a bearing on these attitudes he responded, “Absolutely – in fact this element was the only one with an impact on levels of immigration. It’s not fear of loss of cultural identity, or security.”

Baker, who terms himself “a political behaviourist” – figuring out why people do the things they do – outlined some of the nuts and bolts of POR.

He estimates his industry employs between 8,000 and 9,000 persons, including those working the call centres around the country. Environics operates six call centres – two each in Montreal, Toronto and Alberta, which are connected and virtually interchangeable. However, many firms simply contract opinion search outfits to do the calling and provide the raw data for number crunching and analysis by the experts.

First, a sense of the costs: a cross-country poll of 1,500 Canadians will run around \$80 to \$85 thousand. The tab for 10 focus groups will be \$60 to \$65 thousand.

Phone numbers are purchased from list brokers. “A certain number of calls are going to be randomly-dialed anyway ... but for a survey of 1,500 it’s not just the first 1,500 who

answer that get in the survey ... you want 1,500 responses, and you want them to be representative of the population as a whole,” explains Baker.

Accordingly, demographics play a part. Ontario, for example, accounts for about a third of Canada’s population, so a third of the responses should come from Ontario. “But we must also ensure that some of the calls will be made to [places like] Timmins and Thunder Bay, as well as Toronto, proportionately as to population. It’s quite a rigorous exercise as you divide up the country. You have to have 50 percent women, 50 percent men. You have to get people in different age ranges.”

During the telephoning, the surveyors will get no answer on many attempts and when they do connect it may be a business, or the wrong sex or someone just unwilling to answer the questions.

“And in the end,” said Baker, “only about one quarter of total calls will agree to participate.” Moreover, if the selection process is not faithfully followed, “your data is garbage. It’s the element of randomness that actually gives the survey its scientific validity.”

Sometimes the findings are quite surprising. Baker cited a situation in 1993, when the Liberal government first came to power. Unemployment was high, the recession was biting and the federal deficit was a colossal concern.

“There was a lot of interest in the four-day work week,” Baker recalled. “I was working for a firm commissioned to do a fairly in-depth survey on attitudes in the work place. We found that Canadians strongly objected to the four-day work week. Canadians are very hard-working people and we define ourselves, in many ways, through the work that we do.” Even when asked if their work time was cut by 20 percent but their salary wouldn’t change, “26 percent of Canadians opposed the policy ... it was amazing.” Analysis of the results of the 25-minute survey showed that people not only like the work they do, “but they believe nobody gets something for nothing. We concluded that ... if you tried to impose a work-sharing system, Canadians would be violently opposed.”

The end result was that there was no change said Baker. “So the grandiose notion to cut unemployment by 20 percent by cutting everybody else’s work by 20 percent had

a lot of superficial appeal, but it would have been a policy disaster.”

Baker said the techniques of POR “are really developing ... it’s not just that we have new technologies, but there are also very new analytical techniques ... social value research, milieu research – these are the real ‘propeller-head’ examples. But it’s also that in the world of public policy and the world of service delivery there are more powerful tools that can be brought to bear.”

“I think that government procurement tends to be risk-averse, which is good, because we are taxpayers, too, and we want to make sure that our money is spent right,” he said. “But I think we’re not taking advantage of some of these new techniques the way that we could be. I think it’s just a matter of time – when the corporate sector, General Motors, Coca-Cola, MuchMusic and so on, starts really showing off the power of these new techniques, you’re going to be finding the Canadian Tourism Commission saying, ‘Why aren’t we doing this?’ And then it’s just a matter of time before the Department of Finance sits down and says, ‘We could be getting a lot more out of our research, rather than just doing focus groups. Let’s try something new.’”

“So there are lots of new things occurring in public opinion research and I think that government either isn’t aware, or is waiting for it to evolve some more,” summed up Baker.

Another seasoned POR practitioner, Steve Kiar, senior partner at Compas, cited the growing use of the Internet in research world. “Online costs a lot less than phone. It’s cost-effective, and online surveys are increasing in volume. You can do serious research if you have the lists. You can design the question and send it to a target audience for which you have email addresses.”

Online research is usually related to accountability “and that’s kind of the quality-of-service, client-satisfaction world.”

Kiar said there has been an impulse in government, “certainly 15 to 20 years for the federal government, having to do with the care that government takes to be responsive to the needs of citizens and their service users. So they have service standards initiatives of different kinds.” A recent innovation is a common measurements tool where public service managers are being asked to have – or told

they must have – a 10 percent improvement plan. “So that means you have to measure what it is now to be able to compare your performance down the road, to see if you have achieved the objective.”

Most POR work is after the fact, having less input into public policy formation than many would expect Kiar said, citing his firm’s survey work on the workfare initiative

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launched in the early days of Ontario’s Harris government. “What we found was basically that Canadians weren’t as left-wing on this issue as some might have us believe. They don’t mind having a safety net; they value their safety net. But they want it to be more of a trampoline that kind of pushes people up to somewhere new, and they’re much less keen that some people kind of stay on it for life.”

Over at Earncliffe Research and Communications, head honcho Bruce Anderson said there are probably several ways in which POR can influence public policy, “but people sometimes over-estimate its role. It usually doesn’t have a direct role, or anything approaching the nefarious role that some people suggest. But there are a number of ways in which it does influence public policy at different stages in the policy development process.”

Anderson said political parties often like to use polling “not to adjust their philosophies, to the extent they have philosophies, but to understand how the public would like to see the priority list for government, the degree to which their own philosophies can be matched with public priorities ... to help them understand how to communicate more effectively about the things they want to do.”

As for government, Anderson said, “more often than not it’s after the policy has been selected. Our work is basically about how to manage some of the details about the public policy so that it won’t have unintended negative reactions.” As an example he used the Mulroney government announcement that it was about to remove the then Manufacturers’

Sales Tax (MST) and replace it with a Goods and Service Tax.

The then finance minister, Michael Wilson, described the MST as “a silent killer of jobs,” and he promised the new GST would be “deficit-neutral.”

The Finance Department asked Earncliffe to do research on the Wilson pledge. “Our work told us the public was not relieved that

a silent killer of jobs was going to be replaced by the noisy killer of jobs called the GST. Silent or noisy, they were not happy about it,” Anderson said. Moreover, Canadians were not reassured by the promise that the new tax would be “deficit-neutral.” People “were really worried about the deficit at that time and they were not happy at the idea that the government was going through all this policy change, disruptive as it would be, without generating a benefit for the Treasury. It was the first time, or possibly the only time, I may have seen where people said, ‘... you should be raising money with this tax ... because why do this if it’s only the choice of whether it’s a silent killer of jobs or a visible killer of jobs?’”

“We were able to go back to the department,” Anderson continued, “and advise them to stop talking about the silent killer of jobs. We urged them to talk about how the new tax was going to strengthen the economy and grow jobs over the long term. We said, ‘Let’s stop talking about revenue-neutrality, because this is just going to annoy people.’”

He said Wilson had already made the case that the tax would be transparent, “but our research told us that there would be at least 60 percent of the people on any given day who didn’t want it to be transparent ... it would annoy the hell out of them every time they saw it.” That advice was ignored ... and many are still annoyed when they see it.

Anderson entered the POR field two decades ago with Decima, in Toronto, when the gathering and crunching of data was convo-

luted and slow. Then, a \$70,000 survey, from the proposal process at the front end, to the ultimate report to the client at completion, would take up to three months. But with today's high-speed technology, the job can be done in a few days.

"And," says Anderson, "if the client wants some results more quickly we'll tell him, 'we can pull the first 200 cases that we've collected and tell you what these numbers are. We can do this every night.' So that part of the business has changed."

Frank Graves, founder of EKOS (Greek word for home) has been a major player in POR for many years and has become "the largest supplier to the federal government," averaging 50 contracts a year. He has observed some interesting correlations between research and resulting government decisions.

He said there was "a fairly fierce debate" going on in the inner circles of power leading up to the budget of four years ago. At issue was how to invest the then substantial surplus. Extensive polling showed massive support for tax relief or accelerated pay-down of the national debt. Less potent was a push to help poor families, especially those with children, and this prevailed.

"There was a very significant re-directing of public funds – \$2 to \$3 billion – to try to remove some of the disadvantages to working poor parents."

Graves recalled a subsequent furious debate over utilizing surplus funds. One of the contending arguments favored a massive new investment in research funding. Other possibilities looked more likely, until Graves' polling results brought the news that taxpayers "were quite definitely in favor of more medical research." The outcome: a massive injection for the Canadian Institutes for Health Research.

Graves credits polling research as being "a significant, but not the determining factor," in public policy decision-making. But he's certain that "sound polling" will always carry great weight.

So there is little doubt that government will continue to pay to have questions asked and answered. ~~~

For 34 years, veteran journalist George Brimmell reported from Vancouver, Winnipeg, and Toronto, London UK, Washington, DC and Ottawa. He spent the next 13 years in the federal public service as a writer and editor.