TALES FROM THE WASTELAND

Fun With the Polls

How I extracted my personal pound of flesh.
By Barry Perryman, Ph.D.

My colleagues tell me I have a peculiar relationship with telemarketers, and I must admit it is plausibly true. They can annoy me like nothing else. How do they know the moment you sit down to eat a hot supper, or when you are passing into that blissful, euphoric sleep early on a Sunday morning? Who writes the phone-dialing algorithms that predict just when we will be the most annoyed?

At other times I am almost happy to carry on a conversation with them—off the subject of their call, of course, and designed to waste their time. We had a fellow who went by the name of Steve Martin who for two years called about twice a week and sometimes more. He may have called you as well. Steve would introduce himself and say he represented Microsoft and noticed we were having problems with our computer. After several months of almost daily calls and warnings from me about scamming folks, I came to recognize his voice.

"Steve, is that you?"

He would reply: "Yes it is. Is this Barry?"

We would then begin a jolly conversation about what the weather was like in Mumbai that week. He would speak with his heavy East Indian accent and I in my mongrelized dialect that consists of a mix of North Dakotan, Wyomin', and Texican. Of course they weren't long conversations, but the subject would quickly revert to why he would be involved in the scam. Steve would offer answers like, "Well, at least it's a living."

He suddenly stopped calling for about a year, then last September he called again under a new alias, Robert Smith. I recognized him right off and we had a great conversation about missing one another's voice. I told him as usual to take us off the call list and never call again. We said our goodbyes and he hasn't called since. I really don't miss him that much.

In the weeks leading up to the recent election, I got oodles of calls from pollsters. We still have a landline, live in a swing state, and voted in the previous election, so that qualified us to be at the top of every call list. It is no exaggeration that some nights we would get a half-dozen poll calls. Some were robo-calls and others were with live humans. In previous election seasons, my wife and I sort of considered it our civic duty to take them seriously and answer the questions as honestly as we could. However, after the first 20 calls this time, ambivalence and eventually anger set in. I began to just hang up the line after the callers identified themselves as poll-

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sters. After a while, hanging up seemed too little. I needed to provide a more demonstrative response. First I felt anger, then resentment, and finally I needed revenge.

Early on a Saturday morning I was watching "Have Gun Will Travel" on television while having a cup of my usual, strong—I mean stand-a-spoon-up—black coffee. I was also feeling a little waspy on account of a despicable character in the show. The phone rang for a robo-call poll. It was a recording and all you had to do was press the appropriate buttons for the appropriate answers. I began to press random numbers and at the end I became a 19-year-old Hispanic female with an annual income

of over $250,000. From that moment on, every robo-call poll was treated similarly, but with a diversity of outcomes. I introspectively felt a certain bit of satisfaction by extracting my personal pound of flesh.

As it turned out, the presidential polls were terribly off-base. Some weren't even close to predicting the eventual outcome. I saw one of the major news media polls the night before the election that had the eventual loser up by 11 points. That particular poll was certainly not a thoughtful attempt to sample the potential voting population. It showed either a complete lack of professionalism or an attempt to manipulate public perception instead of discovering it.

Manipulation was certainly the goal in a few of the alphabet-soup news polls I participated in. I had several discussions with the poll takers about the nature and wording of many of the questions. They were designed to lead the interviewee to a predetermined answer, to say the least. They went like this: "Ms. Clinton wants to keep illegal weapons out of the hands of criminals so our children can be safe. Mr. Trump hates puppies and kittens. Now that you know this, would you be more likely to vote for Ms. Clinton or Mr. Trump?"

I kid you not. These were the types of questions they asked. My first strategy was to simply refuse to participate in these so-called scientific polls, but we were called every day for weeks by the same pollsters. I needed the satisfaction of revenge.

Shifting strategies I began answering the questions backward. In other words, knowing Mr. Trump's disgust for little furry animals and Ms. Clinton's desire to make children safe, I would more likely vote for the puppy hater. A couple of times the pollster stopped and asked me if I was sure about my answer. That's a real scientific political poll, don't ya know.

The whole country now knows that the polls were wrong about the presidential election, and now you know that I was the one responsible. I was the subterfuge, the guerrilla poll fighter who blew up the accuracy. We all have our calling in life. ■

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