

POSSIBLE DIRECTIONS FOR MARRIAGE MESSAGING RESEARCH

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INTRODUCTION

With marriage messaging research becoming more common and coordinated across the LGBT movement, it is crucial that new research take into account what we already know¹ and focus on exploring new territory.

This brief provides thought starters to help break out of existing research directions—and hopefully break through to new, more effective messages. None of the ideas in this brief have been tested, and many may test poorly. However, it is that process—of testing ideas, and learning more about what works and what doesn't—that moves us toward equality.

Note that we do not recommend using any of the ideas contained in this brief in the public realm until they have been successfully tested.

The brief concludes with ideas for new and creative research *methodologies* that go beyond polls and focus groups, and which may help us gain more insight into how to change hearts and minds.

The intention of this brief is simply to help spur new ideas about future directions for marriage research. However, researchers and campaign managers should determine the most appropriate research (which may incorporate some or none of the ideas in this brief) given their particular goals and objectives, opponent messaging, target audience, etc.

IDEA 1: TRULY ILLUSTRATE “CONCRETE HARMS” (AND PULL AT THE CONSCIENCE OF THOSE VOTING THE WRONG WAY)

Recent marriage messaging has tried to find common ground with moveable middle Americans by emphasizing values like “fairness” and “equality.” However, while a person might feel vaguely uncomfortable about the “unfairness” of marriage discrimination, this messaging does not challenge them to truly “own” the real and lasting damage their “no” vote has on the lives of their friends, neighbors, or coworkers. Similarly, we generically

¹ For more information about current marriage messaging recommendations, see the LGBT Movement Communications Toolkit section on “How to Talk to the Moveable Middle about Marriage” and the recent analysis of marriage research and messaging completed by Freedom to Marry.

talk about the “legal protections” of marriage but don't really *show* how the denial of marriage affects gay people's lives. A conflicted voter is therefore left with a dilemma—“protect” an institution they hold sacred or be “unfair.” We need to up the ante. What if that same voter had to choose between “protecting” an institution they held sacred or watching their 87-year-old neighbor lose her home?²

The successful Washington state Referendum 71 campaign was one of the few recent campaigns to really illustrate a harm related to lack of marriage (through the story of Charlene Strong, who was denied the ability to be with her wife, Kate Fleming, as she lay dying in the hospital). Making harms concrete, rather than abstract, can be very effective. While not specific to marriage, the story of Janice Langbehn—who was relegated to a waiting room as her partner, Lisa Pond, died of an aneurysm during a Florida family vacation—helped move President Obama to issue an executive memorandum requiring hospitals to expand visitation rights in order to qualify for Medicaid and Medicare funds.

There are many ways to experiment with the idea of really making people understand and internalize the harm they are doing by voting the wrong way.

Illustrate the legal and other consequences of denying marriage

For example, same-sex couples are routinely denied:

- Family and Medical Leave to take care of an ill or dying partner
- Funeral, burial and last remains decision-making rights
- Access to health care through a partner's earned benefits³
- Social Security benefits⁴

² For example, due to no longer being able to afford to live in the home due to lack of Social Security survivor benefits, or because the healthy partner was not afforded spousal impoverishment protections under Medicaid. See “Improving the Lives of LGBT Older Adults” at www.lgbtmap.org and www.sageusa.org.

³ With health care now a dominant part of the national conversation, it may be worth examining this in the context of “earned benefits”—though we continue to urge caution against framing health care as a “right” in the context of marriage discussions.

However, there is a big difference between talking about these concepts in the abstract, and having people share their stories, as Charlene Strong did. We need to test the impact of emotionally devastating stories of people and committed couples who have been hurt. Rather than de-personalized messages stating that “same-sex couples don’t have medical leave,” try testing a commercial with a gay man telling a story about how he had to choose between taking care of his sick partner or continuing to work so he could pay for their food or rent.

Or turn the issue around: start by showing the issue from the perspective of a straight person.

- Test a commercial where a woman’s husband has a heart attack and needs care, and her employer threatens to fire her if she takes time to care for him. The wife is frantic. Then ask a closer: “Think this doesn’t happen? All too often, it’s a reality for gay couples today. Your vote on X could change this. Vote yes on X.”
- Same commercial as above, with the devastated wife exclaiming, “This is illegal, we’re married!” Then ask a closer: “What if you couldn’t marry your life partner? You have the power to change this—or to continue the hurt. Do the right thing. Vote yes on X.”

Finally, consider focusing specifically on how lack of marriage hurts LGBT older adults, a uniquely vulnerable population.

- Despite being one of the groups most hurt by the lack of marriage, LGBT elders are rarely featured in marriage messages, except as examples of loving couples who have been together for a very long time.
- While polling data has not exactly supported messaging around concepts such as the lack of Social Security benefits or unequal Medicaid spend-down rules, polls ask these questions in the abstract, evoking stereotypical but inaccurate images of rich gay couples who

“don’t need the money.” However, stories of older people who have lost their family home or no longer have a survival income because their relationship is not recognized might be very compelling. Americans recognize older adults as a vulnerable population and feel a responsibility to help protect them.

- Additionally, older adults are often incorrectly seen as asexual, which appears to minimize the “ick” reaction that often hampers discussions of LGBT equality around images of younger same-sex couples.

Note that our opponents have no qualms saying that marriage for same-sex couples will lead to discussions of “gay sex” in schools. Yet we are often reluctant to talk about something that is not strictly covered by a law in question. For example, without marriage, even current protections such as hospital visitation rights are often subject to the whims and misunderstandings of hospital staff and lawyers, who can deny access until it’s too late (although marriage in a particular state may not be legally necessary to gain hospital visitation).

Illustrate the emotional consequences and personalize the hurt

People don’t marry for rights and benefits. They marry for love and commitment. They marry because they have a dream. They marry because they want to make a promise to someone they love. They marry because they want to be part of something bigger than themselves. When a person is denied marriage, they are denied all of those things.

Consider testing approaches where LGBT people share how it feels to be denied the right to marry. Here are some examples of ways to execute this concept:

- Have an LGBT person talk directly to the audience: “Remember your wedding day? Many people have told me it was the happiest of their lives. And now, it’s up to you whether I might be able to marry too. Was marriage always one of your dreams? It’s definitely one of mine. Please don’t tell me I can’t marry. Please. Vote yes on X.”
- Freedom to Marry sponsored an ad on MTV where a young man knocked on endless doors asking strangers for permission to marry his

⁴ We believe that this kind of federal-focused message is worth testing, even when the marriage discussion is happening within a particular state. Even if opponents push back and claim that this shows that we’re talking about federal recognition, the discussion can still remain focused on how they want to deny committed couples the legal protections of marriage.

girlfriend. The closer asked: “How would you feel if you had to ask 30 million people for permission to marry?” Future research might execute a similar concept while choosing a more tangible or emotionally compelling illustration of harm than the need to ask others for permission (which, while memorable, doesn’t connect at the gut level).

Also consider illustrating the harm from the point of view of a straight person:

- The Garden Wedding ad in California, which showed a young straight woman facing many obstacles on her wedding day, was another attempt to help straight people understand how it might feel if there were obstacles to their own marriage.
- Recent canvass efforts led by Vote for Equality and Equality California are demonstrating that getting straight people to talk about their own marriages can be a strong emotional hook for creating empathy in the conversation.

Make voters “own” their decisions

Does it make a difference if voters are made to understand the consequences of their vote, the fact that they are responsible for their decision, and that their vote directly creates these consequences? We would love to see more research along these lines:

- The last ad in Maine’s No on 1 campaign did something very interesting—but unfortunately, due to short timeframes, there wasn’t time to test its effectiveness. Rather than talking about Maine values and showing LGBT families, the last ad made voters really “own” their decisions. The narrative told voters that with this election “On Tuesday, Maine has a clear choice. We can choose to treat some Maine families differently, to make these families feel ashamed. To deny them basic protections like health care, or making sure their children are cared for when a parent dies. Or, we can choose equality, and make Maine a place where all families are equal and have the same protections.” Note the difference between this ad, which forces people to own their choice, and an ad which simply asks voters to support fairness and equality (and does not articulate what it means to vote in the other direction).

- Consider approaches that lead people to acknowledge what their opposition to marriage says about *their own* feelings toward gay people. For example, imagine a woman talking directly to the camera: “To me, marriage is about love and commitment and responsibility. It’s about making a promise to be there for someone—and knowing they will be there for you—through the good times, and the hard times. If you don’t think I should be allowed to marry, tell me, which of those things do you think I should not be allowed to have?” This kind of message—and the open-ended nature of the question—presents something of a forced choice to the voter. Why exactly is the voter against marriage for their gay friends and family members (might it be because they believe these relationships are inherently inferior, and if so, are they willing to live with this prejudice?) Or, if the voter continues to maintain their stance against marriage, he or she must grapple with the implications of voting against their gay colleagues, friends and family members—and their relationships.

IDEA 2: SHOW THE LOVE

Recent research in Oregon⁵ shows that many Americans believe that gay couples marry for rights and benefits, whereas straight couples marry for love and commitment. This belief is highly problematic because it reinforces fears that gay and lesbian couples don’t really value and respect the “sacred” institution of marriage (and therefore, shouldn’t be granted equal marriage rights).

We need to reassure people that the ways gay and lesbian couples think about marriage are consistent with, rather than at odds with, the ways straight couples think about marriage. Otherwise, calling a same-sex couple’s committed relationship a marriage will continue to evoke a negative reaction in many Americans in the same way that Sarah Palin calling herself a “feminist” angers many liberals—it threatens their self-definition.

⁵ Statewide Poll in Oregon, May 2010

While campaigns often try to demonstrate common values by *talking about* love and commitment, speaking about these values in the abstract is different than attempting to have LGBT people share what marriage, or their partner, means to them.

Test ads that focus on couples marrying for love and commitment

Consider having LGBT spokespeople talk directly about their dreams for marriage or their life with their partner. This is similar to the recommendation about illustrating the emotional harm from lack of marriage, but the focus is more positive and aspirational, connecting to someone's hopes and dreams and love for their partner. (We look forward to hearing the results of creative testing in Oregon, which probes in this direction.)

Experiment with "Hallmark Humor"

Could we use sentimental humor to provide a more romanticized view of gay couples? Ads could focus on depictions of lesbian and/or gay couples in everyday situations that show them caring for each other amid humorous mishaps that ultimately make the caring more meaningful. Burnt birthday cakes, shrunken sweaters, awkward-entrance surprise parties—all the little things that couples look back on and laugh about.

IDEA 3: ADDRESS THE MYTHS

Focus Group participants—and swing voters—repeatedly mention a consistent set of assumptions and fears that allow them to believe that marriage is not necessary to provide the very things that same-sex couples are seeking. Even as we work to tell personal stories and create empathy, do we need a parallel track of messaging which responds to—and knocks down—these very common assumptions?

- **"Civil unions/domestic partnerships take care of the problem."** Relentless messaging on the theme of "Civil Unions Don't Work" in New Jersey appears to have generated general agreement among elected officials—including non-supporters of marriage for same-sex couples—that the Civil Union remedy is not effective. Do we need a similar effort in California, Oregon and other states to show that laws on the books do not provide real-life remedies?

- **"Can't they write contracts and create legal documents like a living will?"** Again, it is crucial to show that these documents often fail couples in their time of need, and that legal contracts are easily broken when taken to court, even by distant family members.
- **"My church/minister will be forced to marry homosexuals, or suffer the consequences."** A proactive effort to remind voters that no house of worship can—or will—be forced to perform marriages outside of their belief system could inoculate against future attacks.
- **"Does allowing gay couples to marry change the definition of marriage?"** Can we help clarify the definition of marriage (i.e. love and commitment) and take the power out of a fear-based argument from the opposition?
- **"If gay couples can marry, society will start to fall apart."** People keep talking about marriage for same-sex couples like it's a theoretical experiment that has yet to happen. However, gay couples can already marry in five states and myriad other countries, and in all of these areas, life has simply continued as usual. Would arguments of this sort help allay fears?

Basic Rights Oregon is currently testing a number of these ideas. Another area to test is whether sharing more data and information about states/countries where marriage for same-sex couples has been legal for some time without causing the sky to fall impacts undecided voters by lowering their level of fear (i.e., if it's okay in Iowa, will it be okay here, too?).

IDEA 4: UNDERSTAND HOW PEOPLE'S OPINIONS & ATTITUDES CHANGE

With much of our movement's research focused on talking to people who are in the middle of battles around marriage, we believe there would be value in researching what has made people change their mind on marriage—and trying to duplicate it. Ideas include:

- Conduct research in places that have had legal marriage for same-sex couples for a time (e.g., Massachusetts, Canada) and where what was once an incredibly contentious, hot-button issue is now just a part of everyday life. In these places, has public opinion shifted, and if so,

what specific factors have moved people toward acceptance/support? For example, were they bracing for horrible things to happen, and over time, the fact that life continued as normal led them to stop worrying about disaster? Or was knowledge of gay couples in their lives and seeing first-hand the value they placed on marriage the key to embracing marriage equality?

- Research people whose opinions on marriage equality have shifted in the last 3 years, no matter where in the U.S. they live. What caused them to change their minds? Can we find common themes? Can we re-create those themes through mass communications? Note that this kind of exploration would likely require deeper psychographic research and the use of alternative research methodologies like those discussed at the end of this brief.
- In states where marriage or some form of relationship recognition exists, there is an untapped wealth of information on how married same-sex couples are being incorporated into the fabric of communities and families. Research in this area might uncover approaches both for increasing support for marriage and for protecting recent advances in marriage equality. Consider ethnographic data collection (perhaps by academic institutions and researchers) to increase our understanding of how straight family, friends, neighbors, colleagues and other community members understand, incorporate and adapt to the unions of same-sex couples in their lives and social circles.

IDEA 5: SPOTLIGHT PEOPLE WHO HAVE CHANGED THEIR POSITION ON MARRIAGE.

Recent research with Latino/a populations shows that modeling others who have changed their mind on marriage for same-sex couples might help bring new audiences along. For example:

- A person could talk about their difficult journey from being unsupportive to becoming supportive (“I used to think X, but then I found out my niece was gay, and it really got me thinking. It’s a tough issue and it’s required a lot of soul

searching, but when I see Joanne with Christine, I think ...”)

Oregon is testing some ads along these lines, and we look forward to hearing about the results.

IDEA 6: EXPLORE WAYS TO COUNTER THE “HARMS KIDS” STRATEGY

Research continues to suggest that directly engaging our opponents’ claims that marriage for same-sex couples “harms kids” is risky—and serves to shift the conversation to their ground rather than ours. We need research about whether there is an effective counter to this opponent strategy (and if so, what it is) or whether it is more effective to simply stick to core messages as much as possible.

Testing approaches for countering this opponent strategy needs to be done with utmost care and context. For example, research shows that Americans often support protecting the children of same-sex couples (e.g., by extending partner health insurance to children); however, when such questions are asked *in the context of a marriage debate*, there tends to be a significant drop-off in support. While little in-depth research has been done on this drop-off, it appears to be because respondents worry that marriage for same-sex couples will impact their own children (e.g., by increasing visibility of, and thereby discussion of, same-sex relationships) and also because they worry that same-sex marriage will simply result in more families where children are placed in harm’s way.

Test ways to bridge away and deflect

- What are the most effective ways to “bridge” away from our opponents’ “harms kids” strategy and back to discussions that make affirmative, emotionally compelling cases for marriage? Is bridging more effective than directly addressing opponent arguments?
- Find an Achilles heel for opponents. Are there arguments or tactics we could use that would distract opponents and put them on the defensive so they fall off their core message?

Turn the argument around

Consider approaches like those offered by the campaign in Maine, which countered the “harms kids” argument with the idea that anti-gay

opponents are trying to make kids feel ashamed. This kind of message—which seems to engage with concerns about kids in ways that make our opponents the source of the problem—is an approach of direct engagement that seems to avoid many of the traps inherent in the “harms kids” message, and may be a direction worth exploring further.

Inoculate parents through fact-based outreach

In focus groups, parents who are most involved in their children’s schools seem least affected by opponents’ claims about “gay marriage being taught in schools.” Could we inoculate parents from fear-based messaging through a “parent to parent” outreach strategy (as was briefly tried in Maine) or a proactive educational effort coming from a trusted source, such as a state or local PTA? This test could take advantage of recent research⁶ which shows that it can be highly persuasive to share information delivered in an apparently unbiased format (e.g., “fact sheets”).

Use adult children of same-sex parents as spokespeople

While not a direct counter to the “harms kids” argument, we also suggest testing whether using adult children of lesbian and gay parents as spokespeople will indirectly help allay many concerns. Note that images of grown children of lesbian parents will likely be more effective (research consistently shows that gay male parents generate the most resistance among moveable audiences).

- MassEquality’s campaign to defend marriage for same-sex couples in 2007 introduced TV ads featuring Peter Hams, the twenty-something hockey player son of two lesbian moms. A well-adjusted, athletic, caring, articulate, all-American adult son, Peter sent a message that the kids of gay parents turn out just fine and

helped focus group participants who were conflicted on marriage equality resolve some of their concerns about the kids of gay and lesbian parents.

- However, many factors were at play in the ad’s success. It ran in a state that, over more than three years, had already become accustomed to marriage for gay couples through mainstream media coverage and a multi-year on-the-ground education campaign by MassEquality and GLAD.

Images of LGBT parents and their non-adult children typically do not test well. However, showing adult children and their parents may have a different result, as might ads which simply focus on the adult child rather than the larger family.

Note that Third Way is currently undertaking extensive research in this area, both to understand parents’ deep-seated concerns around what allowing gay couples to marry will mean for their own children, and to develop and test concepts to more effectively address these concerns. This four-phase research initiative will be completed in mid-2011.

IDEA 7: FIGHT BACK—EXPLORE INNOVATIVE STRATEGIES TO UNDERMINE OPPONENTS

In general, we’ve recommended against direct engagement with opponents’ arguments, as it tends to work to our opponents’ advantage by allowing them to frame the debate. However, it may be worth examining whether there are approaches that can be used to go after opponents by elevating moveable audiences’ concerns about more extremist anti-LGBT rhetoric—or by putting opponents on the defensive so they spend time countering our ads, rather than launching their own.

Put opponents on the defensive by humorously ridiculing their arguments

This would need to be done carefully, without falling into the trap of name-calling. For example:

- Commercial. [Announcer’s voice:] “Same sex couples can marry in Canada, Denmark, Sweden, etc. Did the sky fall? Did their cities turn into wastelands? Did their economies crumble?” [Show futuristic pictures of post-nuclear waste and devastation.] [Screeching halt sound,

⁶ 2010 research on talking about transgender-specific non-discrimination ordinances, led by Fran Simon of Simon Analytics, funded by the Arcus Foundation and Gill Foundation, managed by GLAAD and MAP.

woman clearing throat.] “I think it just let me marry my partner.” [Another voice:] “It let me be happy.” [Another voice:] “Well, weddings are up.” [Happy cross talk.]

- Commercial. [Person with microphone:] “So, same-sex couples can now marry in Canada. How did that affect your life?” [Hold up microphone to confused agricultural worker.] “Did your currency stabilize?” [Hold up microphone to stockbroker type and ask a similar question.] Etc.

There could also be value in mocking our opponents by pointing out the inconsistencies, illogic, mean-spiritedness or broad extremism of their positions and/or spokespeople (a la *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*). Rather than directly arguing about or countering such positions, explore whether making them the object of humorous ridicule (while still strictly avoiding name-calling) engages moveable audiences in ways that undermine our opponents’ credibility and shift the emotional tone of the discussion.

Elevate opponents’ inflammatory language (without calling them names in return!)

Recent qualitative research on nondiscrimination ordinances suggests that moveable voters are resistant to opponents’ messages about “immoral lifestyles” and other judgmental rhetoric. We recommend testing whether elevating and/or drawing attention to such rhetoric would work in marriage campaigns as well. This is similar to, but the inverse of, opponents who continue to state that LGBT advocates will “call you a bigot” for not supporting marriage for same-sex couples (because they understand that alluding to such name-calling serves to make Americans unsympathetic towards LGBT people).

IDEA 8: EXPLORE STRATEGIES TO COUNTER RELIGIOUS OBJECTIONS

Talk about “civil marriage” or “city hall weddings”

Most people don’t intuitively see distinctions among marriage, civil marriage and religious marriage. Can drawing parallels help them (e.g., the Catholic Church doesn’t believe in marrying divorced people, do they think that this is the formation of good

government policy)? Even if we succeed in drawing a distinction, does this shift support for marriage? Other ideas along these lines include talking about “courthouse weddings” or “city hall weddings” as distinguished from “church weddings.” Basic Rights Oregon and Equality California are doing some testing in this area and we look forward to hearing the results.

Explore religious inconsistencies with regard to divorce

We find it interesting that during talking-heads shows, whenever someone tries to counter a religious opponent, they normally do so by critiquing Biblical literalism or the interpretation of texts surrounding homosexuality. Yet the Bible is arguably more critical of divorce than homosexuality, and regards most second marriages as adultery. However, religious opponents would rarely argue that divorced persons should not be able to re-marry under American law; that they should not be able to teach children because of the poor moral example they set, etc. Parents would rarely disown their children for being divorced, and nobody argues you should be able to fire someone who is divorced, or dismiss them from the military.

We feel it would be interesting to dissect this inconsistency further. When this inconsistency is raised, how do people respond? Will they recognize the inconsistency and will it bring any self-realization of the double standard, relaxing their judgment of, and opposition to, same-sex marriage? How do they explain their discomfort around their gay coworker but not their divorced coworker?

Note that we do not believe that this argument would work with mainstream audiences, but we would be curious to see if it is an effective counter to push the thinking or quiet the hostility of certain types of opponents, and to understand more about what’s behind opposition to marriage for same-sex couples.

IDEA 9: UNDERSTAND WHAT LEADS TO AFRICAN AMERICAN AND LATINO/A SUPPORT

Recent Arcus Foundation research provides a framework for conversations with African Americans. However, it did not focus on marriage messaging (though it did offer key “do no harm” findings).

Building on the previous recommendations, we suggest qualitative/psychographic research to examine the path toward acceptance of marriage for same-sex couples among African Americans and Latino/as who have moved from opposed or conflicted to supportive in the past two to five years. For example, new research on Latino/Hispanic audiences—conducted by Bendixen & Amandi for GLAAD and the Gill Foundation—suggests that highlighting the stories of families who have struggled through a journey from rejection to acceptance of their gay children might open the door to greater openness to equality for LGBT people. The same research also suggests that allowing Latinos/as to acknowledge their existing discomfort with gay people—as opposed to pretending that such discomfort is a relic of the past—may help them set that discomfort aside and move toward greater acceptance of issues like marriage for gay couples.

On-the-ground experiments in D.C. and California also deserve observation—with the most promising projects being ripe for additional support in order to outreach to larger segments of the community.

IDEA 10: USE ALTERNATIVE RESEARCH METHODOLOGIES

With a number of marriage messaging research projects being planned in 2010 and beyond, we recommend considering the following:

Focus less on polls that test “talking points” and more on developing and testing creative concepts

For example, consider testing TV ads, online video, direct mail pieces, etc. We need to know more about how to construct ads that deliver messages in emotionally compelling ways. We also need to know more about *why* our audiences like or don't like certain communications.

Focus more on research that simulates campaigns

In 2009, Basic Rights Oregon (BRO) undertook a first-of-its-kind piece of campaign research, evaluating the comparative effectiveness of public education efforts involving door-to-door canvassing and a direct mail campaign. In addition to developing polished campaign creative that could be tested in

other states, the research allowed BRO to measure changes in real world public opinion over the course of a public education campaign, rather than relying on a small sample of survey respondents or focus group participants.

Think more about “out of the box” qualitative research

We need to better understand why things work or don't work. However, focus groups, while helpful, also often suffer from one or two dominant voices and little room for discussion. Think about more one-on-one interviews; online bulletin boards that allow every participant to give their input;⁷ online highlighter exercises that allow respondents to highlight effective and ineffective key words and phrases;⁸ creative methodologies like those used by ZMET;⁹ role playing; or asking participants to complete journals at home (for example, writing about how they feel about marriage for same-sex couples, writing a letter to someone LGBT to explain their position, writing a letter to themselves talking about their own journey regarding their feelings toward LGBT people over time, etc.)¹⁰

Other ideas include dial-testing or using a “perception analyzer” to test creative concepts online or in-person,¹¹ and spreading interviews over the course of a few days to give respondents a

⁷ Conducted in September 2009 by Leapfrog Marketing Research and Fran Simon of Simon Analytics for the transgender-specific non-discrimination ordinance messaging research project, managed by GLAAD and MAP.

⁸ Conducted in May 2010 by Fran Simon of Simon Analytics and Socratic Technologies as part of a national online survey for the transgender-specific non-discrimination ordinance messaging research project, managed by GLAAD and MAP.

⁹ In 2006, Olson Zaltman Associates conducted a study for Third Way in which participants were interviewed one-on-one for two hours. Prior to the interview, participants were asked to collect images from magazines and other media that represented their thoughts and feelings about gay and lesbian issues in American society. Those images formed the basis for the two-hour in-depth interviews.

¹⁰ These latter ideas were suggested by Fran Simon of Simon Analytics. We have not yet seen them tried by LGBT messaging researchers.

¹¹ With this methodology, participants watch or hear creative and track their real-time emotional reactions either by turning a dial up or down, or by using a mouse to track their reactions online.

chance to ponder, think more deeply, and absorb and internalize key messages and arguments.

Think about methodologies that minimize social influencers

One challenge we face in marriage research is that people not only want to do the right thing, but they also want to be thought of as good people. Researchers have seen this effect in focus groups, where a few dominant personalities tend to sway an entire group. Other researchers would also argue they have seen a social desirability bias in polls. Explore methodologies—like online bulletin board focus groups, online surveys and robo-polling—that show promise in more accurately gauging people’s opinions on marriage by avoiding social desirability bias.

Current Marriage Messaging Research Efforts

The Marriage Research Consortium, organized in March 2010 by Freedom to Marry, serves to coordinate efforts among organizations that are actively commissioning and working with messaging research to advance marriage for same-sex couples. This document references some of the recent and ongoing messaging research initiatives by a number of those organizations.

Organizations participating in the Marriage Research Consortium include:

- Basic Rights Oregon
- Center for American Progress
- Equality California
- Equality Maine
- Freedom to Marry
- Gay & Lesbian Advocates & Defenders (GLAD)
- Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD)
- Movement Advancement Project (MAP)
- Third Way
- The Williams Institute

For more information on the Marriage Research Consortium and how some of its members are exploring research questions proposed in this report, contact Thalia Zepatos, Director of Public Engagement at Freedom to Marry, at (503) 704-1244, or via email at thalia@freedomtomarry.org.



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