

# How to Find Love

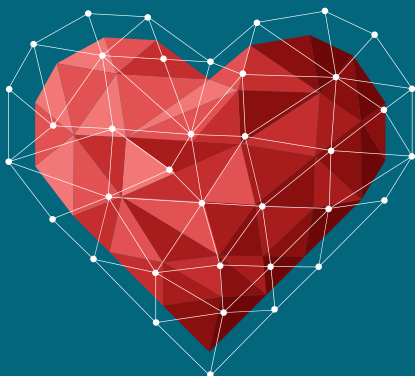
OR AT LEAST A  
GOOD PARTNER FOR  
EVIDENCE-BASED  
COMMUNICATIONS

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# About this guide

This document is intended to provide some general guidance for NGOs seeking to engage in research partnerships to make their communications for social change more effective and evidence based. In developing this guide, we reached out to several research and communications experts to ask for their advice.<sup>1</sup>

The resource includes some guidance to consider if you're thinking about engaging external partners to support you in this process. This is not meant to be an exhaustive guide; rather it's a starting point to help you think through the steps you might take.

As they say, you must first love yourself before you can love someone else. Or in this case, you must first appreciate what an evidence-based approach can bring to your communications for social change.

- The first section in this resource, **"What's to love?"** introduces the topic and defines a few key terms.
- The second section, **"How to know when it's time,"** explains how you can develop these capacities within your organisation and offers other specific suggestions.
- You may be interested in partnering with those who can help you develop, test and evaluate your efforts to change knowledge, attitudes and behaviours. You might work with a research-focused NGO, a private research firm, a professional communications firm, an academic institution or university-based researchers, a research or communications consultant or even volunteer students. But how can you find the right partner? How will you know it's love? The sections **"Looking for love or going it alone"** and **"Finding the right match"** explore these questions.
- Once you've found a good match, how do you make sure that you're getting what you need and that the research will strengthen your work? **"Making love last"** looks at the elements of maintaining an effective research partnership.
- Lastly, **"Figuring out what it's worth"** looks at the cost considerations of deciding whether to enter a partnership and the lasting value of research.

<sup>1</sup> Many people contributed to this resource. A heartfelt thank you to Tom Wein, [Busara Center for Behavioral Research](#); Amy Simon, [Goodwin Simon Strategic Research](#); Laura Piazza and Valeria Santostefano, [ILGA-Europe](#); Paul Sparks, formerly Peripheral Vision International; Bec Sanderson, [Public Interest Research Centre](#); Lori Michau, [Raising Voices](#); Varja Lipovsek, [Twaweza](#); and Miles Bredin and Aisha Onsando, [Well Made Strategy](#).



# What's to love?

## An introduction

Organisations working for human rights and social change are often trying to shift people's attitudes or encourage them to act. This work is not easy. But take heart! Gathering information—evidence that can help you decide how to shape and deliver your messages—will enable you to communicate more effectively with the people you want to reach.

You can use **research** to inform any part of a communications effort. Research can help you understand what underlies people's attitudes and behaviours and how different groups view issues from a cultural, moral and emotional perspective. If you're in the planning stages of a campaign, you could use research to help you design the campaign. This could include research to help you:

- Decide how to target and define your audience;
- Understand the factors that influence your audience's thinking and behaviour related to your issue; and
- Determine the best ways to reach your audience.

Research might entail looking more systematically at how your issue is talked about in the media or other public spaces or finding out what others have already learned about the effectiveness of similar communications efforts. If you're in the midst of a campaign, you can test messages using research methods to get feedback from the kinds of people you're trying to reach and adjust your messaging to be more effective with them. At the end of a campaign, research can help you evaluate what did and didn't work.

**Quantitative research** methods, such as surveys or polls, can allow you to collect numerical information on what a group of people think and track changes in attitudes over time (see, for example, the [AfroBarometer](#) surveys on democracy, governance and society).

**Qualitative research** methods, such as in-depth interviews with individuals or focus group discussions, can provide greater insights on what informs certain people's beliefs, understandings and responses.

Research doesn't have to be long and intensive; it can be any inquiry that helps you assess and strengthen the effectiveness of your communications to promote human rights and advance social change.

*Interested in making your communications for change more effective? Willing to challenge your assumptions? Research can help!*

# How to know when it's time

## *How can I figure out when it's the right moment to explore research for more effective communications for social change?*

If your organisation has the interest and motivation to make your communications more effective, it's time! At its core, adopting an evidence-based approach to communications is about challenging your organisation's ideas and putting yourself out there, by asking questions and testing your assumptions to make your work stronger.

- **Make yourself vulnerable.** Kick start this process by encouraging your organisation to embrace a culture of inquiry, learning and humility. It's helpful to recognize that what we know about the effectiveness of our communications approaches is limited. Often, one of the greatest barriers to effective interventions is the very passion that brought us to this work in the first place; the motivation to make the world a better place prevents us from critically examining the effectiveness of what we're doing.
- **Challenge yourself!** While all staff don't need to know how to conduct in-depth research, they do need to be willing to use evidence and to challenge assumptions. Help staff build those muscles by asking questions like, "How do we know that?" or "What assumptions are we making?" and to explain the evidence they're using to make decisions. These are important questions to ask when figuring out who you want your message to reach and why, what your message should be, how to get it to the right people and whether it's had the impact you intended.

In addition, forming research questions and theories about your communications is useful—whether or not you have the resources or time to test them out. You'll clarify your own objectives for your messaging and surface your assumptions about what'll work and why. It keeps you from falling back on the attitude of "We'll do it this way, because this is how we've always done it," and helps to guard against the tendency to confirm what you already believe—that is, "I knew this would work, because I believe in the power of X!"

- **Start small.** Often, it can make sense to do a little bit of research at a time, rather than lead off with a big, daunting project. Starting small might also help to build support for and demonstrate the value of research within your organisation with a more limited upfront investment. Research can simply entail looking into communication strategies others have tried on your issue or similar issues, or finding data from existing polls or surveys that your organisation can draw upon. If you cannot test messages with 50 people, start with 5 who are representative of the people you want to reach.

# Looking for love or going it alone

*When seeking to strengthen my organisation's communications, how should I determine when to work with an external partner or when to focus on building internal staff capacity?*

These don't have to be mutually exclusive options. Take advantage of what's available to you and get started!

- **Everyone can work to build an organisational culture that supports research and learning.** Communications is a full-team sport, so it makes sense to build the capacity of all players and not just the communications lead.
- **Don't forget to look at the capacity your organisation already has.** For example, if there's someone on your team who has skills that would be helpful—such as how to interpret other research, how to develop and conduct a survey or how to carry out an in-depth interview—get them to teach others.
- **You can draw upon free resources to support your learning,** such as materials from the [Frameworks Institute](#) or [PIRC and ILGA-Europe's guide on how to test your communications.](#)
- **You can also build connections with external researchers without entering a formal partnership—**for example, with university-based researchers interested in similar issues. You can create an informal network to get second opinions, bounce around ideas or collect information about possible partners.
- **There may be areas where you want an expert's help—**for example, to analyse the ways your issue is discussed in the media, to create and conduct a poll or survey, or to hold focus groups to test or evaluate your messages. If you decide to work with an external partner, make sure your partner is willing and able to strengthen your organisation's own capacity. Ask them how they plan to support you to learn and how you can be actively involved. It doesn't have to be through PowerPoint-focused workshops.
- **Collaborating with a professional research team can give you tools and ways to approach communications that you can continue using, even if you can't afford to contract them again.** For example, you can develop a set of questions that you can keep drawing upon to test future communications.
- **Before embarking on any partnership, think through your objectives and the questions you want to know more about.** If you don't have a strong reason for doing the research and hiring someone to support it, don't do it.

*Research projects can start small, and you can draw on free resources and connections for advice.*



# Finding the right match

*What should I consider when looking for external expertise to support evidence-based communications? What are the top three questions I should ask a potential research partner to figure out if it's the right fit?*

- 1. Do they share our values and approach?** You might not be able to find a partner whose agenda and approach completely aligns with yours. However, there must be sufficient overlap for it to make sense for both parties. Think of the things that are essential to you.

The right partner knows the local context or is ready to partner with you and/or others to learn about it. They should be willing and able to explain what they're doing and build a relationship of mutual trust—a genuine partnership.

These factors are more important than technical expertise or impressive lists of past clients. Conventional signs of qualifications can be misleading, in that they may suggest a partner who's less good at explaining difficult concepts or who's more embedded in mainstream development or advertising work.

Nonetheless, you do want to confirm that your partner possesses the skills and experience to conduct high-quality research and to ensure they are thoughtful, strategic, and ethical partners.

- Ask for references to organisations that they have worked with that are like yours.
- Have them describe the methods they would apply to your research questions.
- Are they willing to work with you to ensure that what you're measuring is relevant to your work? (For example, if you're engaging a firm that's accustomed to helping companies sell things, they may have certain ways of measuring success that might not make sense for your work.)
- If it's relevant to your case, let the firm know you want to conduct research on socially sensitive topics and ask them if they're willing to engage in that type of research; ask them for examples of challenging subjects they've conducted research on in the recent past. Do they have a demonstrated capacity to understand and navigate the unique dynamics present in this kind of research? For example, are they thoughtful about the words to use on communications materials, techniques for asking sensitive questions, confidentiality, and so on?

**2. Will you leave my organisation's capacity stronger?** It's a wasted opportunity to just outsource the research without learning anything from the process. Your partner should be willing to research "out loud" so you can learn. Have them talk through how they're doing the research and why. If it's too technical and confusing, keep asking them until they explain it in clear, understandable terms. If it makes sense, you can also observe different research activities. Regardless, all aspects of the research process should be transparent and done in partnership with you.

**3. Will this be a true partnership?** You should respect each other's expertise and strengths. The process should involve both parties learning from each other.

- Researchers need to be good consultants as well as good researchers; this means listening well, presenting findings effectively and thinking hard about what's most useful to an NGO partner. Likewise, they should be open to your questions and engage you in the research process.
- Some researchers (like those at universities, for example) may have their own research agenda. They may view partnering with an NGO like yours as a way to get information for their own research. You want a partnership where the researcher is interested in and focused on your agenda; while alignment between their research interests and yours is useful, your work should be the priority.

In recognizing the strengths and limitations of your organisation and those of any potential partner, you might determine it makes sense to work with more than one consultant. For instance, working with both a communications firm and a research firm might be particularly useful if your organisation is seeking both research capacity and support in designing communications materials based on the research findings.

- If you pursue this path, make sure that the communications firm has the same commitment to your approach and values.
- In addition, make sure the research firm and communications firm will work together and that the communications firm will be responsive to the researchers.

*Choose partners for the long term—those who share your values, respect your expertise, and will leave you stronger.*



# Making love last

## *What are the main ingredients of a successful research partnership?*

Once your organisation is clear about its research questions and has determined that an external partnership is the best way to go about answering them, the key ingredients of a successful partnership are (1) clear, shared objectives; (2) well-defined terms of partnership; and (3) regular, effective communication.

- **Discuss the terms of the partnership and come to a clear agreement.** Having a memorandum of understanding is important because research firms can be proprietary about the design, method and outputs of their research.

Think about what information you want your organisation to own and who you want to be able to share it with. For example, do you want to write a public report based on the research findings? Do you want to use videos from focus groups as training materials for other organisations in your sector, sharing them privately? Put the terms in writing to make sure everyone is on the same page.

If it's a longer-term project, you can check in on the terms of the partnership to see if things have developed or changed. If the research results will be shared widely beyond your immediate partners, then you should inform those participating in the research.

- **Establish and maintain good communications with your external partners.** It is important that both sides assign consistent points of contact for this work and know who needs to weigh in on which decisions, when. Your organisation's point person(s) should be someone who understands research enough to be involved, help to steer it, ask smart, critical questions and make the link between the research and your organisation's programs. That usually means someone who's not part of senior management but who's empowered to make basic decisions and share learning. Senior leadership should endorse the work and can be engaged in major decisions so they're involved in the process and open to what the research finds.

A good flow of communication will enable frank discussion if it looks like big adjustments are needed—for example, if there are significant changes in the context that might make the research irrelevant or other forces are pulling the organisation in another direction. We should of course honour commitments and build good relationships, but we shouldn't do research for its own sake.

- **End your partnership on good terms.** Most partnerships are going to end. That's okay. Just end them well: deliberately, and celebratory of the work you've accomplished together. Debrief together about what you learned. It'll be a good reference for the next partnership you want to enter.

Within your organisation, debrief about what went well and what you would change next time; document this learning so you can refer to it when considering new projects or partnerships.

*Make sure your research addresses a well-defined need, and your organisation is open to what the research findings may reveal.*

# Figuring out what it's worth

## *What considerations should I think about when it comes to value for money?*

- **The first thing to remember is that you can change your organisation's communications culture to be more evidence based with little or no budget.** What you need, ideally, is a savvy advocate for research on your team—not necessarily an expert, just someone with a questioning mind—and access to free resources and points of support.
- **Consider what program(s) the communications research will help strengthen.** What is the overall budget for those programs? Research should contribute to quality programming, but there must be a sufficient allocation for the programming itself. It could make sense to budget for research as a percentage of the program's overall budget. And always return to the central question: Is this helping us to improve the quality of our work?
- **Explore low-cost options for partnership:**
  - Many research firms will offer lower rates for NGOs or small organisations, so make sure to play that card and emphasise the public good of the research.
  - University departments are often eager to support “real-world” experiments because they're increasingly interested in measuring impact and need to demonstrate their relevance in order to raise funds.

When approaching universities about a partnership, emphasise how your proposed research has implications for real-world issues. You can also mention, if relevant, that you'd help provide access to audiences that they might not otherwise reach; universities typically draw on students for their studies, which is a narrow, limited audience.

Of course, be careful and clear about expectations. The deal must work for both sides. For example, universities almost always must publish the findings of their research; this may not be in your interest if you want to keep the results confidential.

- Some big research companies offer package deals that can reach a large test audience and usually use a simple design, for example, [Ipsos MORI's omnibus](#). This can be attractively cheap for NGOs but, again, be clear about expectations. These deals might be quite limited for what you want to do.



- **Good research can be useful for a long time, so think about how different kinds of research might benefit your organisation.** For example, while there might be a set of messages you're interested in testing, some in-depth qualitative research on your campaign issue can give you insights into deep patterns of thinking among your audience that you can use to shape a long-term communications strategy. This can be incredibly valuable, as you can get a sense of the big-picture narratives to emphasise or avoid in your work; this is something you might not figure out by testing one message against another.
- **Once you've done your research, go back to it on a regular basis.** There may be new opportunities to apply what you've learned. Good research doesn't just sit on a shelf!
- **Last, but not least, consider the value of the research beyond your organisation.** How might your organisation's learning benefit others? Often, the NGOs that can afford to put resources into research could think more deeply about how the research might reach or benefit other organisations working on the same issue(s). With this approach, allied organisations, including smaller NGOs and grassroots groups, can enhance their impact as well.

*Consider the lasting value of the research both to your organisation and to others.*

Go forth—  
with evidence!

We hope this guide has given you some practical advice and inspiration as you develop partnerships for evidence-based communications. There's a range of ways you can strengthen your approaches on your own and with help from others. No need to completely overhaul your work—start small and see what changes when you begin testing your assumptions and asking questions.

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Do you have questions about this guide?  
Contact **Gitta Zomorodi** ([zedconsulting@riseup.net](mailto:zedconsulting@riseup.net)) or  
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