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Harris' Head Pollster

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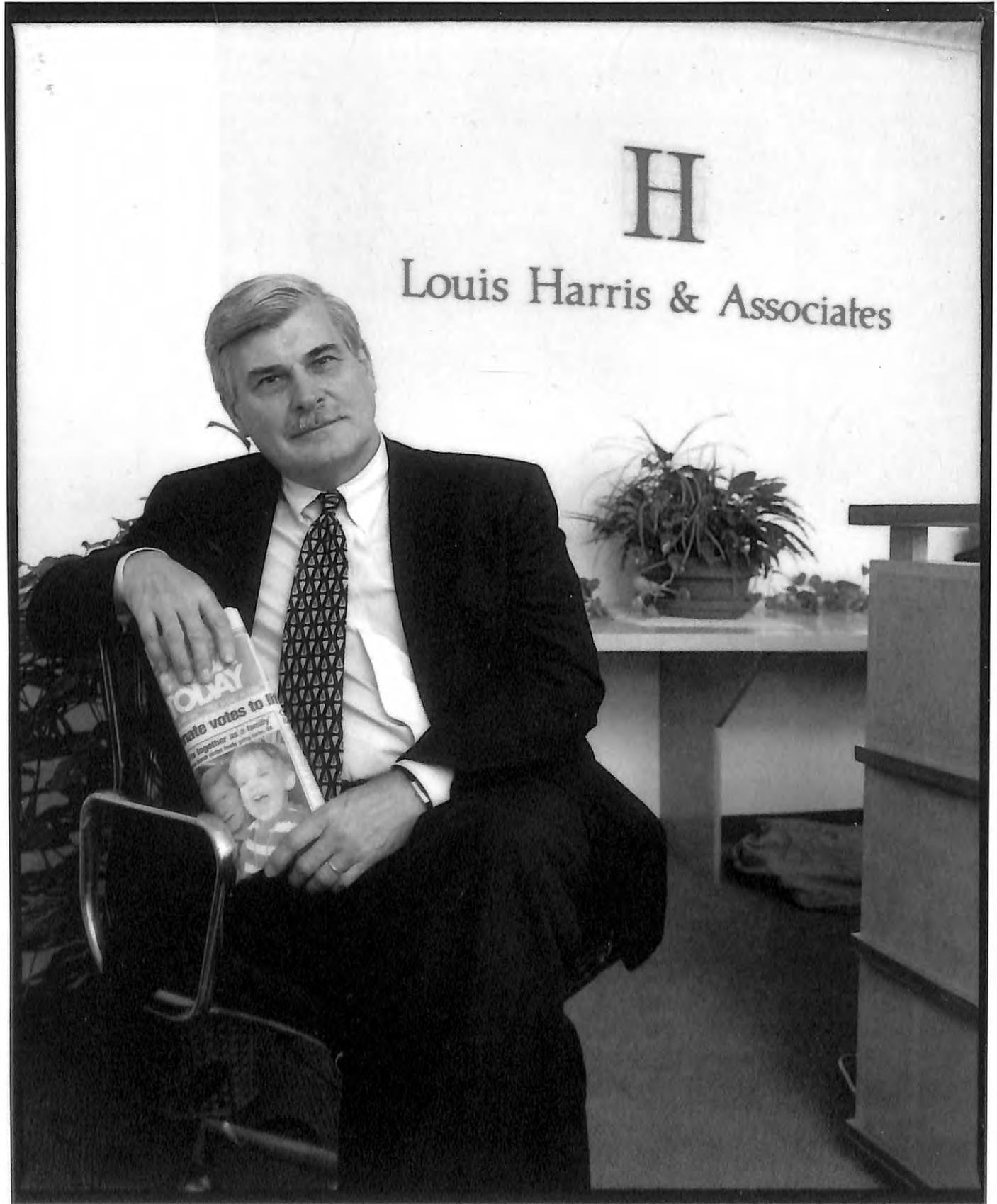
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Special Features



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The Boy Scouts were in trouble.

They needed to convince their sources of funding — mainly the United Way — that they were worthy of continued support. In the '90s, many were questioning whether they were still relevant and effective.

"They set out to prove that the boys and then men who have been through the Scouting program have benefitted from the experience," says Albert Dolata, president of the renowned polling firm Louis Harris and Associates Inc.

So the firm did what it does best: It found the right people to talk to, in this case former Boy Scouts, and asked them the right questions. How successful had they been in life? Any criminal record? Any notable achievements?

But it didn't end there: Harris consulted with the Boy Scouts of America organization on how to present the information to its funders, what kind of presentation would advance its cause.

The result? Well, discretion is the better part of the polling business, but "The Scouts were very pleased with what we did for them," Dolata says.

The 1964 UB Law alumnus became president and chief operating officer of Louis Harris and Associates last year. It's the latest in a series of positions with Gannett Co. Inc., the giant media company. Previously, Dolata was director of labor relations at Gannett headquarters in Arlington, Va. and has served as publisher and president of a number of the company's newspapers, including those in Honolulu; Elmira, N.Y.; New York City; Oakland, Calif.; Bridgewater, N.J.; and Niagara Falls.

"I was filling out a company questionnaire the other day," Dolata said. "and it asked, 'How many times have you moved for Gannett?' And I answered 10... One of the things that has characterized my career is a certain amount of adaptability."

He's adapting again at Louis

Harris and Associates, a 100-person firm in Manhattan famous for the media-friendly Harris Poll. Topics as diverse as women's work lives, the effectiveness of major ad campaigns, Americans' economic literacy and parents' attitudes toward spanking — all have been covered in recent polls, and reported on extensively in print and on television.

Dolata says one of his objectives is "to improve the synergy between Harris and the rest of the Gannett company. Harris is a well-rounded, com-

of work is better done by us or subcontracted — general business decisions. It's like the guy who runs Pizza Hut — he does very little cooking or waiting on people. I certainly am not an expert statistician or pollster."

He says his UB Law education was "invaluable because of our firm's litigation research — of which we do a good deal." For instance, Harris was commissioned to find out whether listeners were confused when a new radio station adopted call letters similar to those of an established one. The answer was yes, and it was actionable.

"Right now we are trying to establish the usefulness of survey research in libel cases," notes Dolata. "We will ask, 'Was your opinion of the plaintiff affected by exposure to the allegedly defamatory utterance?' It is an exciting new field for us."

Rumblings of discontent with the new power of polling surfaced in the 1992 presidential election, but Dolata says that hasn't carried over much to the everyday work of Louis Harris and Associates. "To the extent that we're grouped with telemarketers, we suffer," he says. "When somebody calls at 6 o'clock and tries to sell you a vacuum cleaner, you tend to be hostile."

But the power of the technique, which he broadens under the category "survey research," can't be denied. Dolata says.

He points to the Republicans' "Contract With America" — "the result," he says, "of careful survey research. The success of the Contract is an advertisement for the power of survey research. The Republican Party commissioned research (not by Harris, which does no political work whatever), went out to the populace and asked people about what they consider most important. Newt Gingrich took those issues Americans said they cared about and put them in his Contract. The 1994 Congressional elections showed that the message was right on target." ■

"Do You Have A Moment to Talk?"

Albert Dolata '64 wants to know what you're thinking

plete information company. We're involved in information just like the newsroom is."

And sometimes, no journalist works harder to catch his sources than the Harris researchers. The firm specializes in "hard-to-reach" target groups, Dolata says — such as in a recent survey of a most select group of people, the presidents and CEOs of billion-dollar companies and divisions. Documenting their opinions isn't quite as simple as catching somebody at home to ask if they've seen the latest McDonald's commercial.

As president, of course, Dolata isn't calling a lot of respondents himself. "I do general marketing plans and policies," he says, "and try to address questions like whether a certain piece