



UNIVERSITY OF PHOENIX

FUTURE

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The Echo Boomers

The Millennium Generation Comes of Age

The Truth about Computer Viruses

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Poll Position

What's Behind America's Obsession with Opinion Surveys

PRINCIPLES OF INVESTING
FROM THE MUTUAL FUND KING

Peter
Lynch

know how we felt about things? Did we know how anyone else felt? Did we care?

The business of public opinion research has become just that: big business. Annually, thousands of public relations firms and advertising agencies worldwide seize on public opinion research to help direct their campaigns, or to get their clients in the news. Their target: the media—that merciless machine with the power to determine who's hot and who's not.

Yankelovich Partners, a pioneer in social research since the 1950s, conducts some 50 to 100 polls each year, including close to 20 polls for *Time* magazine, to track the shifting values of consumers. Roper Starch Worldwide, another public opinion research firm, since 1973 has tracked Americans' values, attitudes and behaviors. "We get a lot of door slamming, but our numbers are reliable," says Paul Leinberger, a senior vice president with Roper Starch. "Americans don't lie in person. If you're sitting in their house, they know you can check on them."

Annually, the firm's field staff of 500 conducts some 16,000 interviews across America for more than an hour each, in the privacy of peoples' homes, on subjects as interesting and private as when was the last time you had sex or how do

you feel about your ex-wife?

That's a good one. The sex one. Yankelovich also knows lots about sex. Men told Yankelovich in a restaurant poll that they would rather have good sex than good food, while women chose the food. When asked if they'd rather find a great bargain on clothes or have good sex, women chose the bargain and close to 80 percent of men still said they'd rather have good sex.

Which brings us to headaches. Out of the 36 headache types that Excedrin lays

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claim to helping relieve (including the "not tonight dear" version), a Yankelovich poll found that women have 35 of them most often. The only headache that men have more often than women is the hangover headache.

"Like I always tell people, sex sells. The purpose of a lot of polls is to get media attention," says Hal Quinley, a partner with Yankelovich Partners. A former academician with Stanford and

Brown universities, Quinley has been the guru of the *Time* magazine polls for 13 years and relishes the more obscure topics. "For the most part, we get the truth when we poll people, except for when we ask people if they cheat on their spouse. You know they're going to lie. People often exaggerate their behavior when we ask them about their voting habits or about giving to charity."

In Quinley's opinion, opinion polls are good things, often informative and fun. Marketing strategies and product development adopted by corporate America often hinge on the opinions and behaviors of the masses. Roper Starch's Leinberger thinks our national obsession with self-polling may show signs of our collective insecurity.

"A lot of us don't say what we really think, but what we think we're supposed to say.

It's an American obsession to measure everything, partly because we want to be like everybody else," he says. "That's why fashions and trends are so predictable. In this country, we discount the past quickly. Everything is focused on the future. Today is really the past."

So, what did you do in the past 24 hours? If you're anything like the folks who get nailed by pollsters, there may be a difference between how you see your-



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1. Do poll results affect your behavior?
A. Usually B. Sometimes C. Never
2. Do you think poll results affect other peoples' behavior?
A. Usually B. Sometimes C. Never
3. Have you ever lied about your behavior or an opinion in a survey or poll?
Yes _____ No _____
4. What was the most ridiculous question you've ever been asked in a poll?

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This Year's "To Do" List

During this year I expect to:

Have more fun	53%	Quit smoking	13%
Lose weight	46%	Buy a cellular phone	8%
Look for ways to organize myself	42%	Have a child	6%
Take a special vacation	40%	Get married	6%
Send more letters/greeting cards	27%	Retire	3%
Look for a new job	23%	Stop drinking	2%
Read the newspaper more	21%	Get divorced	1%
Move	18%		

SOURCE: Yankelovich MONITOR, 1996

self and how you actually behave. In a 1996 poll by Roper Starch, while most respondents admitted to having taken a shower, the majority also stayed up past midnight, skipped breakfast and ate at a fast food restaurant. Only 26 percent exercised, 5 percent went jogging, 14 percent checked their horoscope and, thankfully, only 6 percent had a nightmare.

Do you believe that life has ever existed on Mars? A majority of Republicans and Democrats polled by Yankelovich this year said "no," while Independent voters said "yes." Meanwhile, most of us believe in the power of personal prayer, that God sometimes intervenes to cure people who have a serious illness and that faith healers are just smoke and mirrors.

Oddly enough, baby boomers want to be healed by crystals but would rather deal with a machine than a person, when given a choice. One of America's greatest taboos is money. Fifty percent of Americans don't know how much money their spouse makes. And no matter how much money we have, we don't seem to know what to do with it.

In our search for meaning, Americans have a love affair with community, but what we really want is community without obligation or responsibility—or at least that's how we're being marketed to.

In Leinberger's opinion, the quintessential community du jour can be found in a Starbucks coffee house. "Starbucks is such a success because it meets all of Americans' definitions for community: a controlled environment without commitment, no reciprocal arrangement and all the desired transactional demands," he says. Further, we seek materialistic simplification: back-to-the-basics, but in order to simplify our lives, we need to buy more stuff.

Is this chaos? Not according to Watts Wacker. "We're moving into the age of

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enlightened anxiety, where we're going to manage our choices, as opposed to feeling overwhelmed by them," says Wacker, a resident futurist at SRI Consulting, a global think tank based in Silicon Valley. His book, *The 500-Year Delta: What Comes After What Comes Next*, is due out this spring. Wacker feels that polling is society's attempt at making sense of it all. "Polling gives you a yardstick to measure yourself against when living in an era of cultural schizophrenia.

I'd like to see more 'people-like-me' polls," he adds, although there is probably no one like him. Watts liberally sprinkles conversation with words and amalgams of words that may not yet have found their way into the modern lexicon. He's lived a unique life in the pursuit of learning what makes people tick and what turns the crank of popular culture.

Wacker doesn't agree that polls are a result of man's desire for homogeneity. He prefers the concept of *homophily*: the tendency of things when touched to become like that which they touch (which may explain why people look like their pets). "Polls are used to allow you to understand the collective homophily of the society you live in," he says.

What would Elvis think of all of this? We may never know because, contrary to popular rumors, only 19 percent of Americans believe Elvis is still alive. (Wacker, however, claims to have recently eaten breakfast with the King.)

In the final analysis, man's search for meaning may have been replaced by his search for an original opinion. It's quite possible that we are nothing more than a nation of exaggerating, sloth-like, fast-food-eating, spouse-cheating, money-grubbing, sex-loving voyeurs who just want to have fun. Only the pollsters know for sure.—Annie Osburn ♦