

# What You Need to Know Before Using this Toolkit

LGBT Movement Communications Toolkit



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### This toolkit provides a starting point

This toolkit is a bit different from anything our movement has put together before. We know that part of what makes our opponents so effective is their disciplined and consistent messages and communications. We also know that, as a movement, we've yet to achieve this same level of messaging consistency. In fact, movement leaders have identified messaging and communications challenges as among the biggest issues that our movement faces.<sup>1</sup>

Therefore, while we're not claiming it to be perfect, this toolkit puts an initial stake in the ground on messaging and communications on lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) issues. It brings together much of the research undertaken by our movement and offers messages and communications approaches based on what that research says. It's the joint product of national and state movement organizations, market research and polling firms, and communications experts.

This toolkit is a starting point, not an end point. It's a start to help our movement work toward more effective, more consistent messaging. And it's a start to opening an ongoing dialogue about the most effective ways to talk about LGBT issues.

### This toolkit will evolve

We expect that the messages and recommendations in this toolkit will change over time. Our movement will continue to evolve and change as organizations continue to fine-tune their communications and as we gather and share research data. Also, the political, social, and legal climates will continue to change, meaning that messages that work today may be ineffective or irrelevant in the future. For this reason, this communications toolkit is organized in a binder format, so we can easily replace and update information as it changes. Our aim is to continue to work with LGBT organizations and polling and market research firms to dynamically update the

recommendations and content as needed. Toolkit readers can register for updates to this toolkit by emailing [commtoolkit@glaad.org](mailto:commtoolkit@glaad.org).

We also invite you to be part of this process. Give us your feedback; share your experiences, knowledge and research findings; and help us keep this toolkit up to date. Alternatively, feel free to contact the authors if you're undertaking a communications campaign and want to discuss ideas, approaches, methodologies, or the specifics of your communications planning.

### This toolkit may not be for everyone

As with any messaging project, we don't expect readers to agree with every recommendation in this toolkit. We also acknowledge that different organizations in our movement play different roles. This toolkit's recommendations may not work for every organization. We expect that it will be most helpful for organizations that work with moveable middle audiences (e.g., those organizations trying to increase public support, defeat a ballot initiative, or pass legislation). However, not all movement organizations play this role. For example, some organizations focus on engaging and cultivating our base, rallying existing allies and supporters, or providing services to members of our community. While we hope you'll find the content valuable and useful, how and whether you use it is up to you.

That said, we do believe this toolkit is a critical step toward helping our movement become more coordinated and effective in its public communications.

### This toolkit focuses exclusively on reaching moveable middle Americans

The moveable middle is that portion of the public who's not yet supportive of LGBT equality—but might be persuaded given the right messaging. They're not the third of Americans who support equality (our base), and they're not the third who strongly oppose it (our opponents). They're that middle third—Americans who are uncertain, or mildly to moderately unsupportive, of LGBT issues. They're the Americans we need to convince in order to win majority public support. And they're almost 100% straight.

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<sup>1</sup>This finding is from strategy work and interviews with movement and allied leaders performed in 2004 and 2007 by the Movement Advancement Project.

This doesn't mean it's not important for organizations to reach out to our own community and supporters; base communications can be critically important for mobilizing grassroots support, donations, and more. It simply means that communications to our base aren't the focus of this particular toolkit. Base communications reach people who are already supportive. This toolkit focuses on increasing the number of supporters by reaching those who are undecided or moderately opposed to equality.

Why is this distinction important? It's because reaching people who don't support equality for LGBT people is a fundamentally different challenge, and requires fundamentally different messages and messaging strategies, than mobilizing those who already do.

### **This toolkit focuses on campaigns with limited budgets or specific, short-term objectives**

If movement organizations had bottomless budgets for public education work, many of the recommendations outlined in this toolkit wouldn't apply. For example, we know that, in most areas of the country, images of same-gender couples create a backlash. With vast mass media purchases over time, organizations could potentially push past this backlash simply through the power of repeat exposure. However, even a long-term statewide public education campaign would likely require a budget in the tens of millions of dollars. In other words, it's not that we believe long-term public education campaigns aren't important. It's simply that we believe movement organizations don't have the money to do them well.

In almost all cases, movement organizations have tight budgets and can only afford small, targeted media buys. Or, they're working to fight a ballot initiative, or pass a policy objective, within a limited timeframe (weeks and months, not years). In these cases, it's far riskier to use communications that create a short-term backlash—because we won't have the money or time to overcome that backlash. Campaigns with limited budgets, or those that are trying to meet specific short-term objectives, generally need to move their target audience as quickly and cost-effectively as possible. The campaigns do this by presenting the issues in the way that market research shows is most effective at changing public opinion. Likewise, this toolkit is focused on methods and messages that change public opinion as quickly and cost-effectively as possible.

### **This toolkit emphasizes messages that reach the moveable middle—even when those messages don't resonate with us**

One of the first rules of effective communications is that communications should resonate with the target audience (in this case, the moveable middle). Often however, there's a conflict between what we want to say and what works when the moveable middle hears it. For example, the moveable middle generally reacts better to straight messengers than to LGBT messengers. They can get uncomfortable and resistant if shown images of same-gender couples. They retrench if they feel LGBT people are attacking them, as opposed to engaging in an open dialogue.

There are choices to be made. When seeking to increase the number of people who support LGBT equality, should the primary goal of our movement's communications be to:

*Say what we want to say and how we want to say it (even if it alienates the general public—specifically the moveable middle)?*

– OR –

*Tailor messages to the moveable middle to increase public support and more quickly secure legal and social protections for LGBT people (even if we'd personally prefer to use different messages)?*

This toolkit is for those who prioritize the second objective, though not at any cost. (For example, we don't advocate communications that violate deeply held convictions, hurt members of the community, or are dishonest.)

A hypothetical example from another movement might be helpful. What if the peace movement found it could end the war in Iraq by focusing exclusively on how much the war is costing each and every American, as opposed to talking about why the war is wrong? Most peace advocates would likely prefer to talk about the morality of the war. However, what if research showed this line of reasoning was not compelling to the public? In this case, talking about the financial costs of the war doesn't violate any deeply held convictions, and it does accomplish the objective of ending the war more quickly.

So what does this mean? It means this toolkit often recommends separating what you want to accomplish and why from how you talk about it in the public arena. You may want to end the war because you think it's immoral, but end up talking about how much it

costs. Your messages should help you achieve your goal, but they likely won't be about your goal or why you want to achieve it.

Bringing it back to our movement, your goal might be to pass an inclusive adoption law in your state. This may mean you need to feature pictures of children awaiting adoption, rather than images of gay men with their sons, in order to get the legislation passed (legislation that will then protect, among others, gay men and their sons). Given your goal, what messages and communications approaches get you there?

Note that you don't have to agree with the moveable middle. You also don't need to set aside the things you believe in to effectively reach the moveable middle. You just need to focus on using frames, messages, images, and spokespeople that resonate with them, as opposed to those that don't—or that run counter to their values.

Although intuitively it may seem that communications that focus on the short-term won't help us in the long-term, research shows that this isn't the case. In fact, when we reach the moveable middle by appealing to the values and ideas that matter to them, they're better able to connect to LGBT people in the long-term. Also, as we increase public support with compelling short-term messages, we can then move to the next level of messaging without creating a backlash. Finally, as LGBT people gain long-denied rights and freedoms, and continue to become a visible part of the American fold, those in the moveable middle will increasingly come to know LGBT people as their neighbors, friends, family and coworkers. As research shows, the more Americans know LGBT people, the more accepting they become.

### This toolkit focuses on using research to guide our messages

We've used market research on the moveable middle to drive the messaging recommendations in this toolkit. As part of this project, we looked at years of existing research on how the moveable middle feels about LGBT issues (including focus groups, polls, online surveys, and campaign results). We let the research findings (not our intuition) drive our recommendations. Therefore, some approaches may seem counterintuitive and different from the way our movement has talked about things in the past. That's

because this toolkit focuses on what research shows works for the moveable middle—rather than starting with what “feels” right to us.

### This toolkit uses different terminology depending on the section

You may notice that this document sometimes uses “LGBT people” and sometimes uses “gay people” or “gay and transgender people.” Here's the distinction. We've tried to use “LGBT” in sections that speak directly to our readers (in other words, in sections where we're communicating to our base—advocates for LGBT equality).

However, we usually use “gay people” or “gay and transgender people” in sections that describe how the moveable middle thinks about gay issues—or in sections that give recommendations on how to talk to moveable middle audiences. Why? Because research shows that these terms are more effective with the moveable middle. The moveable middle doesn't know what “LGBT” means, and the full term “lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender” can be overwhelming and distancing. It can also be difficult to use in public communications that need to be succinct (e.g., a television sound-bite).

That said, for communications to the moveable middle, many organizations have chosen to use the more inclusive “gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender” on first reference, but then talk about “gay people” or “gay and transgender people” thereafter. This can also be an effective solution. For more information see, “*Promote Inclusion, But Not Alphabet Soup*” in *Overall Guidelines for Talking About LGBT Issues*.

### Next steps

We're excited that you've joined us for this discussion, and we're honored to be working alongside you as we move toward equality and opportunity for all. Since this toolkit is meant to be a starting point, not an end point, there's certainly continued work to be done. There are holes in the existing research. Public attitudes will evolve. Issues will change.

We need your help to keep this toolkit as up-to-date as possible.

**Help us ensure we've got the latest research.** If you're undertaking (or have undertaken) market research, please let us know. We'd love to incorporate any non-confidential findings into the toolkit. Contact Sean Lund at GLAAD by emailing [commtoolkit@glaad.org](mailto:commtoolkit@glaad.org).

**Give us your feedback.** As you use this toolkit, or adapt it to your needs, let us know what's working and what could be improved or updated.

**Contact us if you'd like communications assistance.** If you'd like to talk through ideas for messaging, communications campaigns, market research, or crisis communications, among others, please contact Sean Lund at GLAAD by emailing [commtoolkit@glaad.org](mailto:commtoolkit@glaad.org).

**Register to stay up-to-date.** Send an email to [commtoolkit@glaad.org](mailto:commtoolkit@glaad.org) and ask to be added to the mailing list. That way, we can let you know via email whenever there are major changes to the toolkit.

We hope you find this toolkit useful. We look forward to working together to improve it!

## Stretched for Time? Focus on This Essential Reading

We realize most readers won't have the time to read this entire toolkit. Therefore, we suggest the following:

### Essential Reading

We believe the following three documents are essential to understanding the greater themes and ideas outlined in the toolkit:

- ***The Art & Science of Framing an Issue.*** This document briefly describes communications theory and best practices for framing social and political issues in ways that move public opinion.
- ***How America Thinks About LGBT Issues: The Mindset of the Moveable Middle.*** This document describes how the moveable middle thinks about LGBT issues, and is essential pre-reading for understanding this target audience.
- ***Talking to the Moveable Middle About LGBT Issues: Overall Messaging Guidelines.*** This document outlines core communications principles that apply across all communications on LGBT issues.

### Additional Selective Reading

Read the remaining documents on an as-needed basis. They've been designed to be read together, or as stand-alone documents.

- ***Communications Campaign Best Practices.*** This document outlines all of the steps of an effective communications campaign, from setting objectives to doing market and public opinion research to measuring results. Read the entire document, or skip to the section you need.
- ***How America Thinks About LGBT Issues (Opponents, Media).*** If you only have time for one document in this area, read "*Mindset of the Moveable Middle.*" Two additional documents, "*How Opponents Think About LGBT Issues,*" and "*How the Media Portrays LGBT Issues,*" create a complete perspective on how America thinks about LGBT issues.
- ***Talking to the Moveable Middle About LGBT Issues (Messaging Guides By Issue and Audience).*** Again, we recommend reading the *Overall Messaging Guidelines* before delving into the detailed documents. However, as needed, you'll find recommendations on how to talk about the major issues facing the movement (marriage; parenting and adoption; employment; Don't Ask, Don't Tell; and hate crimes), as well as how to talk to specific audiences (religious, African American, Asian Pacific Islander, Latino/a).