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Using Opinion Surveys to Assess Community Expectations on Emergency Response

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ABSTRACT

Utilizing statistically valid community opinion surveys (polling) has long been a design and decision tool in political campaigns. Politicians have recognized the value of keeping a "pulse" on community opinion and as a mechanism to test ideas, concepts and messages, as well as track performance.

Over the past several years, Harris, DeVille & Associates, Inc.(HDA), a Baton Rouge, Louisiana based issues management firm, in conjunction with the polling firm Southern Media & Opinion Research (SMOR, Baton Rouge), has adapted these political tools to ascertain community opinions on a number of issues important to industrial manufacturers, including health, safety and environmental perceptions. The findings have been used in the siting and permitting of new manufacturing facilities, closure of old industrial sites, and assessment of performance of community outreach activities.

Recently, several Gulf Coast communities – Corpus Christi, Beaumont/Port Arthur/Orange, Baton Rouge, and Mobile - independently engaged HDA to apply community surveys to a specific objective: the design, implementation and evaluation of community-based emergency response and risk communication systems. Under the guidance of Local Emergency Planning Committees, Emergency Management Agencies, and/or Industry/Community panels, HDA has developed and conducted several opinion surveys designed to understand public perceptions of risk and expectations for emergency response services and communication.

Interestingly, there are marked similarities and differences in response based upon geographic (distance from source of risk) and socio-demographic variables, such as race, income, and education. Public confidence in emergency response systems and emergency responders is generally quite high. Public expectations on emergency services response time generally far exceed the ability of any system to deliver. And the ability to provide "real-time" quality information to the public is lacking in most communities.

Findings from the various surveys will be compiled and presented.