Top Findings From MASA Message Testing

**TOP PERFORMING FIVE MESSAGES**

- **GENERAL FAITH:** It is not acceptable for politicians to divide people against each other on the basis of how they choose to pray in order to use prejudice and fear for their own political advancement.

- **SPECIFIC INCIDENTS:** Mass murder is committed with many justifications. Dylann Roof, who murdered nine people in a South Carolina church, is a white supremacist; Robert Dear, who killed three at a Colorado Planned Parenthood clinic, holds fundamentalist religious beliefs; the San Bernardino shooters embraced violent Islamic extremism. We should treat all of these people as individually responsible for their actions and not to judge all white people, or religious fundamentalists, or Muslims.

- **MEDIA ACCOUNTABILITY:** Already, in the wake of the Paris and San Bernardino attacks we have seen a rise in hate crimes against Muslims and those perceived to be Muslim. The media must avoid inflammatory headlines and irresponsible reporting before all the facts are in because reckless reporting can contribute to violence and discrimination. We need responsible media coverage, not coverage that fans the flames of hate.

- **SPECIFIC HATE CRIMES:** Hate crimes against American Muslims and those perceived to be Muslim have surged in the wake of the Paris and San Bernardino attacks, including a Pittsburgh taxi driver shot in the back and a pregnant San Diego woman assaulted with her child in a stroller. It is the responsibility of all Americans to stand up against this type of bigotry.

- **HATE BEGETS HATE:** The violent actions of individuals in attacks like San Bernardino are no excuse for violence against the American Muslim community, or those perceived to be Muslims. Hate must not beget hate, and murder must not beget murder.

**A/B TESTING OF MESSAGES**

We tested all messages in A/B pairs.

1. **Specificity:** In some cases, we tested whether specificity – giving examples, using names, providing more information – produced more agreement.

   Naming politicians, including historical examples, is less helpful than talking about politics and responsibility writ large. For example, consider the following two messages.

   **MESSAGE A:** “Throughout our history, some politicians have used fear and hate to score political points, but now they’re remembered mostly for their bigotry. George Wallace is remembered for defending segregation; Senator McCarthy is synonymous with blacklists and modern witch-hunts. Today’s politicians who are exploiting fear and prejudice against Muslims and refugees are no better, and history will judge them accordingly.”

   **MESSAGE B:** “It is not acceptable for politicians to divide people against each other on the basis of how they choose to pray in order to use prejudice and fear for their own political advancement.”

   In this case, Message B did 20 points better than Message A.

   In the case of hate crimes and the refugee screening process, however, we found that the more specific the examples, the more likely respondents were to agree with the message. For
example, when discussing the US refugee screening process, arguments that emphasized the 18-24 month process, including the UN designation, along with terror screenings, did 10 points better than messages that claimed that the refugee screening process was stringent without supporting evidence.

2. **Collective vs. individual responsibility:** When discussing failures to save refugees in the past, blaming old-fashioned policies or putting the responsibility on all of society was more effective than laying the blame with specific personas or public officials. For example, consider the following messages:

   **MESSAGE A:** “Public prejudice toward Jews was very high in the 1930s and 40s. Some politicians exploited that prejudice to appear strong on national security issues, calling for the US to close our borders to refugees. Today, we see these politicians as having participated, however indirectly, in the deaths of thousands of people who might have been saved.”

   **MESSAGE B:** “Public prejudice toward Jews was very high in the 1930s and 40s. As a result, the US rejected thousands of Jews trying to escape Nazi Europe and closed our borders to refugees. Today, we know this policy resulted, however indirectly, in the deaths of thousands of people who might have been saved.”

   Message B, the message that blamed the policy rather than the politicians, performed 12 points better than the message that held politicians accountable for the deaths of refugees.

   Similarly, consider these messages:

   **MESSAGE A:** “No one should walk down a street in America and fear for their or their families' safety because of how they look or choose to pray. Yet too many American Muslims have been physically attacked on the street for speaking another language, wearing a headscarf, or exiting a house of worship. Every American has a personal responsibility to stand up against these types of hate crimes.”

   **MESSAGE B:** “No one should walk down a street in America and fear for their or their families' safety because of how they look or choose to pray. Yet too many American Muslims have been physically attacked on the street for speaking another language, wearing a headscarf, or exiting a house of worship. Elected officials have a responsibility to lead by denouncing these types of hate crimes.”

   In this case, Message A performed 13 points better than Message B, because the responsibility has been placed on the average citizen to step up to the plate and protect their neighbors.

3. **Competing values:** Emphasizing faith resonates more with the larger American public than other values, such as inclusivity, tolerance, diversity, and understanding.

   **MESSAGE A:** “Violent extremists like ISIS seek to create a wedge between Muslims and ‘the West.’ In the wake of tragedies like Paris and San Bernardino, it is more important than ever to stand together with people of all faiths and origins, united against extremism and hate.”

   **MESSAGE B:** “Violent extremists like ISIS seek to create a wedge between Muslims and ‘the West.’ In the wake of tragedies like Paris and San Bernardino, it is more important than ever to stand firm in support of our nation’s principles of inclusivity, diversity, tolerance, and understanding.”

   Message A tested 10 points better than Message B. The only difference was the reason to stand up against ISIS. Citing our nation’s principles was less convincing than invoking an image of people of all faiths and origins.