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CQ Roll Call's Guide to Building Engaged Communities

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Advocacy in Action by Gerry Gunster

## The False Consensus Effect

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The False Consensus Effect: Perhaps you learned about it in Psych 101?

It's the tendency to overestimate the level to which other people share our beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors. In other words, a "false consensus" is what happens when you assume others think and feel as you do.

And it's a campaign killer.

All campaign strategists have fallen victim to it at one time or another. We sit in our "war rooms," vacuum-sealed away from the real world—convinced that the masses will agree with our campaign's point of view and that therefore our campaign messages will resonate.

Meanwhile, study after study demonstrates that these assumptions are rarely true. Because when you lack solid information about what others might think or do, you cannot begin to predict how your campaign will be perceived. More interesting still, false consensus even occurs when campaign strategists have access to vast amounts of polling information. That's because the more invested a person is in a particular issue or the more relevant that issue is to his or her own life, the more likely he or she is to embrace the false consensus.

### **Issue Advocacy Danger**

False consensus poses a particularly dangerous threat to issue advocacy campaigns—and even more specifically—to ballot measures. I've seen it happen dozens of times. An advocacy group believes passionately about an issue. Its members get together and they write up some ballot language. Then, they run out and collect the necessary signatures, submit their ballot initiative to the Secretary of State, and they even get the initiative certified for the next election.

But as soon as the campaign begins, it falls apart. The language they chose for the ballot doesn't resonate with voters and, ultimately, their measure is defeated on Election Day. By the time the members of the advocacy group realize their fatal flaw, it's too late.

The only method for avoiding this fatal proposition is to resist the psychological instinct to believe your own spin. Remember this vital rule: Campaigns only work when campaign teams rely exclusively on impartial research.

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## **Survey Research**

Survey research is the skilled campaign strategist's oracle. It's the only truth teller in a whirlwind of deceptive gut feelings and suppositions. That's why **survey research should always be the first step in any issue advocacy campaign.**

Before the first message is crafted or the first creative idea is even considered, surveys should be fielded so you know exactly where you stand. Because when research guides an issue advocacy campaign from the start, everything else just falls into place.

*Next week on "Advocacy in Action," an in-depth interview with a top research guru will reveal how and why research works.*