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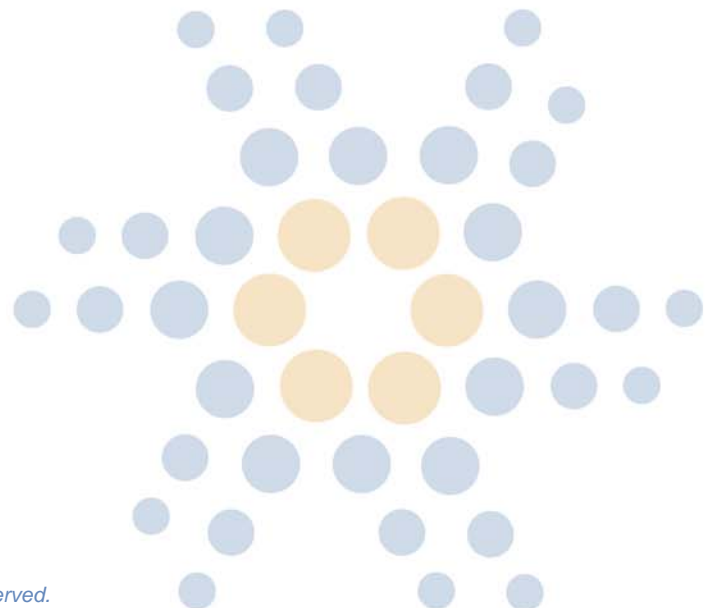
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WHITE PAPER



Influence™

How to move public opinion to win a campaign





Executive summary

This paper discusses the nature of public opinion and how it can be influenced through more effective messaging in order to achieve the greatest effect on the outcome of a social marketing or political campaign.

Candidates and causes work tirelessly to move public opinion in one direction or another through messaging. Too often, however, even the best intentioned—and best funded—campaigns fail because their messages are not delivered in a manner that resonates with the way the human mind processes information.

The purpose of this paper is to review what is known about public opinion, how marketers and campaign managers try to influence it through messaging, and the research techniques that are used to determine the messages that campaigns use to sway public opinion. This paper ends with a critique of these methods and an outline of a new approach that delivers a precise understanding of how campaigns can more effectively influence the views of their target audience.

What is Public Opinion?

Public opinion is one of the most widely used and frequently referenced social constructs in the world, particularly in democratic societies. But ever since its earliest use, there has never been a universally accepted definition of public opinion. In most ancient societies, public opinion played only a minor role due to the small size of societies and the lack of a mechanism for expressing opinions. During the Roman wars of conquest, as news and information about the success of various military campaigns circulated among the populous, the Romans began to speak about the *vox populi*. In France, Montaigne used the term ‘l’opinion publique’ (Montaigne, 1588). Later, Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Jacques Necker also frequently used the term *opinion publique* in their writings (Rousseau, 1762; Necker, 1784). The first political theorist to discuss the term was Jeremy Bentham, writing in England in the late 18th century. He theorized that public opinion had the power to influence rulers to act for the greatest happiness of the greatest number (Bentham, 1768).

Despite its contemporary daily use, disagreement remains among political scientists, sociologists and social psychologists on the precise meaning of public opinion. At times, the term is used in reference to widespread beliefs and shared opinions within a group. At other times, when the expressed opinions of the majority become irreconcilable with a minority, there is recognition of separate publics.



There is also widespread disagreement over the relevance of public opinion. Following the sanguine view of public opinion expressed by Bentham and others, the original work of George H. Gallup represents the optimistic understanding of how public opinion should operate in democratic societies. In a column titled “America Speaks,” Gallup argued that scientific polling is designed to communicate the public’s wishes to the public’s leaders. Gallup’s primary contribution to our contemporary understanding of public opinion is that scientific polling represents a new instrument that can be used to bridge the gap between the public and those in elective office responsible for making laws in their name (Gallup, 1935).

In contrast to this optimistic understanding of public opinion, Walter Lippmann earlier questioned the ability of ordinary citizens to get the objective information they need to make rational public policy choices (Lippmann, 1922). German philosopher Jurgen Habermas has more recently expressed the more cynical understanding of public opinion, theorizing that it is highly susceptible to elite manipulation through agenda setting, advertising and propaganda (Habermas, 1981).

At the core of this debate is the mediating role that is played by the mass media and by advertisers. Lippmann charged that the leaders of America’s newspapers could not be trusted to provide the public with objective information. He also believed that our individual and social “stereotypes” prevent most people from making rational policy choices (Lippmann, 1922).

Our definition of public opinion and messaging

For the purpose of this paper, the term “public opinion” is used to describe the aggregate of individually expressed opinions. Also, the term “message” is used to describe the way in which a candidate or cause communicates a position, or point of view, with the intention of influencing how the listener reacts (cognitively and emotionally) and behaves.

A campaign’s ability to communicate its message with a target audience is rarely direct. Rather, the overwhelming majority of messages reach a target audience through the mass media, which plays a crucial role in the formation and reflection of public opinion.

Our emphasis is to understand how campaigns can move the tide of public opinion through the mass media. From this perspective, campaigns can achieve greater or lesser success based on their ability to mobilize public opinion. It is the momentum—or lack of momentum—that results in the success or failure of a campaign to achieve its desired outcome, such as: 1) reducing youth violence (CDC); 2) educating parents about the tools they can use to control



television programming in their homes (Ad Council); or 3) winning an election (fill your candidate's name here).

RKM Influence™ is a unique, proprietary methodology that gives campaign managers the insight they need to achieve the greatest impact on the tide of public opinion. RKM Influence™ uses experimental priming and framing techniques to deliver a much deeper understanding of the messages that: 1) motivate the base; 2) appeal to the middle; and 3) de-motivate the opposition

Social campaigns: the Ad Council and Truth.org

The Ad Council and the American Legacy Foundation provide useful examples for understanding how messaging can be used in social marketing campaigns. The Ad Council introduced many iconic figures through its public service announcements, including McGruff the Crime Dog, the Crash Test Dummies and the phrase “friends don't let friends drive drunk.” The Ad Council continues to trumpet the significant impact that many of its campaigns have had on perceptions and behavior. It credits its Crying Indian campaign from the 1970s with changing the way people think about littering and environmental protection (Ad Council, 2004).

Most Ad Council campaigns have been inspired by topical social issues. Vince and Larry the Crash Test Dummies were developed because, in 1985, only 21 percent of people buckled their safety belts. By 2004, that figure had increased to 79 percent (Ad Council, 2004). The “Friends don't let friends drive drunk” campaign arose because, in 1982, 60 percent of automobile fatalities were alcohol related. By 2004, that figure had been reduced to 40 percent (Ad Council, 2004).

From the very beginning, the Ad Council maintained strong relationships with advertising companies, and most of their campaigns continue to be developed in concert with ad agencies on a pro-bono basis. One of the earliest Ad Council archetypes, Smokey Bear, was developed by ad agency Foote Cone & Belding. Because of this close tie to Madison Avenue, Ad Council messages develop from standard ad research techniques, including the use of focus groups. For example, the agency Dancer Fitzgerald Sample (now Saatchi & Saatchi) created McGruff the Crime Dog after focus group participants said that “we can't defeat crime, but we can work against it by taking lots of [little actions] and putting them together” (Ad Council, 2004). This inspired Jack Keil, creative director at Dancer Fitzgerald Sample, to invent McGruff, a cartoon dog capable of taking small bites out of crime, nipping away at a big problem to effect big change.



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In addition to focus groups, other organizations, like the American Legacy Foundation (formed after the landmark tobacco settlement in 1999), also use quantitative and qualitative methods to develop and test the messages they use in their anti-smoking truth® campaign. Its National Youth Tobacco Survey is an anonymous self-administered survey taken by thousands of American students, and it contains dozens of questions that help researchers understand how teens think about tobacco use (American Legacy Foundation, 2002). No doubt these data offer a great deal of insight into what issues the truth® ads should address and which messages have been effective in the past. But these attitudinal measures do not provide a direct way to predict what message will be most effective, how the message should be framed, who should deliver the message and what vernacular should be used.

Frank Luntz, George Lakoff and the modern American political message

The contemporary examples of Frank Luntz and George Lakoff provide additional insight into the nature of social and political campaigns. Political researcher, Frank Luntz, is one of the most influential figures in the development of the modern American campaign message. He is the researcher behind some of the most widely used conservative catch-phrases, including “Contract with America,” “tax relief,” “partial-birth abortion” and “the death tax.” Luntz’s primary method of message development is the focus group. One of his key elaborations is the “Instant Response” focus group technique, where participants twist dials while watching politicians deliver their messages. If they turn it one way, it registers a positive reaction, an electric “thumbs-up.” The other way means “thumbs-down” (Luntz, 1994).

Luntz’s primary contribution to our understanding of campaign messaging is the importance of keeping a razor-sharp focus on language and the need for discipline to stay “on message.” Luntz has advised Republicans on everything from environmental issues to how best to frame the impeachment of President Clinton in the late 1990s. Indeed, many consider Luntz’s work to be a major contributing factor to the party’s widespread electoral successes.



While focus groups can be a useful research tool, the use of focus groups to develop campaign messages is, at best, limiting and, at worst, misleading. Gerald Zaltman warns of the misapplication of focus groups. He says that, “Contrary to conventional wisdom, they are not effective when developing and evaluating new. . . ideas. . . . [They aren’t] based on well-founded insights from the biological and social sciences and the humanities” (Zaltman, 2003). In essence, people do not naturally think in groups. Interviewing them in groups makes it next to impossible to truly measure how a message works on individual participants outside of a group setting. The comments of 8-12 people over the course of one hour can yield lists of ideas and surface judgments, but not quantifiable results or deep insight (Zaltman, 2003).

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As Warren Mitofsky, renowned methodologist, explains in reference to Frank Luntz, “You cannot generalize from the results of a focus group, period. . . . A lot of people [use them to] do research on the cheap and that’s a good way to get in trouble” (Chinni, 2000). And as Zaltman argues, there are important, and well-known, limitations of conducting focus group research that make message development and message testing through focus groups highly problematic. What is known is that Luntz has been particularly effective in developing political messages, but what is not known is the extent to which these ideas should be attributed to the focus groups or to Luntz himself. Given the well-documented limitations of focus groups, it may very well be the latter.

Luntz has also attracted criticism for his use of quantitative research methods. In 1997, the American Association of Public Opinion Researchers (AAPOR) formally reprimanded Luntz because he refused to disclose all of the data from the polls that led to the formulation of the Republican Contract with America. He even refused to reveal the questions that he asked (Chinni, 2000). David W. Moore, author of the book *The Super Pollsters*, considers Luntz an exception even among political pollsters: “When you hear [other political pollsters] talk, they genuinely try to analyze data,” Moore says (Chinni, 2000). The fact that Luntz rarely references numbers to back-up his claims, and that he brazenly serves the ends of a single political party, raises serious concerns about the usefulness of his message testing methodology (Chinni, 2000).



On the other side of the political spectrum is George Lakoff. A linguistics professor at the University of California Berkeley, Lakoff focuses on the concept of metaphorical “framing.” He argues that most political discourse is framed in elaborate conceptual metaphors that the human brain instinctively understands. Therefore, it is not the best argument that will win the day, says Lakoff, but the best and most-broadly applied metaphor (Lakoff, 1996). As Lakoff explained in an article in 2005, “The frames in our brains can be ‘activated’ by the right combination of words and imagery, and only then, once the brain has been unlocked, can we process the facts being thrown at us” (Bai, 2005). According to Lakoff, Democrats and liberals have tended to lose the war of public opinion because they continue to think they can argue and debate effectively with reason alone. In contrast, Republicans and conservatives have tended to attract the public’s support because they argue more consistently through the use of framing (Lakoff, 1996).

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Lakoff’s theories give us useful insight into the reasons why Frank Luntz and others have been able to successfully re-frame campaigns using language and imagery that taps into our deeper, and often unconscious, mental processes. Unfortunately, they do not provide us with the tools and techniques that enable researchers to test the relative appeal of different message frames with a target audience. Influence™ was developed precisely to meet this need by giving campaigns the ability to quantitatively test various message frames using experimental priming and framing techniques.

Influence™ provides a unique methodology to test the relative appeal of different message frames

Influence™ gives campaign managers precise insight into the messages that are most compelling to a target audience, as well as insight into the precise vernacular and rhetorical framing that are most compelling (cognitively convincing) and motivational (emotionally appealing).

Each message tested using Influence™ is typically divided into three components, including: 1) a stated position on a specific campaign topic, or issue; 2) a justification, or reason, for the stated position; and 3) a rhetorical frame that casts the topic or issue within a particular metaphorical context.



Influence™ uses visual stimuli alongside text and/or streaming video. Other experimental manipulations include priming respondents with attributes such as: 1) the gender of the spokesperson; 2) the political party of the spokesperson; and 3) other salient characteristics relevant to the topic or issue. Respondents are then asked to evaluate, and respond to, several messages, the content of which is subject to experimental conditioning and randomized priming cues. The outcome is a fully representative understanding of the cognitive appeal and emotional power of the messages under investigation, and a complete understanding of how the message should be stated, justified and placed within a consistent metaphorical frame for each audience under investigation. The priming methods provide additional insight into whether the topic should be broached differently by men and women, Democrats and Republicans and any of the other priming conditions included in the research.

Influence™ provides unique insight

Influence™ is superior to other message testing methods in three important ways. First, it is quantitative, which means that the results are less susceptible to the subjective influences associated with qualitative research methods. Second, the research evaluates the cognitive and emotional appeal of each campaign message. Third, the results are generalizable to a larger population because the research employs the use of probabilistic samples consisting of individuals within a target audience.

Influence™ tells campaigns: 1) the most effective way to state a position on a topic or issue; 2) the most effective way to support—or argue for—a stated position; and 3) the most effective rhetorical frame that enables the message to resonate within a metaphorical context. It also provides insight into variations in message effectiveness based on the salient characteristics of the person delivering the message.



The responsible use of Influence™

We recognize the power that Influence™ represents for marketers, politicians and others interested in manipulating public opinion. We launched this product from the optimistic outlook that is George Gallup's legacy. From the very beginning, Gallup argued that scientific public opinion polling could be used as a barometer to mediate the will of the public and the power of those in elective office to act on behalf of the public. In its most idealized form, public opinion polling measures the pulse of democracy, enabling policy makers and the public to communicate and build consensus (Moore, 1992).

Influence™ was launched in this tradition, with the goal of making it possible for campaign managers to truly understand how audiences—both supporters and opponents—understand issues. As Jonathan Haidt has taught us, the arguments between liberals and conservatives in contemporary America reflect judgments that are based on different foundations, but both are deeply rooted in human morality (Haidt, 2004).

Our goal is not manipulation, but communication. Understanding how people think and feel about an issue, we believe, will empower campaigns with the insight they need to talk to—not at—the audiences they wish to engage.



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