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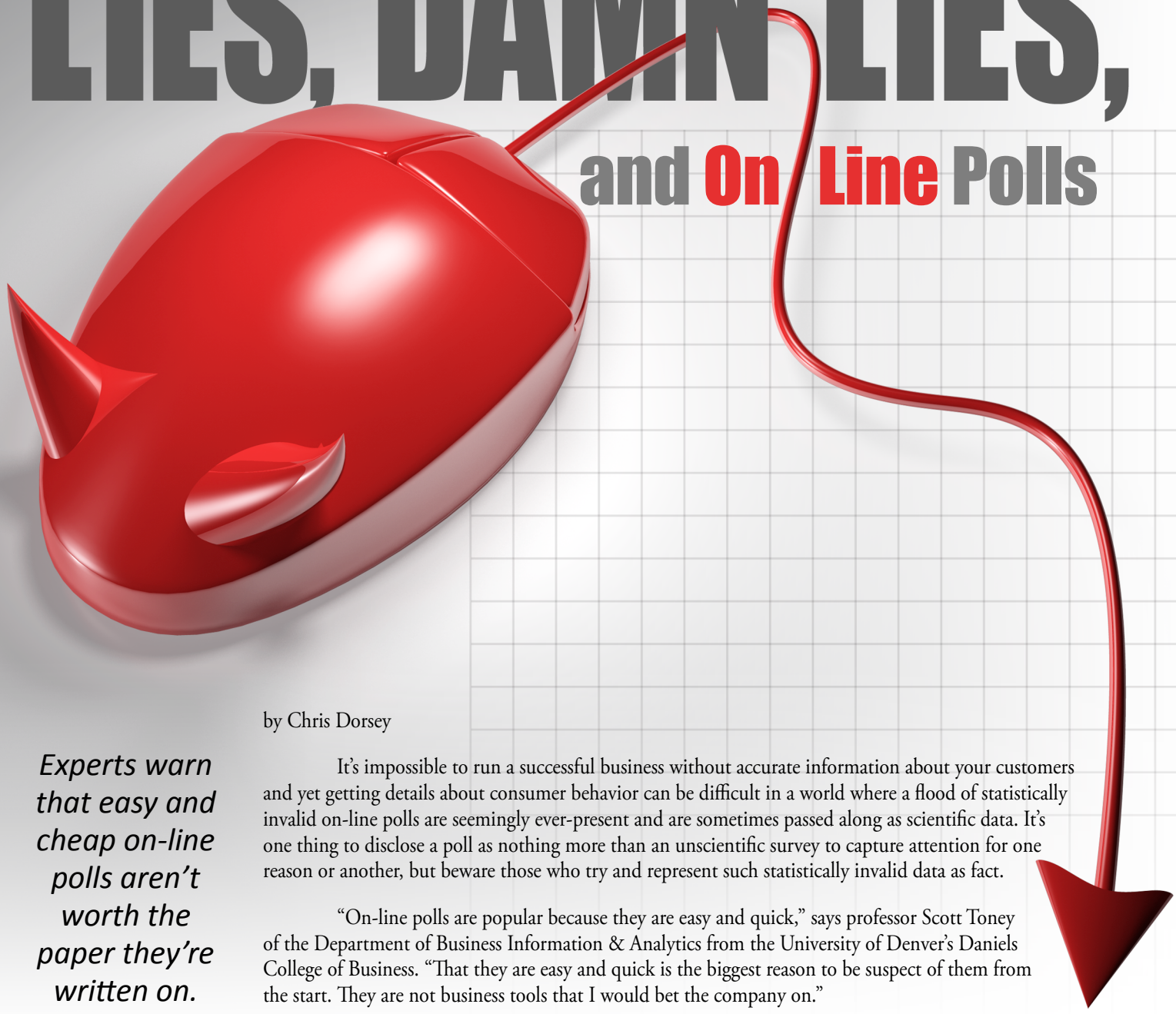
LIES, DAMN LIES, and On Line Polls



Experts warn that easy and cheap on-line polls aren't worth the paper they're written on.

by Chris Dorsey

It's impossible to run a successful business without accurate information about your customers and yet getting details about consumer behavior can be difficult in a world where a flood of statistically invalid on-line polls are seemingly ever-present and are sometimes passed along as scientific data. It's one thing to disclose a poll as nothing more than an unscientific survey to capture attention for one reason or another, but beware those who try and represent such statistically invalid data as fact.

"On-line polls are popular because they are easy and quick," says professor Scott Toney of the Department of Business Information & Analytics from the University of Denver's Daniels College of Business. "That they are easy and quick is the biggest reason to be suspect of them from the start. They are not business tools that I would bet the company on."

Bottom line, there is no easy and cheap way to conduct unbiased, accurate surveys and polls. "Non-random sampling is difficult to avoid in online polling," says professor Toney. "For instance, if a survey about media consumption is conducted on-line it's likely that there will be a bias toward online information gathering. Sampling from an on-line community that has self selected and may be filling out surveys just to get a chance at winning a prize simply invalidates the results. Computer savvy folks with free time to fill out surveys would likely be overrepresented and, furthermore, the proverbial deck could be stacked by groups looking to promote results that would benefit their own interests."

Until you're able to understand the methodology of any survey or poll to know that it is statistically valid, Toney warns that all 'research' data should be viewed skeptically. "If an on-line poll doesn't offer a margin of error, an assurance of non-repeated entries or evidence of random sampling of a population," says professor Toney, "I would eye any results with suspicion."

Can the web, then, be a place to conduct statistically valid polls? "It can be a place for polling, but a number of safeguards need to be in place," says professor Toney. "You need a certain amount of data about the participants in the poll to insure randomness and insure the poll respondents fit the demographics of the poll design. If you are looking for folks who hunt, for example, how will you insure the people that you poll really do hunt...verify licenses, their age, etc? Gather and verify enough data about a person and you can most likely feel good about the poll results, but you are unlikely to get much of a response. Emails to magazine subscribers are likely to be viewed as spam or scams. Website pop ups are not likely to generate many details and can be 'gamed' by folks responding multiple times--especially if there's a prize involved. Can it be done? Yes, but it is not a cheap and easy solution if you're looking for accurate information."

What else is necessary to conduct statistically valid polls and surveys? "Random sampling is really key and sounds easy, but how do you get a list of random folks to question and how do you make sure the folks that respond are still random in nature? It turns out to be hard to make your set of respondents random and to avoid bias. This is even harder on-line. A systematic sample might make sense. That comes from looking at every 'nth' person in a line or record in a file. You could easily look at every nth person to visit a website but your take rate is going to be very low. How do you insure that the folks that take the time to do the survey remain representative? Other methods include geographic and stratified sampling. These methods have application for non-online polling, but are very hard to put together on-line. Again, conducting valid polls is easy to talk about in the abstract but difficult to construct in real life," cautions professor Toney.

"Beyond the method, you have to keep in mind the power of the poll. Think about presidential polls that are so much in the news today. They usually come with a margin of error. Generating the margin of error is based on insuring random/representative polling and is tied to the size of the poll. If you get 500 responses but they are all from the same person, from employees of the same company, or from people with a vested interest in the outcome of the survey your poll is worthless."

Should companies and consumers be cautious about results from on-line polls? "Yes. You have to watch for the same things that you would from any poll," says professor Toney. "Are the poll methods disclosed? Can you see the questions to verify that they're asked in an unbiased manner? How many polls were completed? Were the respondents random and from the target population? Is the margin of error calculated and reported? Was it conducted by a reputable polling organization? Who funded the poll? All of these answers are critical to weighing the validity of such polls and surveys."

"The key reason that some polls reflect public opinion accurately and other polls are unscientific junk is how people were chosen to be interviewed. In scientific polls, the pollster uses a specific statistical method for picking respondents. In unscientific polls, the person picks himself to participate."

–National Council on Public Polls

"Critics point to a central problem with many online surveys: the pools of respondents, though massive, rarely represent the larger population. That, argues Stanford professor Jon A. Krosnick, is because the respondents aren't selected randomly, violating a core requirement of probability-based research. Instead, research firms reward volunteer participants with gift certificates or cash. That's far cheaper than hiring a staff to call thousands of people, but it skews the sample...".

– Business Week

Does an online poll, then, have any place in business given the inherent issues with data accuracy and poll validity? "Online polling can be a good way to engage customers and create a community of sorts," says professor Toney. "It gives an unscientific peek into what others in a group might be thinking or saying. Online polls also can be a fun way to generate web traffic or media buzz. The key is to avoid treating online polls as tools for business decisions without some assurance of their validity."

About the author: *Chris Dorsey is founding partner of Orion Entertainment, the world's largest producer of outdoor adventure television with 32 series in production on nine networks. He's run some of America's largest outdoor magazines, is an award-winning author of seven books, and his work has appeared in the* Wall Street Journal, Newsweek, Television Week, Writer's Digest, Ad Week*, and scores of domestic and international outdoor titles. He's also a highly sought after consultant and speaker specializing in multi-platform media marketing and branding strategies.*

Researching Polls–Discerning fact from fiction

To better understand what makes a statistically valid poll, Dr. Sheldon R. Gawiser and G. Evans Witt of the National Council on Public Polls offer 20 questions that every journalist (and we've included business leaders) should ask before applying polling information to business practices. For thorough explanations why each of these questions are vital to valuing polling results, visit http://www.ncpp.org/?q=node/4.

Here, then, are the 20 questions:

1. Who did the poll?
2. Who paid for the poll and why was it done?
3. How many people were interviewed for the survey?
4. How were those people chosen?
5. What area (nation, state, or region) or what group (teachers,lawyers, Democratic voters, etc.) were these people chosen from?
6. Are the results based on the answers of all the people interviewed?
7. Who should have been interviewed and was not? Or do response rates matter?
8. When was the poll done?
9. How were the interviews conducted?
10. What about polls on the Internet or World Wide Web?
11. What is the sampling error for the poll results?
12. Who's on first?
13. What other kinds of factors can skew poll results?
14. What questions were asked?
15. In what order were the questions asked?
16. What about "push polls?"
17. What other polls have been done on this topic? Do they say the same thing? If they are different, why are they different?
18. What about exit polls?
19. What else needs to be included in the report of the poll?
20. So I've asked all the questions. The answers sound good. Should we report the results?