

Key Association Analysis measures the strength of descriptive attributes or performance ratings in relation to a strategic characteristic...a critical issue which campaigns wish to understand and affect.

BY MICHAEL LIEBERMAN

# What's Driving the Vote?

## Looking at Key Association Analysis

**T**HE CAMPAIGN IS beginning. The message is being formed. Surveys are conducted with the challenge to find the winner – the message that will carry your guy into office and the other guy into the retirement home. What you emphasize, where you defend your ground and how to attack.

The challenge is to produce the results within either the context of existing research, or within a short, budget-friendly snapshot poll that can be reproduced easily to track progress and keep costs down.

Over the past few years, our company has been using a simple, yet sophisticated, technique with great success. We call it Key Association Analysis. Key Association Analysis utilizes linear regression, spread over an array of issue importance; message acceptance; or statement agreement ratings to measure which issues drive voter preference. Key Association Analysis tells a story that is valuable, easy to understand, and easier to present.

### Basics

Key Association Analysis measures the strength of descriptive attributes or performance ratings in relation to a strategic characteristic. The strategic characteristic is “Will vote for your candidate,” “Will vote for the other guy,” or “Level of support for this initiative,” “Overall performance rating of the government.” This is a critical issue that the campaign wishes to understand and affect.

The first step – after asking the respondent who they will vote for – is to produce a list of key issues, policies or support statements on which the campaign message can be formed. For example, on a 1-to-7 scale how important is each of the following to you personally: “Ensuring everyone has access to affordable health care,” “A women’s right to choose abortion,” etc. Things that are pertinent to the campaign and that, once delivered, form a coherent message or platform.

The form of the issues statements may

vary from a standard scale. For example, which statement represents Candidate A or Candidate B more, “Honest.” Or “Effective...gets things done.” If you are measuring support for an initiative (e.g., the building of a new trash compactor) the statements can look like, “How much do you feel the following statement is true?” “The new incinerator would eliminate poisons from seeping into the ground,” or “The new incinerator would last 100 years, while the old one is expected to break down in 10.” These statements are then run against an overall support question for the trash compactor, and the key reasons people will back the initiative will emerge.

The power of this technique is that it can be filtered by key voting groups (e.g., gender, race, age, etc.) without lengthening the survey. Voter groups can be defined, such as men over the age of 50 who live in suburban towns, make more than \$100,000 and play golf three times a week. Groups can be mixed. Drivers can be shown. Either way, running the analysis by filters yields a far greater amount of information than standard tabs.

### Running the Analysis

Here is how the technique works.

Linear regression analysis uses ratings of independent variables and the corresponding ratings of the dependent variable to form a linear equation that predicts the dependent variable. The resulting equation yields beta scores, which are multiplied by the independent variables once the linear equation is calculated.

In other words, the beta gives the weight of the issue or statement in predicting who the respondent is going to vote for.

Next, there are two short steps and the interpretation begins. The first step is to rank the issues by their beta weights. This gives the order of importance for the issues in relation to vote preference. The second step is to highlight those betas that are statistically significant. In a nutshell, within each regression equation there is a basic as-

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sumption that the beta scores are equal to zero. They don't matter, and we are interested in the issues that do matter. These are significant. In presentation, we highlight only significant issues to show their weight. Insignificant issues are ignored. I usually draw the line at 90 percent, meaning that I want to be 90 percent certain the issue affects the vote or support.

The time we spent within a political context significance can be either positive or negative. Positive issues drive the vote up, and as they rise, so does voting percentage. Negative significance drives the vote down, as they rise, the vote drops. For example, in a poll "Abortion rights" was negatively significant for Candidate A. What that translates into is that those people who are for abortion rights are against Candidate A. A good piece of information for Candidate B.

### Interpretation

There are three ways to use the information. (1) Promote, (2) Defend your ground, and (3) Attack your opponent.

● **Promote.** Promote those issues or qualities that are positive and significant for your candidate. Our research shows "Loves Dogs" is driving the vote for Candidate Bob. Tell the public, "Bob Loves Dogs." Run on the issues that are of high importance to those who plan to vote for you.

● **Defend your ground.** Defending your ground becomes necessary when an issue is driving both candidates. For example, our research indicates that "Loves Dogs" is also a key driver for Bob's opponent, Bruce. Whereas "Loves Dogs" may not be the single defining issue of the race, Bob does not want to cede this ground to Bruce – or any other common issue. Have Bob's speechwriter insert a line, "My opponent says that we do not love dogs. In fact, we do love dogs. We are doing more for dogs than our opponent, who has never owned one." Defend the ground.

● **Attack.** Key Association Analysis regression tells your campaign to either attack your opponent's positives or promote his negatives. Returning to an earlier example, "Abortion rights" is a negative driver for Candidate A. Candidate B should be pushing this fact because as

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this becomes known, the research indicates that support for candidate A will drop.

Similarly, "Supporting the Trash Compactor" is a positive driver for your opponent. Attack his support as fake, or attack the initiative as a gimmick. If support for your opponent's sincerity or the initiative drops, so will support for your opponent because his campaign is driven by this issue.

### Sample Campaign

It is August, the dog days of summer, the time of squeezing hands during beach (if there is a beach in your state) barbecues and back-to-school sales. Also time to prepare the message for the campaign, which begins in earnest after Labor Day. A poll is being conducted to determine your candidate's name position, that of your opponent, and the winning message you wish to bring to the effort.

During the survey, respondents are asked to rate a short series of local and

national issues on a 1-to-7 scale, 1 meaning “Not at all important” and 7 meaning “Very important.” Later in the survey respondents are read a list of qualities and are asked if they apply more to Candidate A or Candidate B – respective nominees of their parties for the governor’s chair.

There are two key groups that the campaign would like to target. These are “Women” and “Late Boomers.” Late Bloomers are men who are baby-boomers and are within a certain socioeconomic sphere. The survey is taken and Key Association Analysis is performed in total, then filtered by these two groups.

Issue importance ratings are listed below:

- ✓ Protecting the environment
- ✓ Protecting Social Security and Medicare
- ✓ Keeping taxes and government spending down
- ✓ Improving the local transportation system and reducing traffic congestion
- ✓ Improving accountability in the way education dollars are spent
- ✓ Guaranteeing a woman’s right to choose on the abortion issue
- ✓ Fighting and preventing crime
- ✓ Ensuring everyone has access to affordable health care.

Candidate qualities are summarized here:

- ✓ An advocate for the people
- ✓ Effective
- ✓ Has a vision for the future
- ✓ Experience to manage the state
- ✓ Is in touch with my values
- ✓ Someone you can trust
- ✓ Will work hard.

Among the two key groups, the following issues and qualities came up significant for the two candidates.

#### **Candidate**

Positive Significant Drivers  
Negative Significant Drivers

#### **Candidate A**

Issues:

1. Protecting the environment
2. Guaranteeing a woman’s right to choose on the abortion issue
3. Improving accountability in the way education dollars are spent.

#### **Candidate A**

Qualities:

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1. Effective
2. Will work hard
3. Vision for the future.

#### **Candidate B**

Issues:

1. Improving accountability in the way education dollars are spent
2. Keeping taxes and government spending down
3. Protecting the environment.

#### **Candidate B**

Qualities:

1. Is in touch with my values
2. Will work hard
3. Experience to manage the state.

From the analysis the strategy emerges. Candidate A is running on a platform that he protects the environment and is a champion of a women’s right to choose. Moreover, he is an effective, hard-working candidate who has a vision of the future.

Candidate A rejects his opponent’s interpretation of “improving accountability in the way education dollars are spent.” It is an attack on the school system that, while

it could use improvement, is not in the dire straights Candidate B says it is (attack the opponent’s positives).

Candidate A also attacks Candidate B. He is a man who is not in touch with the values of the common voter, and is not a hard worker. His recipe for keeping taxes and spending down is just not reality, showing that Candidate B does not have the necessary experience to manage the affairs of the state. Moreover, Candidate B’s policies do not have environmental interests at heart. Candidate B is the anti-environment candidate.

#### **Conclusion**

Key Association Analysis is one of a number of statistical techniques that Multivariate Solutions offers to its clients to help add value to existing polls and allow the strategists more information for their planning. Within the framework of a dynamically changing campaign, when candidates are searching for more information as well as cost effectiveness, Key Association Analysis delivers a winner in a way that the client can comprehend and utilize without delay. ■