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As Millennials Begin Their Ascent: An Interview with John Della Volpe



John Della Volpe believes in the power of surveys. As Director of Polling for Harvard's Institute of Politics as well as Founder and Managing Partner of SocialSphere, a highly respected Cambridge-based global strategy company, he has spent time at the intersection of politics, business strategy and technology. Starting with his work with the 1988 presidential campaign, Della Volpe has collaborated with well-known pollsters, strategists and candidates over several presidential campaigns. Past clients include President Clinton, several U.S. Senators, and the Prime Minister of Greece, as well as prominent Fortune 500 firms. In 2000, John partnered with undergraduates from Harvard to launch the Biannual Youth Survey of Politics and Public Service at Harvard

University. It's considered a seminal piece of research on this emerging generation. *A:I/R* spoke with John in early May 2010; our interview follows.

What is the Institute of Politics' (IOP's) mission?

The IOP is a living memorial to President Kennedy. It was created more than 40 years ago to inspire young people, primarily undergraduates, into a life of public service. President Kennedy actually has two memorials in Boston – one of which is the IOP, and the second being the JFK Library in Dorchester. The IOP is a very active living memorial.

The IOP Survey of Young Americans' Attitudes toward Politics and Public Service has tracked young Americans since the late '90's. What is this poll's main objective, and what has it covered?

The poll was inspired and created by undergraduate students at Harvard. In 1999, two sophomores involved in the IOP were concerned about the disconnect between politics and community service. In the late '90s it seemed like most young American college students were engaged or interested in engaging in some kind of community service – helping the homeless, mentoring – a variety of things. Yet during that timeframe, few

seemed interested in political participation – working on a campaign and voting. The '96 election saw the lowest youth turnout in a generation, so these two students were interested in learning more about the disconnect between their generation and politics.

What do you believe has engendered Millennials (18-29 year-olds) to become dedicated to public service?

Our survey has evolved significantly since the first national survey in the Spring of 2000. That first survey included only college students. We have continually broadened our survey sample groups to the point where it now reflects the “new face of America”. From the earliest days, we’ve noticed that a significant number of young people – both inside and outside of college – are engaged in some kind of community service. I think there have been two reasons for that. One is that the public education system in the United States, dating back 15 years, has made public service a priority or a requirement in many school districts for graduation. Our research indicates that, though young people might have started public service projects to receive credit, they ended up receiving much more. They found something, a passion for service. The community got something, more thoughtful and engaged kids. As a result, students found new ways to volunteer outside of high school, where “credits” were neither sought nor given.

College admissions requirements was one driver, the other is that young people just seem to be much more aware of social problems, both in this country and abroad; they believe that they can make

a difference at a very early age. I think that there are lots of reasons for this, but again, people really want to see a tangible result of their involvement in something.

How did your previous work lead you to your current role with Harvard to develop this survey?

I am one of a handful of political pollsters involved. I’ve been involved in different projects associated with the Kennedy School since the mid-nineties – and most of my work, political and otherwise, has always been influenced by this unique combination of politics, technology, and research. In the nineties, I worked on a couple different projects at the IOP in the Kennedy School around measuring opinions related to presidential debates, using innovative techniques at that time. A few years later, when they decided to create this research program, I was one of the people with whom they spoke.

What were some of the unique techniques that you used?

I was a very early adopter of dial-testing in the early '90s and was able, at a young age, to work in several presidential campaigns in this country and abroad using that technology. Dial-testing caught the eye of Harvard in the mid-nineties. I did a couple of projects related to dial testing with Harvard to measure opinion about the debates in the '96 cycle and started a relationship then.

Do 18- to 29-year-olds present special challenges to a quantitative researcher?

A lot of challenges with this cohort apply to others. One major challenge, identified first within the Millennial population, was the increasingly high level of adoption of cell phones and loss of landlines. Another is the mobility factor of Millennials taking their cell phones with them; moving from place to place makes it difficult to do traditional research. A third is their hours and schedules. Young people work often, work late, and sometimes are unavailable for surveys when traditional telephone banks call – between nine and five.

The changing face of America also poses challenges – specifically within Hispanic/Latino communities, where there are close to one in five Millennials. They sometimes aren't as comfortable expressing their views on political topics in English as they might be in their native tongue.

What led you to choose KnowledgePanel®?

We began research over ten years ago using traditional telephone-based methods. When we were interested in speaking with college students, we bought lists from traditional vendors. After the rise of cell phones and social networks we moved to Internet-based research with another vendor and found that the quality of the Internet research was now increasing over time. We wanted to maintain the best, most rigorous research design possible. After conversations with colleagues at the Kennedy School and careful research,

we felt that Knowledge Networks was the best option. We did an analysis of all the tools and companies and decided that Knowledge Networks would be the best partner.

What specific advantages does using an online probability-based panel provide your work?

The fact that it is an online probability panel! The probability aspect of KnowledgePanel is incredibly important, especially as we share our research and our findings throughout the academic community. Having the probability sample behind us is a “must have.” Almost as important, frankly, is the ability to do it online. Young people seem to be much more engaged in an online tool than a traditional telephone poll. Surveys require some thought and oftentimes exceed 10 or 12 minutes. The Internet provides the ability to show images, video, and audio; it offers a much more robust tool than a telephone or even a cell phone interview. I would rather have a young person take our interview at midnight, after he or she is done with coursework, than on a cell phone at six o'clock walking down the street.

What's your take – and your colleagues' take – on the use of online surveys?

We've used online methodologies for at least five or six years – and before we moved online, we tested and compared the results of traditional telephone versus online; so my colleagues are extremely comfortable, especially with this cohort. They understand that traditional methods of reaching these people don't offer accurate results anymore. There are

significant differences in the opinions of Millennials who have landline telephones versus those who do not – and who have cell phones versus those who do not.

Why did you start your company, SocialSphere?

When we started SocialSphere three years ago, it was very much inspired by my work at Harvard on the Millennial generation. I quickly realized that Millennials were the largest generation in the history of the world, and we're just beginning to see their impact, whether it be political, economic or social. The way in which Millennials communicate is different than any previous generation. I was lucky to be at Harvard to study this firsthand, from a research perspective. In addition, I was fortunate to be at Harvard during the dawn of Facebook. I was the 30,000th member of Facebook, and now there are 400 million people. One of my colleagues at SocialSphere was the 1,000th. Some of us are older than Millennials, some of us are in the heart of the age cohort, but we've all grown up with Facebook and can understand it and help our clients leverage those kinds of new media tools, to build and communicate with stakeholder groups.

SocialSphere is a global research-based strategy company, and most of our work focuses on developing social media strategy. We use all the tools and disciplines one would expect. But, we believe that the thoughtful application of these technology tools and research techniques is what creates the insights and the wisdom that our clients are asking for. It's almost like the chicken and the egg, in that we have analytics,

programs, tools and strategies to assist clients – and technologies. Many of our other clients are interested in building relationships with Millennials, so we're conducting primary and secondary research with them but adding the social media strategies to that.

What survey topics personally interest you for the future?

Certainly issues related to the economy and to the changing face of America – also the impact that they have on the American culture. We are super-focused on understanding the impact of this new census and how our clients can engage and communicate with a diverse America. We will continue to probe differences within various African-American communities, within Hispanic/Latino communities, and within Asian communities. There are no simple monoliths out there anymore. Our diversity is much richer than that. We embrace that diversity in all its complexity. We think that this will be of extreme value to our clients. Understanding globalization and America's role in the world are also of great interest to us and to our clients.

What are the central findings from the poll that you conducted via KnowledgePanel earlier this year, which focused on young people's feelings about their economic future?

The Millennial generation is becoming more closely aligned with the rest of America in terms of their support for President Obama. These people were outliers in the 2008 election; exit poll results indicated that they voted for him by a margin of two to one. They still

support the President, but not by the significant margins of a year ago.

A second finding is the economic recession's significant short-term effects on this generation – and potentially significant long-term effects as well. For example, a majority of young people is concerned about affording the ability to stay in college. A majority is also concerned about just keeping their heads above water, paying their bills, their car loans, their rent. So the level of economic anxiety among this generation is palpable in this last survey, and this is likely to have ramifications moving forward – whether that is seeking additional personal and economic security – stronger and more stable job and benefit packages in the future – and potentially even changing the way in which this group will be saving. Bank, Insurance and Investment Management clients will need to develop a deep understanding of these emerging trends.

What other types of studies do you conduct at SocialSphere?

One or two clients with whom we're working at SocialSphere will likely use Knowledge Networks. One already is: the United States Marine Corps. We are doing probably the most significant Millennial study in at least a decade for the Marines, regarding Millennials' attitudes toward service, the military and the Marine Corps, specifically. We're in the middle of 31 focus groups to prepare for that – with Millennials and boomers – because we're interested in the opinions of the Millennial parents. We are doing 7,000 interviews with Knowledge Networks. Some of our other social media work is on behalf of

The Walton Family Foundation on education reform.

What do you feel are some of the underlying dynamics that are causing Millennials to lose faith in government?

First, it's incredibly important to note that the two surveys that we've done with KnowledgePanel were conducted before health care reform passed. Young people have exceedingly high expectations of the Obama presidency and government, and it may be unfair – after basically one year on a job or less, when we were taking our surveys – to say that the administration has failed to meet expectations. It's a work in progress. The economy is a work in progress; health care was a work in progress; and certainly our role in Afghanistan militarily is, too.

Young people don't necessarily seem disillusioned, but I think that they are somewhat frustrated with the pace of change. In our last survey – our March release – we discerned that young Republicans are significantly more likely to engage in the midterms than young Democrats. It's still early, but this is something that could be a concern among Democrats, and could provide hope to Republicans.