

A Conversation with DRI Pollster Gary Langer

Gary Langer is president of Langer Research Associates, a New York-based firm providing survey research design, management, and analysis services for media, business, association, foundation, and government clients. Among other projects, Mr. Langer led a recent two-day seminar on best practices in applied research techniques for the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs.



Gary Langer

Mr. Langer is a former longtime director of polling at ABC News, a two-time Emmy Award winner, and an active member of the American Association for Public Opinion Research, including past president of its New York chapter. He and his group produced successive, well-received national polls for DRI in 2012 and 2013, delving into a range of public attitudes on the civil justice system.

On June 17, 2014, DRI Director of Communications Tim Kolly sat down with Gary Langer to discuss the art of polling and both the 2013 and 2014 DRI National Poll on the Civil Justice System.

Tim: I don't know of too many kids who say, "You know, I think that I'm going to be a pollster when I grow up." What brought you to polling, and did you pass through other professions along the way?

Gary: Stumbled in and fell in love with it. I spent the first 10 years of my professional life as a newsman for the Associated Press—train wrecks, plane crashes, national politics, cats stuck in trees, you name it. I was pretty detail-oriented, and the only guy in sight who wasn't terrified of numbers, so when the AP needed someone to run a little public opinion poll they had going, I got the call. The reporting I'd been doing sometimes felt like it was a mile wide and an inch deep. I found polling to be absolutely fascinating—a mile wide and

a mile deep—with rich opportunities for professional development and a lifetime of learning and discovery built in. From AP I eventually jumped to ABC News where I covered the beat of public opinion for the next 20 years, most of them as ABC's director of polling. Fulfilled the dream by starting my own shop in 2010.

Tim: In 2012, you became the DRI pollster for the DRI National Poll on the Civil Justice System, the only annual, national poll dedicated to the civil justice system. At the time, I remember that it was tricky because we wanted to release the polling results in the fall and timing-wise we had to dodge the national political conventions both to conduct the poll and to release the results. Given all the polling going on at those times, is there such a thing as "poll fatigue" both for audiences and the poll takers?

Gary: If all you get are numbers, a sameness creeps in. It gets to be like eating popcorn, and even that can get old. But when polls produce insight—the story behind the numbers, with the context, the questions, and the analysis that lift mere information into intelligence—there's endless interest, and for good reason. Solid research, honestly done, helps make sense of our world in a unique and irreplaceable way. That's compelling, even in late October of even-numbered years.

Tim: We chose you because of your impeccable credentials for integrity and exemplary methodology. You helped to write the standards for the industry, and both of our polls have been accepted by the Roper Center at the University of Connecticut. But it must be a big challenge dealing with notoriously bad in-house political polls and corrupt polls done solely to promote a product or point of view. How does the lay person judge the quality of a poll? In lay language, what should they look for?

Gary: First, thank you. Second, it starts with disclosure—a clear and full description of the methodology, the complete questionnaire, and the results. Those, simply, are some of the key places where polls go bad—poor sampling, biased questions,

and misleading or cherry-picked analysis. Given disclosure, we look for the basic components of quality research—a random or probability-based sample of the full population of interest. Balanced, neutral questions—there's a rich literature in optimal questionnaire design. And sober, true-to-the-data reporting, ideally produced with advanced analytical techniques, but always within the confines of statistical significance.

Tim: How about some insight regarding what happened in the political race of House Majority Leader Eric Cantor. His polls had him up by more than 30 percentage points two weeks out from the election, and he lost by more than 10 points. Bad polling? Bad sampling? A dramatic reversal in public opinion?

Gary: Don't know the details, but we've seen this movie before. The usual culprits are problematic sampling, problematic modeling, or both.

Tim: Give us an example of the same polling question asked two different ways, one methodologically sound and one flawed.

Gary: Here's the first: What kind of a job do you think Gary Langer is doing in this interview, excellent, good, not so good or poor? Here's the second: Do you agree or disagree with the following statement: Gary Langer is doing an excellent job in this interview. The first is neutrally phrased, clear and simple, with balanced options. The second is one-sided, lacking the alternative proposition. Fifty years of research has unequivocally established agree/disagree questions as chock full of bias. Yet they march on, the walking dead of survey research. You see them all the time—proof positive that too many pollsters have spent little time coming to grips with best practices in the field.

Tim: Name a particularly flawed methodology that we'd recognize.

Gary: Non-probability, opt-in online samples are the big kahuna these days. These are samples of people who sign up to click through questionnaires on the Internet in exchange for points redeemable for cash and gifts. It's a multibillion dollar business, largely because marketing researchers can

use it to get lots of data quickly and cheaply. But as far as validity and reliability—two key terms of art in survey research—it's been shown to be a highly compromised method of data collection. The American Association for Public Opinion Research has said flatly that this approach should not be used to estimate population values, that is, to make percentage estimates of how people in any

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broader population think about an issue or respond to a question. Research has shown that the results can be off the mark, they can be highly variable across studies and over time, and we can't be confident in the relationships among variables. These all are things we really want and need from good-quality survey research.

Tim: What factors are important to obtain valid and reliable data?

Gary: Probability-based sampling, which generally, in this country, means a telephone survey. You want adequate proportions of cell as well as landline phones; well-managed calling by trained interviewers; appropriate sampling, respondent selection, and weighting techniques; and good questions and unbiased analysis that's tested for statistical significance and ideally that employs advanced modeling. The bottom line is that with strong methods and robust analysis, there's an awful lot to learn.

Tim: Regarding the DRI polls, as a citizen, what do you find compelling about them? As a pollster?

Gary: As a citizen and pollster alike, I'm pretty regularly awed by the common sense and consistency I see expressed by average Americans. I think it's fair to say that most people don't walk around in deep contemplation of the civil jurisprudence system. Yet they have basic attitudes about it—generally drawn from their underlying political and social predispositions—that tell some really interesting stories. At a time of

broad distrust of government, most Americans think the civil justice system usually produces results that are just and fair, and we find overwhelming acceptance of jury duty as a civic obligation. The public does see flaws in the system, and many concede their own potential biases, often against corporate defendants—but we've also found skepticism about class actions, including broad opposition to opt-out enrollment. There's plenty there and elsewhere to think through.

Tim: How are the DRI polls useful to the defense bar?

Gary: By learning where potential juror biases lie, defense attor-

neys can guard against them. By discovering broadly and strongly held preferences, the defense bar can advocate intelligently for popular reforms. And by identifying misconceptions about challenges facing the civil justice system, DRI and its members can engage in well-targeted efforts to more fully inform public attitudes.

Tim: What's a bad day for a pollster? Does it make you wish you'd been a cowboy or a fireman?

Gary: My first aspiration was to be a Good Humor man, and that remains the backup plan. But honestly, as a pollster every day is 100 percent great. Plus or minus three. **FD**