

# Understanding Public Attitudes: A Primer on Polling the General Public



Healthcare Georgia Foundation  
grantmaking for health



**Why does understanding public opinion matter to your organization?** Imagine you are on the school board of a rural school district. For the last 15 years, your district has operated a teen health center at the public high school, and you are unsure as to where your community stands as a supporter for the center's services. Given strong evaluation results, you are considering expanding the program, but doing so would require significant community backing and financial support. While the data show these services have led to improved health for teens, you have heard that some community members don't support teen health centers.

In this example, a public opinion poll could help you understand the public's perception as to the importance of these services versus other potential solutions, as well as the role of the school district itself in providing these services and perhaps how these services are financed. Healthcare Georgia Foundation has commissioned The Schapiro Group to provide a simple, straightforward overview of conducting public opinion polls. This publication provides a synopsis of the what, where, when, why, and how to conduct or commission public opinion polls for health nonprofit organizations in Georgia.

#### **ADDITIONAL RESOURCE:**

If you would like to learn more about scientific surveys, The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research at the University of Connecticut has provided a very useful education section on its website: <http://www.ropercenter.uconn.edu/education.html>.

#### **RECOMMENDED CITATION**

[Understanding Public Attitudes – A Primer on Polling the General Public](#), Beth S. Schapiro, PhD and Rusty Parker, PhD, The Schapiro Group, Inc., Healthcare Georgia Foundation, Publication #70, January 2013.

#### **ABOUT THE SCHAPIRO GROUP, INC.**

[The Schapiro Group, Inc.](#) is a public opinion and strategic research firm that serves private sector, public sector, membership organization, and nonprofit clients throughout the United States.

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

---

Introduction	4
Why is public opinion important to you?	5
Communications/Marketing	
Advocacy	
How are surveys conducted?	7
Telephone Surveys	
Mail Surveys	
Internet Surveys	
How are data analyzed?	9
What does a survey cost?	10
How do you find the right research partner?	11
How do you get the most out of this experience?	12
Is there anything you should avoid when conducting a poll?	13
Case Studies	14
Healthcare Georgia Foundation	14
Georgia Early Education Alliance for Ready Students (GEEARS)	15

## INTRODUCTION

---

How does the general public feel about our issue? Do they care about it as much as we do? Where does it fit among their other priorities? What can we do to get the public to care more about it? The answers to these questions can be critical to the success of any organization or the fate of any issue. Learning more about the general public and its thoughts on your issue or organization not only facilitates communication with others, but it can also influence your entire organizational strategy and what you achieve. Public opinion surveys are a valuable resource in answering these important questions.

The purpose of this publication is to help nonprofit health organizations understand what polling is and what strategic value surveys can offer them. It covers the benefits of public opinion research, strengths and weaknesses of several methodologies, data analysis, costs, and offers guidance on how to work with a research partner.

4

Surveys are a scientific tool used to measure the opinions, knowledge, or behaviors of an audience. Essentially, they are a series of carefully-crafted questions that are asked to a random sample of people. When we talk about surveys or polls in this publication, we are not talking about a link to a web survey that an organization might put up on their website for people to click on and fill out. Something like that would only receive responses from the people visiting the website, most likely supporters of the organization, and would miss out on the opinions of people who, for whatever reason, do not visit the organization's website.

The keys to executing a scientific survey that will give you useful, reliable, and actionable results are 1) developing quality questions and 2) using the best possible sampling strategy. You must spend a good bit of time thinking about the questions that are most likely to get you the information that you need for strategic decision-making, not the questions that are most likely to return responses that seem most favorable to your organization.

You must also think carefully about who you want to survey. A scientific survey takes a random sample of individuals from a given population to give you results that you can then generalize to the larger population. The best polls give everyone in that audience about an equal chance of being selected to participate. So, in this publication, we will be talking specifically about scientific polls of the general public, not of donors, supporters, clients, or other groups known to your organization. However, there are times when you may want to strategically select your audience, whether you want to hear from only voters, people in a certain geographic area, or people who share key demographics.

There are many benefits to conducting a scientific survey of the general public:

- Gauging the opinions of those outside your organization to see how people really feel about the work you are doing or the messages you are conveying.
- Reaching a representative sampling of people, so that the opinions collected are not overly influenced by a “vocal minority.”
- Quantifying people’s opinions to help your organization’s strategic decision-making and making it easy to track changes over time.
- Providing a baseline against which to track change.
- Complementing other data sources used to measure progress.
- Providing support for, or ammunition against, a specific piece of legislation.

## Why is public opinion important to you?

At some point, most organizations need to intersect with the general public. The most common reasons are to:

- Increase membership
- Generate attendance at a special event
- Raise funds
- Solicit contributions of specific goods or services
- Generate awareness of the issue(s) being addressed by the organization
- Generate awareness of possible approaches for addressing the issue(s)
- Generate awareness of the organization
- Motivate the public to become involved in the issues
- Build public support for changing laws or public policies
- Align programs, services, and policies with public preferences

These strategic objectives fall into two broad categories: Communications/Marketing and Advocacy. Polling the general public can provide actionable information for achieving strategic objectives in either category. The most important thing to remember is that you are conducting a poll with a strategic purpose in mind; **simply collecting information from the general public can be an interesting exercise, but a survey’s true value lies in how it helps you achieve specific strategic objectives.**

## COMMUNICATIONS/MARKETING

Successful nonprofits dedicate resources to ongoing communications and marketing. They realize that telling their story in the most effective way possible can pay off in general public support of the organization and/or the issue it is addressing. Public opinion polling can help guide these efforts by providing information on:

- Is the public aware of this issue?
- What are the public's perceptions about the issue and the need to address it?
- What importance do they assign to it?
- Is the public aware of your organization?
- If so, are you perceived favorably or unfavorably?
- Does the public think you are doing a good job?
- Do or would they support your efforts on a certain issue?
- Where do people go to learn about you or your issue?
- How do they *want* to get information about you or your issue?

6

## ADVOCACY

Successful advocacy is important to many organizations, as they need to rally public support for their issue. Public opinion polling can help provide the strategic roadmap for engaging the public in these advocacy efforts. In addition to everything listed above, polling can tell you:

- What is the level of support for specific approaches to address the issue?
- What actions do people think will effectively address this issue?
- What actions are perceived to be ineffective?
- What messages move people to act?
- How convincing does the public find each message to be?
- What are the most effective messages and among which subgroups?
- Focuses and favorability ratings of potential endorsers
- Has the public heard of individuals who are potential endorsers of your effort?
- Who would be the most effective endorsers? The least effective?

Public opinion polling can help provide the strategic roadmap for engaging the public in advocacy.

## How are surveys conducted?

One of the special strengths of public opinion polling is how flexible it can be. Depending on the audience you wish to survey, your budget, and your timeline, there are often different methodologies that can accomplish your goals, but each has its own strengths and weaknesses.

### TELEPHONE SURVEYS

Telephone surveys are very common today, and they are typically what news media use to report public opinion results.

#### Strengths

- The main strength of telephone surveys is that they are able to reach such a wide audience—anyone who has a telephone, including a cell phone. Researchers can contact a random sample of survey participants, ensuring that the results of their study can be applied to the larger population.
- Also, many telephone surveys use live, human interviewers to conduct the survey, allowing for a touch of human interaction during the survey and even some explanation on especially complicated surveys.

#### Weaknesses

- The downside of using a telephone survey is that some recent technology has made telephone survey work more difficult. The advent of caller identification services has made some people less likely to answer their phone when a research firm calls.
- Also, more and more households are moving away from landline telephones and relying solely on cell phones, which means that researchers must make some adjustments to their methods. It is illegal to dial a cell phone number using the automatic dialer that researchers use to call landline numbers, so researchers must dial each of them manually, making that calling more time consuming and expensive. (This also speaks to the benefit of using a research firm with live callers, as “robocalls” cannot call cell phones.)

### MAIL SURVEYS

Mail surveys are another common type of survey, often used in government work among other things (including the decennial census).

#### Strengths

- Mail surveys are also able to reach a very wide audience that makes results generalizable, and, when done right, can achieve high response rates.
- They, unlike telephone surveys, are a visual medium, which allows the research team to include graphics for respondents to rate.

### Weaknesses

- Mail surveys can take a long time to conduct—from designing a survey questionnaire, to coordinating the mailing, to arriving at a person’s home, to the respondent completing the survey and dropping it back in the mail, to the research team finally receiving the completed survey, and then analyzing the data.
- As mentioned above, mail surveys can achieve quite high response rates, but it can be expensive to do so. An effective mail survey might involve several mailings and incentives for participant completion (e.g., dollar bills, gift certificates, etc.).

## INTERNET SURVEYS

Internet surveys are becoming more popular as their technology develops greater capabilities and more people become comfortable with the internet. They are particularly common for website feedback studies and customer satisfaction surveys.

### Strengths

- Internet surveys can be fielded very quickly, because they can be sent out to a very large number of people at once, and respondents can take them immediately after receiving an invitation.
- Because they take less professional time, staffing, and materials from a research firm, internet surveys are often significantly less expensive to conduct.

### Weaknesses

- Whereas the main strength of a telephone survey is the ability to collect information from a random sample of respondents, an internet survey’s main weakness is its inability to be administered to a random sample. Nearly everyone has about an equal chance of being contacted for a telephone survey, because researchers randomly generate the phone numbers they call for the survey. It is virtually impossible—or at least very inefficient—to generate random email addresses to which researchers can send invitations to participate in an internet survey.
- Instead, researchers will use internet “panels” of individuals who have agreed to take internet surveys in exchange for some incentive. Using a panel does not give everyone an equal chance of being surveyed (by most panel curators), especially older and lower income individuals who may not have internet access.

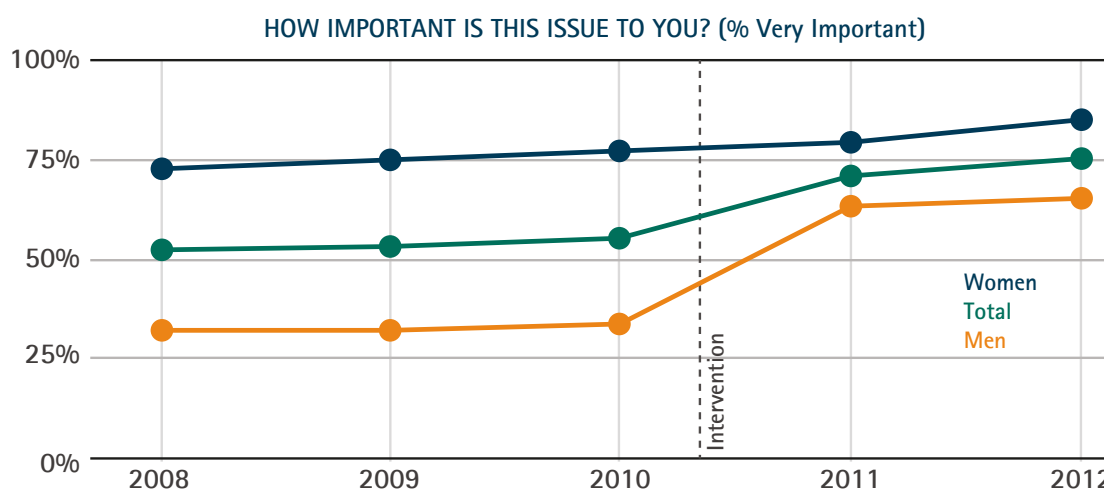
## How are data analyzed?

The most common way for survey data to be analyzed is simply to display the basic results of each question asked. These are the numbers that tell you how many people have heard of your organization, or how many people are familiar with your issue. Digging a little deeper, survey results can show not just those topline results, but also the results for particular subgroups. You might be interested in differences between men and women, urban and rural residents, or people in different income brackets, and subgroup analysis can accomplish that. An example of how those data might be presented is below:

HOW IMPORTANT IS THIS ISSUE TO YOU?		VERY IMPORTANT	SOMEWHAT IMPORTANT	NOT IMPORTANT AT ALL
TOTAL		75%	15%	10%
Gender	Male	65%	20%	15%
	Female	85%	10%	5%
Community Type	Urban	88%	8%	4%
	Suburban	76%	13%	11%
	Rural	64%	24%	12%

The data in the table look pretty positive for your organization, but they represent only a single snapshot in time of what people think. Another useful way to analyze poll results is to see how opinions change over time. Organizations routinely field the same survey several times to see if their numbers go up, down, or stay the same. These tracking surveys can be conducted at any interval, ranging from monthly or quarterly all the way up to several years later. The greater the time between any two surveys, though, the more difficult it is to tie any changes in results to a specific intervention your organization might have implemented. You should work with your research partner to determine the appropriate interval for any tracking study.

Suppose your polling over the years revealed that men were much less likely to consider your issue to be very important to them, so you decide to launch an education campaign aimed directly at men. Below is an example of what several years worth of tracking data might look like, before and after your new campaign:



10

There are also more complicated ways to analyze survey data, such as experiments and regression analysis. Most people think of experiments as being performed in sterile labs by doctors in white coats, but they can also be embedded directly into a public opinion survey. Researchers can randomly assign respondents to different conditions, and then compare the responses to each condition to see how favorably people react to different messaging options or key words. Regression analysis is a statistical procedure that allows researchers to parse out the effects of several different variables on an issue. It is a valuable tool, but not necessary for most surveys.

## What does a survey cost?

The cost of any survey is determined by several factors:

- **Complexity.** The complexity of the issue or the survey instrument will demand more professional time from the research firm, which will in turn affect the cost of the survey. For example, the survey instrument may have open ended questions, making results more difficult to analyze.
- **Length.** The more questions on the survey, the longer it will take to administer, which will increase the cost.
- **Audience.** The narrower the audience, the more difficult they are to reach, which will also increase the cost. The research team might have to send out more mailings or place more phone calls in order to track down enough people who match the criteria for completing the survey, not to mention actually getting those folks to complete it.
- **Number of completes.** Obviously getting a higher number of completes will cost more. The number of completed surveys you want will depend on the size of the population you are researching, the amount of subgroup analysis you are interested in, and the acceptable chance for error within the data.

## How do you find the right research partner?

You have done your homework and have determined internally why you are even commissioning public opinion research. You know the strategic uses for the survey results. You have also identified the funds to pay for a poll and set your deadlines for receiving the research findings, and now you are ready to begin the process. What do you do now?

There are many research firms around, staffed with professionals with expertise in questionnaire development, survey methodology, and data analysis. As is true for most professional services, the most effective way to identify potential research partners is to ask around. Good sources of referrals include peer organizations, your funding partners, and “gatekeeper” organizations like Healthcare Georgia Foundation. A web search can also be helpful.

Another useful resource is the American Association of Public Opinion Research (AAPOR). This professional organization has developed a clear set of standards and ethics, and provides a Blue Book of potential research partners comprised of some of its members. The Blue Book can be found at <http://www.aapor.org/source/bluebooksearch/>.

Once you have identified one or more research firms you would consider using as your research partner, the next step is to develop a Request for Proposals (RFP) to send them. This is as important for you as it is for the potential research partner, because it forces you to think through what you are trying to accomplish and identify the key criteria in your selection of a vendor. A good RFP contains:

- Background information on your organization, what has led you to seek a poll, and how you intend to use the findings
- Description of the audience you want to survey (the more specific you can be, the more accurately the vendor can price the survey)
  - All adults over age 18 or just registered voters
  - Geographic area in which the target audience lives
  - Specific demographic group(s) such as parents of young children or people in a certain age range
- Desired deliverables (e.g., full written report with analysis, PowerPoint slides, in-person presentation of findings)
- Deadline for completing the project
- Items for the research firm to include in the proposal. Standard items include:
  - Qualifications of firm and key team members
  - References (usually 3) for work on similar projects
  - Description of methodology
  - Project deliverables
  - Project timeline
  - Project budget

- Your criteria for evaluating the proposals. The clearer you are up front, the easier it will be to evaluate and then compare and contrast different vendors. Organizations often assign different weights to the various components of the proposal. An example:
  - Methodological approach – 50%
  - Vendor qualifications – 30%
  - Cost – 20%

Once you have developed the RFP, distribute it to the research firms identified in your search. It is generally good practice to solicit at least three proposals, as there are often differences in qualifications, pricing, and methodological approach. If a clear choice doesn't emerge from the proposals, then schedule interviews with the top contenders.

As you evaluate potential research partners, factors to consider include:

- General qualifications and experience of the firm and team leaders
- Experience in polling the general public, particularly on your issue
- Polling experience in your general geographic area
- Versatility in tailoring the project to your research needs and budget
- Credibility and reputation of the firm
- Value you are receiving, not just the cost of the project

12

## How do you get the most out of this experience?

Since most organizations don't commission polls on a regular basis, working with a research firm is usually a new experience. Several steps can help you get the most out of this effort and ensure that you accomplish your strategic objectives.

- Anticipate your data needs prior to finalizing the methodology and survey instrument. Put a lot of thought into the kinds of information you want to collect, as well as what subgroups might be important to you. Be sure to include all the relevant people in your organization in this process. This will help prevent, or at least minimize, the "Gee, I wish we had asked..." questions that sometimes arise after the survey has been completed.
- Have clear expectations from the outset about methodology, budget, timeline, and deliverables. Always have a written contract, and be wary of a research partner that will not sign such a document.
- Have clear channels of communication. Since there is almost always more than one person at the organization involved in the project, identify an internal project manager to coordinate communication with the research partner. Your research partner also should designate a project manager to coordinate with you. If desired, develop a "check in" schedule for regular progress reports.

The single most important thing you can do is to have clear research objectives. Know why you are conducting the poll and how you will apply the findings.

- Approach the development of the questionnaire as a partnership. What you bring is expertise on your issue and knowledge of the kinds of information you are seeking to learn from the public. You chose your research partner for their methodological expertise, among other reasons. Leave it to them to construct the questions and determine the proper order of the questions. You will have the opportunity to review drafts, and ultimately you will approve the final instrument before the fielding can begin.

## Is there anything you should avoid when conducting a poll?

Conducting a poll and working with a research partner are generally enjoyable experiences, but there are a few pitfalls to avoid to ensure that the process accomplishes your objectives.

- While price is important, it should not be the primary driver in choosing your research partner or the appropriate methodology. If you can't afford to do it right, then save your funds. Solid strategies require solid data.
- Beware of potential research firms that want to impose boilerplate methodologies or questions. You are making a significant investment in order to conduct a poll, and should work with someone who will customize the project to your needs.
- As noted above, it is important to involve your organization's relevant players in the process. Avoid adding too many cooks to the kitchen, however, as you'll need a streamlined internal process for providing input on and approving the questionnaire.
- For advocacy polling in particular, avoid the temptation to ask leading questions, or questions that may somehow skew the results in your favor. The last thing you want is for reporters or elected officials to challenge—or even dismiss—your findings because the questions are not impartial. Most reputable research firms will guide you toward fair and objective question wording, and you will be well-served to follow that advice.

### Healthcare Georgia Foundation

#### Background

The mission of Healthcare Georgia Foundation is to advance the health of all Georgians and to expand access to affordable, quality healthcare for underserved individuals and communities. Key strategies for accomplishing that mission include understanding public opinion on a range of health issues and providing information to stakeholders, opinion leaders, and the general public. When the state of Georgia was undergoing major challenges in providing mental health services, the Foundation commissioned The Schapiro Group to analyze the state's efforts. A key component of that analysis was a telephone survey of Georgia voters.

#### Strategic Goals of the Survey

- Assess voters' overall awareness and knowledge of mental illness
- Measure perceptions of access to and affordability of mental health services
- Measure perceptions of the state's role in providing mental health services

14

#### How the Foundation Used the Information

- To guide its strategic planning and determine the Foundation's resource allocation
- To educate stakeholders, opinion leaders, and the general public
- To provide information through an issue of HealthVoices ([http://www.healthcaregeorgia.org/uploads/publications/healthvoices\\_issue\\_3\\_2010.pdf](http://www.healthcaregeorgia.org/uploads/publications/healthvoices_issue_3_2010.pdf))
- To guide Editorial Board decisions
- To brief legislators

# Georgia Early Education Alliance for Ready Students (GEEARS)

## Background

GEEARS was established in 2010 to inspire and provide leadership for a statewide movement on quality early learning and healthy development for children up to age five. The organization helps business, civic, and government leaders maximize the economic return on the state's investments in early care and learning. As part of its launch, GEEARS commissioned The Schapiro Group and Ayres, McHenry & Associates (now North Star Opinion Research) to conduct a telephone survey of Georgia voters.

## Strategic Goals of the Survey

- Measure awareness and perceptions of early learning and healthy development
- Test messages to move people to act on this issue
- Identify what, if any, voter subgroups were the most likely supporters of the organization's goals
- Provide a benchmark against which to measure progress

15

## How GEEARS Used the information

- To refine messaging and targets
- To guide media strategies
- To guide lobbying strategies
- To educate and mobilize allies

Healthcare Georgia Foundation  
grantmaking for health



50 Hurt Plaza, Suite 1100  
Atlanta, GA 30303  
p. 404.653.0990  
f. 404.577.8386  
[healthcaregeorgia.org](http://healthcaregeorgia.org)



Georgia  
Evaluation Resource Center  
*Because results matter.*