HOW TO WORK WITH PUBLIC OPINION RESEARCH:

A GUIDE FOR HUMAN RIGHTS AND CIVIL LIBERTIES ADVOCATES AND THEIR FUNDERS

Loren Siegel

HOW TO WORK WITH PUBLIC OPINION RESEARCH:

A GUIDE FOR HUMAN RIGHTS AND CIVIL LIBERTIES ADVOCATES AND THEIR FUNDERS

Loren Siegel

HOW TO WORK WITH PUBLIC OPINION RESEARCH:
A GUIDE FOR HUMAN RIGHTS AND CIVIL LIBERTIES ADVOCATES AND THEIR FUNDERS

Loren Siegel, *Author*
Cary Graber, *Copy Editor*
Sara Glover, *Design*
BookMasters, Inc., *Printer*

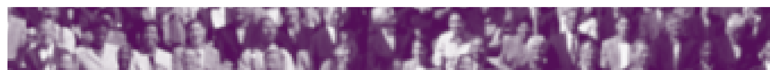
How to Work With Public Opinion Research *was made possible by the generous support of The Ford Foundation.*

Copyright © 2004 Loren Siegel Consulting
All rights reserved. Printed in the United States of America. No part of this book may be reproduced, in any form, without written permission from the publisher.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Many thanks to: Nancy Belden, John Russonello *and* Kate Stewart *for the many lessons learned.* • Meg Bostrum *and* Geoff Garin *for generously sharing their time and expertise.* • Ira Glasser, *ACLU Executive Director from 1978 to 2001, for entrusting the organization's public opinion research program to me.* • Phil Gutis, *ACLU Director of Legislative Communications, for his valuable input and advice.* • Alan Jenkins, *Director of the Ford Foundation's Human Rights Unit, for his moral and financial support in bringing this project to fruition.* • Anthony Romero, *ACLU Executive Director, for allowing me to share the information contained in this guide with others in the advocacy community.*

For additional copies please contact the author at: lorensiegel@earthlink.net.



PREFACE

From 1991 to 2001, I was the Public Education Director for the American Civil Liberties Union. Over the course of that decade the program over which I presided—which was responsible for media relations, communications campaigns, publications, and the organization's website—grew significantly in both staff size and budget. In 1997, a major donor made a large contribution which enabled the organization to develop a systematic public opinion research program. That funding was renewed each year, and I was responsible for managing this new and increasingly important program. The guide that follows encapsulates the many lessons I learned over the course of those five years.

The ACLU and I were extremely fortunate in our selection of Belden Russonello & Stewart as our public opinion research consultants. All of the case studies contained in this guide were products of their excellent work, and most of what I learned about the theory and practice of public opinion research was a result of their patient mentoring. If you decide to embark on this kind of research, be sure you pick consultants with whom you feel compatible. You will be spending a lot of time together…

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction i

I. Why Engage in Public Opinion Research? 1

II. Public Opinion Research Tools 8

III. Putting the Data to Work 26

IV. What to Look for in a Consultant 29

Appendix I: Public Opinion Resources on the Web 32

Appendix II: Public Opinion Research Firms with a Good Track Record of Working with Advocacy Organizations 34

Appendix III: Communications Consultants Specializing in Not-For-Profit Clients 36

Appendix IV: Resources 38

Appendix V: Checklist for Funders 40

Endnotes 42

INTRODUCTION

This guide gives human rights and civil liberties advocates arguments and tools for integrating public opinion research into their communications work. Communications in the broad sense is nothing new to our community. We are, in fact, prolific communicators. We write and publish reports, monographs, fact sheets, and books. We issue press releases, hold press conferences, and publish op-eds. We use our websites to make more information more accessible to more people. But are our communications efforts hitting the mark? Are we using communications to leverage social change?

FoundationWorks, an alliance of communications experts whose mission is to "accelerate social change by partnering with foundations and their grantees," describes two distinct communications mindsets.[1] The first is "FYI Communication" which focuses on the dissemination of information for the purpose of sharing knowledge. In this case the information *is* the message, and the audience is undefined. This is a mindset and a practice with which most people in the advocacy community are very familiar. FYI Communication is important and useful, but it is generally not sufficient to create the momentum necessary for social change.

The "Strategic Communication" mindset uses communications to create a public response. The audience is targeted, and the message is focused. It's not just about sharing information; it's about *stimulating action.* The goal of strategic communications is to move an issue from a relatively low or misunderstood profile on the

unstructured public agenda, to a much higher and better understood profile on the more structured policy agenda.[2] Susan Nall Bales, the founder of the FrameWorks Institute, offers the following definition:

> "Applied to the nonprofit world, the term [strategic communications] means, very simply, drawing systematically from a wide array of disciplines and techniques to meet the challenges of using media in the public interest. It is, moreover, a response to what grantees have known for some time—that using media wisely is more complex than mere public relations, that the communications goals of policy advocates are often at odds with the values and techniques of social marketers, and that the real challenge is to monitor an issue's interaction with the media environment and know when to strike and how."[3]

Frank Karel, the founding president of The Communications Network, defines it in a series of questions:

> "Strategic communications is more than a set of tools. It's also a process guided by the relentless pursuit of answers to deceptively simple questions. What do you want to accomplish? Who has to think or act differently for that to happen? What would prompt them to do it?"[4]

We in the advocacy community need to become better strategic communicators, and strategies, by definition, require planning. At its most basic level, public opinion research is the front end of the strategic communications planning process.

Contrary to what many believe, public opinion research does not have to be an expensive undertaking. Commissioning original research does cost money, but you can also take advantage of a tremendous amount of polling data and analysis that is readily accessible on the Internet. In most instances, you should be able to find existing research that will give you some guidance on how the public thinks about an issue. If there is nothing extant, or if existing research does not meet your needs, then you have a strong argument for raising funds for some original research.

This guide will familiarize you with the fundamentals: why to do it, how to do it, and what to do with the data once it's collected. It also provides information about where to find good consultants, and what to expect from them once they are on board.

I. WHY ENGAGE IN PUBLIC OPINION RESEARCH?

Message Development

"Message development" is one of those phrases that has perhaps been overused to the point of diminishing returns. But basically, it just means figuring out how to communicate an idea so that whoever you want to reach "gets it." Of course it's not that simple, because even though we may think we understand how the public thinks about something, our very immersion in the issues we deal with 24-7 probably makes it difficult for us to predict or interpret public opinion. And in any event, given the fragmentation of the American "public," we may need to develop different messages for different audiences.

In communications parlance, a "message" is a succinct statement encapsulating the problem, the solution, and the action you're calling for. To be effective, a message has to acknowledge where people are at, or they won't listen. While we tend to think in terms of issue areas (*e.g.,* affirmative action, reproductive freedom), public opinion researchers stress the primacy of **values** in shaping the way people think about an issue. Meg Bostrom, a researcher with extensive experience working with public interest organizations, talks about the importance of identifying the "underlying belief systems" which often end up "dictating a person's reactions to problems."[5] Message development on a given issue, be it the death penalty, welfare reform, or the treatment of immigrants, will require more than marshalling facts, no matter how compelling they may be.

If our arguments are incompatible with the public's basic values, it will be difficult to get anywhere.

Connecting with the public's "underlying belief systems" is not synonymous with pandering. We use public opinion research as a diagnostic tool to help us move the public closer to our goals, not to alter our goals to conform to whatever the polls are saying.

Belden Russonello & Stewart (BRS), a social change-oriented research and communications firm based in Washington, D.C., has identified eleven "values groups" that they consider "fundamental to Americans' belief systems."[6] Primary values are dominant when competing with other values, and secondary values, while important, tend to be trumped if they are perceived as competing with primary values:

PRIMARY VALUES	SECONDARY VALUES
Responsibility to care for one's family	Responsibility to care for others
Responsibility to care for oneself	Personal Fulfillment
Personal liberty	Respect for authority
Work	Love of country/culture
Spirituality	
Honesty/integrity	
Fairness/equality	

BRS urges its advocacy clients to be "listening for values" when engaged in message development.

CASE STUDY: Developing the Message

In 2000, the ACLU embarked on an ambitious project to find out how to talk to the public about the crisis of mass imprisonment in the U.S. The ACLU had been making a number of arguments against the country's over-reliance on incarceration—it was incredibly expensive, it disproportionately impacted communities of color, in the case of drug crimes it was counterproductive and inhumane, etc. There was reason to believe that the American public was increasingly receptive to alternatives to incarceration, but we didn't know which messages were most effective, and it felt as though we were spinning our wheels and perhaps missing out on opportunities to make important policy gains.

The research, which comprised both focus groups and a telephone survey, yielded some encouraging and even surprising findings:

- Americans' concern for safety is the driving force (the dominant **value**) behind their attitudes on crime and punishment, and that concern must be acknowledged.

- According to the public, the main purpose of imprisonment should be **rehabilitation**, not retribution or deterrence. A large majority (88%) believes prisons should teach inmates skills so they are less likely to commit crimes in the future; and most people think non-violent offenders can be rehabilitated.

- The public believes that **prisons are failing** to meet society's goals in that they do not rehabilitate and they do not punish sufficiently.

- The public draws an important **distinction between violent and non-violent offenders.** In fact, an impressive 74% believe treatment and probation for non-violent drug offenders is more appropriate than prison, and that mandatory sentencing is unfair.

The consultants gave us the following messaging advice:

- Communicate **values** of security, sense of order, and fairness;

- **Focus** on non-violent crimes when talking about the problem;

- Provide **solutions** Americans consider acceptable, *i.e.*, that meet their threshold for certainty in punishment, rehabilitation, and fairness.

The resulting message was contained in the lead of a July 2001 press release the ACLU issued about the poll:[7]

> "There is a strong dissatisfaction with the current state of the criminal justice system in America and a growing public confidence in rehabilitation and alternative punishments for non-violent offenders. 'Contrary to popular belief, punishment and retribution are not foremost in most Americans' minds,' said Nadine Strossen, President of the ACLU. 'In fact, this new study shows our nation to be far more concerned with rehabilitation and social reintegration than with throwing away the proverbial key.'"

The messaging advice garnered from the ACLU's research on mass imprisonment was used to advance important organizational goals, not to change those goals. Specifically, the organization saw that the distinction between violent and non-violent offenses could be used as a wedge to push for alternatives to incarceration for a majority of drug offenders in America—a very sizable chunk of the offender population.

Identifying Core Constituencies

Public opinion research can tell you who your allies are, both actual and potential. And if it's large enough, a survey sample can be analyzed by age, religion, gender, race, political alignment, region, educational level, and more. If you are trying to make gains in the public opinion arena with limited resources (a given in our line of work), it's extremely helpful to know who your friends are, who the persuadables are, and who is beyond reach. This information will be critical to the development of a targeted communications plan.

CASE STUDY: Identifying Constituencies

In 1998, the education voucher issue was looming large on the public policy agenda at both the federal and state levels, and the ACLU decided to commission some research on the issue. The pro-voucher movement was at that time expending a great deal of time and money communicating the virtues of education vouchers to the African-American public, and the ACLU wanted to know to what extent they were succeeding.

The organization's consultants advised that original research was unnecessary because several large, methodologically sound studies had recently been commissioned by other organizations. So they were able to review the existing data and give us their analysis. What was learned from their review was that the African American public was sharply divided on the voucher issue, and that the dividing line was age. The Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies had asked the following question of a large sample of African-Americans:

> "Would you support a voucher system where parents would get money from the government to send their children to the public, private, or parochial school of their choice?"

Whereas 87% of respondents aged 26-35 responded affirmatively, that number dropped precipitously to 31% for those between the ages of 51-64, and to a mere 19% for people 65 years and older. The strong support by younger African Americans, who are likely to be the parents of school-aged children, was not a big surprise, although the extent of their support was alarming. But the strong opposition by older people suggested that the organization had an important ally in its efforts to reach out to African-Americans on this issue.

Testing Salience

The observation that the public's support for something is "a mile wide and an inch deep" is a comment about the issue's **salience**. Broad but passive support (lack of salience) will not translate into action. On the other hand, a small but committed minority (for whom salience is high) can block change even if the majority tacitly supports it. Understanding salience is especially important if you are contemplating a proactive campaign to bring about reform. If the issue lacks salience even with those who support you, it may be premature to launch a reform effort; more public education about why the issue is important is probably needed.

CASE STUDY: Testing Salience

In 1999, the ACLU commissioned research on the subject of marijuana law reform. The organization already knew that medical marijuana was a winner, but it wanted to find out whether or not the public was ready to support a campaign to decriminalize recreational use for adults. A series of focus groups was followed by a national telephone survey of 1,200 adults in which respondents were asked the following question: "Decriminalization of marijuana would mean that pos-

session of marijuana is still against the law and punished with fines, but a person could no longer be arrested or sent to jail for possession of marijuana. Do you favor or oppose decriminalization of marijuana?"

At first glance, the responses were rather encouraging: 41% said they favored decriminalization—not a majority, but possibly a large enough minority upon which to build a proactive reform campaign. But upon closer examination, the data revealed that salience was a big problem in *both* directions. In the survey, respondents were asked to indicate whether they "strongly" favored or opposed the measure, or whether they only "somewhat" favored or opposed it. The question was phrased specifically to gauge salience. The data broke down as follows: of the 41% who favored decriminalization (our supporters), only 19% were "strongly" in favor. On the other hand, of the 56% opposed, 38% were "strongly opposed". In terms of salience, the opposition was much stronger than the support. The conclusion: more basic education was necessary before this issue could be put on the active policy reform agenda.

II. PUBLIC OPINION RESEARCH TOOLS

Focus Groups

Holding a focus group is what is known in the public opinion research business as *qualitative* research. No one pretends that focus groups produce scientifically valid data, but holding them at the beginning of a project definitely helps insure that the survey instrument for

the *quantitative* research (the poll) produces the information you are seeking. Focus groups help uncover the value lens through which the public looks at an issue, the range of opinions people hold, and the language they use when discussing whatever you are investigating. In the case of the marijuana research described above, for example, the focus groups demonstrated that the term "decriminalization" meant different things to different people, and that the term would have to be carefully defined when used in the survey questionnaire in order to get an accurate measure of support or opposition.

A focus group is not a spontaneous conversation. It is a carefully orchestrated discussion among six to twelve people led by a professional moderator using a prepared discussion guide. Above all, you want the participants to feel comfortable enough to express their real opinions and feelings, and it takes skill to draw people out, especially if the issue being discussed is politically sensitive. There are a number of preliminary questions to consider if you are planning focus group research.

How Many?

The number of focus groups you have may largely be a function of budget. Your consultants will probably want to have more, rather than less, but each group will cost you $5,000 to $6,000, and so deciding how many you have might involve some negotiation. Sometimes two focus groups will be enough to generate the information you need, but sometimes there are compelling reasons to have more, especially if you are interested in the role demographic characteristics plays.

Some basic rules of thumb are:

- **Region:** If you are conducting research for a local effort, obviously your focus groups should be held in that locality. But if you're trying to understand how the public thinks about an issue on a nationwide basis, you may need to conduct groups in various parts of the country in order to get a decent snapshot.

- **Race and gender:** If you want to explore how different demographic groups think about an issue, you will generally have to hold homogeneous focus groups. If you're looking for gender differences, having men and women in the same focus group will not yield reliable information. Ditto for African-Americans or any other minorities, and whites. Identity issues loom large when Americans converse with one another in a controlled environment like a focus group. If you want your participants to speak freely, you have to be able to provide a level of comfort. This applies to your choice of moderator as well, *e.g.*, an African-American focus group usually works better with an African-American moderator.

Who?

Beyond the questions of region, race and gender, there are other personal characteristics to consider. One common dividing line in focus group research is voters versus non-voters. If you are exploring an issue in the context of a possible state referendum, for example, you

will naturally want to focus on registered voters. If you are interested in differences based on ideology, you may want to recruit participants based on their party affiliation or self-definition as liberal, moderate, or conservative. Sometimes it makes sense to recruit what public opinion consultants refer to as "the engaged public"—individuals who are regular newspaper readers, voted in the last election, and either attended a meeting or communicated with their elected representative in the last year.

Where?

If you aren't concerned about exploring regional differences, then you may want to hold your focus groups in the vicinity of wherever your consultants are based in order to hold down costs. Out-of-pocket expenses can add up if your consultants have to fly to faraway locations and spend a night or two in a hotel. But sometimes it's necessary to incur the expense of holding groups out-of-town. For example, in the ACLU's marijuana law reform research project, the consultants felt it was important to hold focus groups in California because of the issue's prominence in that state (this was after the medical marijuana initiative was adopted by California voters). They were specifically interested in comparing the views of relatively well-educated California voters with those of the residents of states where the issue had not been hotly debated.

Consultants also have certain favorite cities for focus group research. They may have a good working relationship with a particular focus group facility located

in, say, Miami. There are also certain regions where people's views tend to be reflective of views nationwide. Ohio is a favorite focus group locality for that reason.

The Discussion Guide

The focus group discussion guide is basically a timed script, and developing it will be a collaborative effort. Your consultants will rely heavily upon you for background material, facts and analysis regarding the issue you are exploring. And you will rely heavily upon them for their expertise in ferreting out the intelligence you are trying to gather from this group of strangers.

Be prepared: seeing the draft discussion guide for the first time might be a bit jarring because as advocates, we are not in the habit of asking the very questions that are almost sure to elicit unfavorable responses. But in order to understand how people think about our issues, it may be necessary to "plumb the depths." And one of its principal functions is to test people's reactions to a range of messages or arguments, including those of our opponents.

Logistics

There are focus group facilities throughout the country, and your consultant will make the necessary arrangements with a facility in the regional area you've chosen. It's the facility's job to recruit participants from the surrounding area according to your consultant's specifications, *e.g.*, liberal white women between the ages of 30-

45 who voted in the last national election. Potential participants are not told the name of the organization that commissioned the research; nor are they told the specific issue to be explored. They are simply invited to come to the facility to participate in a focus group for up to two hours for a modest honorarium (which is included in the cost of the focus group).

At the very beginning of the session, the participants are informed that the session will be audio-taped for research purposes, and that they are being observed through a one-way mirror by representatives of the organization commissioning the research. In the dozen or so focus groups that I have observed, no participant has ever objected to being taped or observed.

Focus groups are usually held during the evening and you should plan to observe as many of them as you can. Not only is it a fascinating experience to watch and listen to "ordinary people" talk about the issues you work on day in and day out, but sometimes the discussion guide may turn out to have unanticipated problems or gaps, and you will want to give your consultant on-the-spot feedback so that corrections can be made. The consultant-moderators I have worked with usually excused themselves from the focus group room before time was up in order to have a quick consultation with me and other ACLU staff in the viewing room. If we felt certain areas had not been adequately explored, we could make last minute adjustments to the guide.

Debriefings and Report

If you are not able to observe the focus group in action, you will want to debrief your consultant by phone after each set of groups to make sure the discussions are on track, and to add or subtract material from the guide. After all the focus groups are completed, your consultant should give you a written report giving you the highlights and laying out areas for further exploration if the groups are to be followed by a telephone survey.

CASE STUDY: Focus Groups

In 2000, the ACLU commissioned a series of focus groups to explore the public's attitudes toward the Victims' Rights Amendment (VRA) which was then pending in Congress. The VRA would give "victims" of crime several "rights" (the terms victims and rights being undefined and open to interpretation), including the right to be heard at every stage of a prosecution, even proceedings for plea agreements. The ACLU feared that the amendment, if passed, would seriously erode the rights of crime suspects and defendants, and that amending the Constitution would set a dangerous precedent. So, the purpose of this qualitative research was to reframe the debate on the issue. The amendment's supporters had framed it as a much needed measure that would give victims more of a "say." The ACLU wanted to build opposition to the amendment, but it didn't know what would work, and it didn't have much time.

Six focus groups were held in three cities during February 2000—San Jose, Baltimore, and Richmond. They were segmented by political ideology (conservative, liberal, and moderate), and all the participants had a college education, were registered to vote, and read a daily newspaper.

The focus group discussions produced a series of key findings:

- The criminal justice system is viewed as "unfair" to both the accused and victims, but voters expressed more concern about the treatment of victims than accused.
- The idea of amending the Constitution to include victims' rights initially meets with mixed to favorable support.
- Support for the VRA grows after voters learn about specific aspects of the proposed amendment.
- Reasons to support the VRA center on having the "victim heard."
- A very strong reason to oppose the VRA is "there is no need to amend the Constitution."
- There is an opening to build opposition among conservative voters.

Based on these findings, the consultants produced the following guidelines to inform communications to build opposition to the VRA:

1. Focus on the lack of need to amend the Constitution. The most persuasive reason to oppose the VRA is that voters see no need to amend the Constitution to help crime victims. This hands-off attitude toward the Constitution is enhanced when they learn it has only been amended 17 times in the last 209 years.

2. Always talk about the ACCUSED, and remind the public that the accused has not been proven guilty. Once someone has been convicted, voters are much less concerned about infringing on their rights.

3. Illustrate how the VRA threatens the right to a fair trial and effective police work. The task for communications is to illustrate how the VRA goes beyond victims being "heard" to their having a disruptive role in prosecutions.

4. Best messengers: Victims' rights groups and domestic violence groups. Almost all voters are surprised to learn that some of these groups oppose the VRA.

Recommended message:

> **"Victims of crime should be heard and protected. But we should not unnecessarily and recklessly change the U.S. Constitution that has worked so well, and has only been amended 17 times in 209 years."**

Surveys

Unlike focus groups, surveys (polls) can yield quantitative data which can be analyzed in a myriad of ways. Surveys are a big ticket item; the fee is calculated according to how large the sample is, who is in the sample, and how long the questionnaire takes to administer. A 20-minute telephone survey of 1,000 respondents can cost in the neighborhood of $60,000. But surveys are enormously useful for testing arguments, messages, salience, and constituencies of support and opposition. Certainly if you are planning to launch a major funded campaign, and you determine that no one else has done any public opinion research on your issue relatively recently, it makes sense to invest in some original polling.

Sample Size

Random sample surveys are based upon the statistically provable premise that a small sample of individuals can represent the opinions of millions of people. But it's not an exact science, and the size of your sample is directly related to the level of confidence you can have in the data you collect (*i.e.*, your poll's "margin of error"). The bigger your sample is, the smaller the margin of error will be. And the lower the margin of error, the more accurately the views of those surveyed match those of the entire population.

According to Public Agenda,[8] however, at a certain point, you experience diminishing returns:

> "The bigger the sample, the smaller the margin of error, but once you get past a sample size of 800 to 1,000, the improvement is very small. The results of a survey of 300 people will likely be correct within 6 percentage points, while a survey of 1,000 will be correct within 3 percentage points, a lower margin of error. But that is where the dramatic differences end—when a sample is increased to 2,000 respondents, the margin of error drops very slightly, to two percentage points."

So, a sample size of 800-1,000 people will usually suffice for most polling purposes. Unless, that is, you are interested in comparing the views of a subgroup that is rare or hard to find. African-American women, for example, make up only a small percentage of the U.S. population, and in a standard random sample of 800-1,000 people, you may not find enough African-American women to give you a statistically reliable sample from which to draw conclusions. The technique for dealing with this problem is called "oversampling" —purposely seeking out members of a particular group and adding them to the main sample.

Questionnaire

The survey questionnaire is a delicate instrument that must be carefully constructed, pre-tested, and revised if necessary before it's administered to your sample. Words matter. Context matters. Order matters. The

American Association for Public Opinion Research cautions:

> "The ideal survey or poll recognizes that planning the questionnaire is one of the most critical stages in the survey development process, and gives careful attention to all phases of questionnaire development and design, including: definition of topics, concepts and content; question wording and order; and questionnaire length and format."[9]

The questionnaire can test respondents' awareness of an issue, the strength or weakness of specific arguments or statements of fact, and the palatability of various policy alternatives. It is a rule of thumb to keep questionnaires under 20 minutes in length; any more than that and you begin to lose the attention of your respondents. It is *always* a struggle to pare the survey instrument down as much as possible without losing important questions, but it is almost always necessary to do so. This is because the survey questions are not limited solely to the substantive issue you are probing. In order analyze the data in ways that will be useful, you must also ask a variety of personal questions. For example, "Did you vote in the last election?" "Are you a Democrat, a Republican, or an Independent?" "What was the last grade of school you completed?" "How often do you use the Internet?" In short, the questions add up quickly. Generally, a 15-minute survey allows for 40 to 60 questions, and an 18-minute survey allows 65 to 75 questions.

Logistics

Your consultant will subcontract the task of administering the questionnaire (the fieldwork) to a professional interviewing house. The science of polling is pretty evolved, and most often the polling firm will use a random or probability sampling of telephone numbers in selecting respondents to insure that they are representative of the public as a whole. It's important that the fieldwork be completed within a short enough period of to minimize the chances that a significant change in national or world events will influence the views of the later respondents and complicate data analysis, and a long enough period of time to allow for multiple call-backs to respondents who were initially unavailable.

Topline Results

This is the moment you've been waiting for. As soon as the fieldwork is completed, you can ask to see the "topline results"—a breakout by percentages of the responses to each question in the questionnaire. While the topline results don't give you much depth, they do give you a quick snapshot of where the public stands on your issue.

Survey Analysis

Typically, your consultant will need a minimum of several weeks, and usually more, to analyze the survey data. The responses will be cross-tabulated by demographic and other characteristics such as gender, age,

political affiliation, and region. Cross-tabulation is a basic statistical technique that reveals differences in the opinions of women versus men, African-Americans versus Latinos, Northeasterners versus Midwesterners, etc. Depending on the research design, the data may be subjected to other kinds of analyses as well. For example, cluster, or segmentation, analysis reveals how *attitudes* divide the population. Attitudinal characteristics like "optimism" or "anti-authoritarianism" or "religiosity" cross lines of race, gender, and region, and may be an important piece of the puzzle.

Once the data analysis is complete, your consultant should give you a detailed report that includes a description of the methodology used, and sections on detailed findings, messaging advice, and recommendations on how to build support for your issue. Ideally, the report should contain helpful charts and graphs illustrating key findings.

CASE STUDY: Surveys

In 1998 the ACLU commissioned a survey to inform the organization's anti-death penalty communications. The survey was preceded by six focus groups which reaffirmed what was already known from other public opinion data: support for the death penalty was deeply rooted among *all* segments of the population (even African-Americans, who are most concerned about how the death penalty is administered, are, in general, not prepared to give it up entirely), and the ability to move public opinion with pro-abolition arguments in

the near term was extremely limited. The purpose of the survey, therefore, was to learn more about whether the public would support specific limitations or restrictions on the application of the death penalty, even if it did not support outright abolition.

The survey was designed to meet three goals:

- To uncover ways to build public support for **stopping the expansion** of the death penalty;
- To determine the most effective communications to use in building public support for **limiting the use** of the death penalty; and
- To **identify target audiences** who would support initiatives to limit the death penalty and the **messages** most persuasive to these audiences.

The survey sample consisted of 1,201 adults 18 and older with a margin of error of plus or minus 2.8 percentage points at the 95% level of tolerance.[10] The fieldwork took place from March 6-14, 1998. Categories used for cross-tabulation included race, gender, marital status, employment status, religion (and in this survey we wanted to examine differences between Catholics, Protestants, and Evangelicals), ideology, region, newspaper reading practices, and whether or not the person had ever been the victim of a crime.

The data provided much fodder for analysis, and in April the ACLU's consultants delivered an 85-page report entitled, *Making the Case for Limiting and*

Stopping the Expansion of the Death Penalty, with an executive summary and list of recommendations. Briefly, the report presented the following information and advice:

Values

The values people hold that inform their opinions about the death penalty are:

- Punishing those who break society's rules;
- "Eye for an eye" retribution;
- Bringing order to chaos (in the criminal justice system);
- Protecting society and one's family and self from convicted criminals; and
- The value of fairness in how the death penalty is applied.

General attitudes toward the death penalty

- Support remains high;
- Order and certainty, deterrence, and retribution are the key reasons for support; and
- Negative attitudes toward the criminal justice system are linked to support for the death penalty.

Potential for building support for restrictions is strongest among:

- Women
- African-Americans
- Singles

- Democrats
- Liberals
- Adults who attend religious services frequently
- College educated adults
- Catholics
- Residents of the Northeast and Midwest

Messages

The survey examined the strength of ten messages supporting "the need to place more restrictions on the death penalty." Four messages were found to be very or somewhat convincing by at least 50 percent of the respondents:[11]

1. Defendants who can afford expensive legal representation don't usually get the death penalty. Most people now on death row are poor and are there because they were represented by inexperienced, court-appointed lawyers **(66% convincing)**.

2. Judges and jurors across the country apply the death penalty using different standards as to who deserves a death sentence and who does not **(66% convincing)**.

3. Restricting the death penalty to only the most horrible murderers would save the courts time and money and result in speedier executions for the worst criminals **(60% convincing)**.

4. Government studies have found that African-Americans convicted of murder tend to receive the death penalty more than white murderers, particularly if the victim is white (**50% convincing** – not surprisingly, 70% of African-American respondents found this argument convincing).

Recommendations

- Anti-death penalty advocacy would benefit from more public education about the effectiveness of the criminal justice system in punishing convicted criminals.

- Communications should stress the central theme that the death penalty is currently not being administered fairly or impartially. This is an opening to solidify support among core targets, and to attract swing groups to support specific reforms. The best messages stress unfairness based on economic inequality and regional differences.

- Begin with core targets, since even they still need convincing. They are African-Americans, women, liberals, and Catholics. Then branch out to the "persuadables": Democrats, singles, college-educated, those who attend religious services, and residents of the Northeast and Midwest.

- Messages promoting alternatives to the death penalty (life imprisonment without parole) should be cloaked in the language of **fairness**.

III. PUTTING THE DATA TO WORK

Figuring out what you are going to do with the data once you've got it is something that should occur in the very early stages of your project, because your goals will very much influence the research design and implementation. But according to Geoff Garin of Peter Hart & Associates, that sense of purpose is sometimes lacking:

> "Non-profits cover the waterfront. There is a wide range of sophistication and understanding and among the people who have less experience with survey research and less experience with communication in general the deficits tend to be lack of focus in the first instance on why they're commissioning the public opinion research. There's a lack of clarity of purpose. If uncorrected, a lack of clarity on the front end tends to result in a lack of clarity on the back end. This is money worth spending because it has specific uses and functions and groups ought to be very clear about what those uses are."[12]

A threshold question is whether you are commissioning research for public release, or for internal strategic purposes.

Public Release

The tricky thing about publicizing your research findings is that you cannot release only the findings that

are most favorable to your position. A competent reporter will want to know everything about the survey in order to make a judgment about whether or not it's scientifically valid. So, if you are commissioning research with the express purpose of publicizing the findings, you have to be prepared to share the entire survey questionnaire and the topline findings in order to establish credibility. That, of course, means that the reporter can highlight any aspect of the research he or she believes is newsworthy. If you are doing the research for public release purposes—presumably because you have very good reason to believe that the findings will be in your favor—the questionnaire will have to be designed very carefully.

For Strategic Purposes

Most of us will use public opinion research for internal purposes. Investing in research for this reason implies that you are receptive to messaging advice, even if it's inconsistent with the way in which you've talked about your issue in the past. It means that you might have rethink the way you've been "doing business." And you may have to spend some time not only digesting the information and analysis you've received for yourself, but figuring out the best way to bring other organizational and coalition spokespeople on board. This can be challenging, but it's definitely worth it.

CASE STUDY: Using the Data

The information and advice the ACLU received from its consultants following their extensive research on the death penalty was incredibly enlightening, but it also raised serious and complicated questions, not only about the ACLU's anti-death penalty work, but about the work of the national abolition movement. It became clear that none of the arguments being made for abolition could overcome the American public's strong support for the imposition of capital punishment in certain circumstances. The pro-abolition messages collided head-on with the values Americans attached to the death penalty issue, and unless the communications strategy changed, little progress could be made.

The one opening the research uncovered was the way in which the value of **fairness** came into play. The research showed that a majority of Americans believed that if we were going to have a death penalty, it had to be administered fairly and impartially. They also believed that this was not, in fact, happening. Even among those who strongly favored the death penalty, 57 percent thought the economic and regional inequality arguments were convincing reasons to "place more restrictions on the death penalty."

These research findings pointed in the direction of a very significant change, not only in language, but in the reforms being promoted. After much discussion, it was decided that the ACLU would focus its immediate energies not on abolition, but on a series of incremental reforms that would, in fact, save lives. But the first

order of business was to bring this research to the attention of coalition partners and have a discussion with them about its implications for the abolition movement as a whole.

Original public opinion research is proprietary, and a decision to share it or keep it completely confidential has to be made on a case by case basis. If your research was commissioned for internal strategic planning purposes, you will want to exercise some caution in order to prevent the data from falling into the wrong hands. In this case, the reasons to share the findings were compelling and so the ACLU reached out to all the key players in the national abolition movement and invited them to participate in a series of teleconferences and follow-up discussions. The teleconferences were presided over by the director of the ACLU's Capital Punishment Project, and featured in-depth presentations by the consultants. Over a period of several months, a new and broad consensus developed around a shift to a more incremental, state-based, strategy for anti-death penalty work.

IV. WHAT TO LOOK FOR IN A CONSULTANT

Public opinion research is a large field with many practitioners. There is a subset of consulting firms who specialize in public affairs and working with not-for-profit organizations, and the contact information for some of them can be found in Appendix II. Some attributes to look for as you are selecting a consultant to work with are:

- **Sensitivity to your issues.** Although a consultant does not have to have substantive expertise in the issue at hand, you don't want to have to spend a great deal of time explaining the basics. You are probably better off with a consultant who has a demonstrated track record working in the not-for-profit advocacy field.

- **Willingness to work with coalitions.** If you are commissioning research in coalition with other groups, or plan to share the data with coalition partners for consensus-building purposes, you will want to make sure your consultant understands coalition dynamics and has the patience to work in that environment.

- **Deliverables.** To stay up-to-date on the progress of the research, to have input at every stage, and to take full advantage of the research findings, you will want your consultant to provide you with certain deliverables. A proposed timeline is essential. You will want to receive drafts of the discussion guide and/or survey questionnaire in a timely fashion so that you can carefully review them, ask questions, and resolve problems. Written memos following the different stages of research are also very helpful. You will want to see the topline results as soon as they are available. And you should make it clear from the beginning that you will expect a final report that is comprehensive and includes messaging advice.

- **Willingness to consult and make presentations.** Public opinion research can be a galvanizing force for united action, and a compelling argument for financial support, so you want your consultant to have both the willingness, the time, and the talent to make strong, clear presentations about your research—to your staff, your funders, your regional offices, and your coalition partners.

Flying blind is not a good thing, whether you are litigating, conducting policy analysis, or engaging in communications. Public opinion research is not a luxury; it is a prerequisite for our sector's increasingly sophisticated communication work. Stated in its simplest form, understanding public opinion—whether through original research or greater familiarity with existing published research—**will produce better results.** Developing messages that resonate, identifying allies, and knowing the strength (or weakness) of their commitment are all critical to maximizing the impact of your programmatic work. This guide should serve as a starting point.

APPENDIX I

Public Opinion Research Resources on the Web

If you don't have the resources to commission original research, you can use published research that others have done. Several public policy-oriented polling organizations have rich resources on their websites and provide both the data and communications analyses.

The Gallup Organization's website at www.gallup.com is a good place to go to learn more about trends since Gallup specializes in tracking issues over long periods of time. If you do a site search for information about "gay rights", for example, you will be referred to Gallup polls taken on the issue over the past five years.

New California Media, at www.news.ncmonline.com, in partnership with USC Annenberg's Institute for Justice and Journalism and the Chinese American Voter Education Committee, conducts and publishes public opinion research directly relevant to ethnic media audiences—primarily those who are traditionally excluded from English-language media surveys.

The Pew Research Center at www.people-press.org is best known for its "regular national surveys measuring public attentiveness to major news stories," and for "polling that charts trends in values and fundamental political and social attitudes." Its user-friendly website has sections on Survey Reports, Commentary, Datasets, In the News, and FYI Other Polls. If you click on a specific polling project, you will be able to see a summary

of findings, a description of the methodology used, the survey questionnaire, and a full report, including topline results.

Public Agenda Online (www.publicagenda.org) is a great source of information about a wide range of public policy issues. From the homepage you can access information about twenty-two different policy areas, including abortion, crime, the economy, education, the environment, gay rights, immigration, poverty and welfare, and race. A click-through takes you to a Public Agenda "issue guide" where you can choose from a menu that includes information about recent polling results as well as a digest of recent news stories, facts and trends presented in graphs, and public views on major relevant policy options. Each issue guide also begins with an "Overview—The issue at a glance," which gives Public Agenda's thumbnail analysis of "the public's view."

The Roper Center is the leading educational facility in the field of public opinion. Its website at www.ropercenter.uconn.edu is the motherlode of statistical data, with a database of surveys stretching back to 1935. Roper's iPOLL service compiles data survey results from academic, commercial and media survey organizations such as Gallup Organization, Harris Interactive, and Pew Research Associates. You have to be a registered user to access the iPOLL database, but it's free.

APPENDIX II

Public Opinion Research Firms with a Good Track Record of Working with Advocacy Organizations

Belden Russonello & Stewart
1320 19th Street, NW, Suite 700
Washington, D.C. 20036
202-822-6090
www.brspoll.com

Principals:
Nancy Belden
John Russonello
Kate Stewart

The FrameWorks Institute
1776 I Street NW, 9th floor
Washington, D.C. 20006
202-833-1600
www.frameworksinstitute.org

Principals:
Susan Nall Bales
Meg Bostrum
Frank D. Gilliam, Jr.

Lake Snell Perry and Associates
1726 M Street, NW
Suite 500
Washington, D.C. 20036
202-776-9066
www.lakesnellperry.com

Principals:
Celinda Lake
Alysia Snell
Michael Perry

Peter D. Hart Research Associates
1724 Connecticut Ave., NW
Washington, D.C. 20009
202-234-5570
www.hartresearch.com

Principals:
Peter D. Hart
Geoffrey Garin
Frederick S. Yang
Guy Molyneux
Molly O'Rourke
Allan Rivlin

Global Strategy Group
895 Broadway
5th Floor
New York, NY 10003
212.260.8813
www.globalstrategygroup.com

Principals:
Jonathan Silver
Jefrey Pollock

APPENDIX III

Communications Consultants Specializing in Not-For-Profit Clients

Communications Consortium Media Center
Kathy Bonk
1200 New York Ave., N.W., Suite 300
Washington, D.C. 20005
202-326-8700
www.ccmc.org

Fenton Communications
David Fenton
1320 18th Street, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20036
202-822-5200
www.fenton.com

Douglas Gould and Company
Doug Gould
1865 Palmer Ave., Suite 103
Larchmont, NY 10538
914-833-7093
www.douglas-gould.com

McKinney & Associates
Gwen McKinney
1612 K St., NW, Ste. 904
Washington, D.C. 20006
202-833-9771
www.mcandmc.com

Pro-Media Public Relations
Robyn Stein
250 W. 57th Street, #820
New York, NY 10019
212-245-0510

Public Interest Media Group
Andrea Miller
611 Broadway
New York, NY 10012
212-260-1520
www.publicinterestmedia.com

The SPIN Project
Holly Minch
77 Federal Street
San Francisco, CA 94107
415-284-1427
www.spinproject.org

Spitfire Strategies
Kristen Grimm Wolf
1742 18th Street
Washington, D.C. 20009
202-822-5200
www.spitfirestrategies.com

APPENDIX IV

Checklist for Funders

This check list is designed to help funders evaluate grant proposals to conduct public opinion research.

- Has the grantee stated clearly and specifically to what purpose the research findings will be put? What concrete results does the grantee project once the research has been accomplished? How will such research advance the grantee's program goals?

- Has the grantee demonstrated that there is no existing published research that can be utilized for this purpose? How has this case been made?

- Does the grantee already have a research partner? If so, is the researcher's work well-regarded in the field? If not, has the grantee laid out a process for recruiting a research partner?

- Is the proposed research plan realistic? Have a sufficient number of focus groups been proposed (generally two would be the absolute minimum number from which to draw any qualitative research conclusions)? If a survey is contemplated, is the sample size large enough to yield scientifically valid data? Has the grantee designated a staff member who will be responsible for managing the relationship with the research partner?

- Is the budget realistic given the fact that focus groups cost between $4,000-$6,000 and a 20-minute telephone survey can cost $60,000 and up?

APPENDIX V

Resources

American Association for Public Opinion Research, *Standards and Best Practices—Best Practices for Survey and Public Opinion Research* (available at **www.aapor.org**).

Bales, Susan Nall, *Doing Communications Strategically: Toward A Working Definition,* April 1998 (a paper prepared for the Benton Foundation, available at **www.benton.org**).

Bostrum, Meg, *Achieving the American Dream: A Meta-Analysis of Public Opinion Concerning Poverty, Upward Mobility, and Related Issues,* September 2001 (prepared by Douglas Gould & Co. for the Ford Foundation Project *Making Work Pay for Families Today,* available at **www.economythatworks.org/reports.htm**).

FoundationWorks, *Bridging the Gap: Connecting Strategic Communication and Program Goals,* April 2003 (**www.foundationworks.org**).

Frame Works Institute, *The Frame Works Perspective: Strategic Frame Analysis* (available at **www.frame-worksinstitute.org**).

Lakoff, George, *Moral Politics: How Liberals and Conservatives Think,* University of Chicago Press (2002).

Russonello, John, *Advancing the American Journey: An Outlook on Public Opinion,* May 2001 (available from Belden Russonello & Stewart, E-mail: brs@brspoll.com).

Salmon, Charles, et. al., *Mobilizing Public Will For Social Change,* May 2003 (a paper prepared for the Communications Consortium Media Center, available at **www.mediaevaluationproject.org**).

ENDNOTES

1 See, *Bridging the Gap: Connecting Strategic Communication and Program Goals,* FoundationWorks, April 2003, at www.foundationworks.org

2 C.T. Salmon et al, "Mobilizing Public Will For Social Change," a paper prepared for the Communications Consortium Media Center (May 2003).

3 *Values and Voices*, The Benton Foundation.

4 The Communications Network serves the philanthropic community by providing strategic communications leadership, guidance and resources.

5 Telephone interview with Meg Bostrum, March 5, 2003.

6 From *Advancing the American Journey—An outlook on public opinion,* Belden Russonello & Stewart, May 2001, p. 5.

7 The ACLU rarely releases its research findings publicly. This was an exception to the usual practice of using public opinion research for internal strategic purposes only.

8 Public Agenda is a "nonpartisan, nonprofit public opinion research and citizen education organization based in New York City." It was founded in 1975 by Daniel Yankelovich and Cyrus Vance.

9 American Association for Public Opinion Research, "Standards and Best Practices—Best Practices for Survey and Public Opinion Research" at **www.aapor.org**.

10 This is the conventional formula and simply means that in 95 out of 100 samples of this size the results obtained in the sample will fall in a range of plus or minus 2.8 percentage points of what would have been obtained if every adult in the U.S. had been interviewed.

11 In retrospect, this survey exemplifies how rapidly public opinion can change in the face of new information forcefully communicated. Respondents were asked if they agreed or disagreed with this statement: "Under existing death penalty laws and procedures there is little risk that an innocent person who is wrongly convicted will be executed." Fifty-five percent agreed with the statement, and 38% disagreed, from which our consultants concluded, "Executing the innocent is not of great concern to Americans." Six months later, in November 1998, the well-publicized National Conference on Wrongful Convictions and the Death Penalty was held at Northwestern Law School, and 28 innocent former death row inmates from around the country were assembled in one place. Two months later, Anthony Porter came within two days of execution when the Illinois Supreme Court exonerated him after another man confessed to the murder. These events, and Governor Ryan's January 2000 moratorium on executions in Illinois, pushed the danger of executing innocent people to the top of the list of anti-death penalty arguments.

12 Telephone interview with Geoff Garin, March 5, 2003.