

Words that Work

Making the best case for people seeking asylum

In late 2015, the ASRC held events to launch our ground-breaking new research to find words that work and that change the debate around people seeking asylum. We were delighted with the amount of interest and support this project gained, which was made possible by engaging communications expert and researcher, Anat Shenker-Osorio (ASO Communications), and our partners, QDos and Commonality.

Background: the research

Over a six-month period in 2015, the research project involved:

- Analysis of over 1000 data points from the current language used in Australia when communicating about the issue
- One-on-one interviews with 54 advocates to explore underlying reasoning of involvement
- Focus groups in Victoria, NSW and QLD to delve into public perception
- Online survey of 1500 Australian voters across the political spectrum
- Separate samples of 2186 advocates from six organisations.
- Based on the response to messages, three clear opinion groups emerged:
 - **Support base** – those who already agree with our message
 - **Steadfast opponents** – those opposed to our message and who will never change their minds
 - **Persuadables** – the bulk of the population whose minds **can** be changed.

Overview

The job of a good message is not to say what is popular. It is to make popular what needs to be said. Changing the minds of the bulk of Australians, that is, the 'middle ground' or persuadables relies on championing the following principles:

- Seeking asylum is a fundamental human right
- All people have the right to live in peace.

The research shows what language is most effective in persuading the bulk of Australians to shift their ideas on people seeking asylum.

Messaging principles

- Lead with values like family, freedom, fairness and treating others as you'd want to be treated.
- Provide aspirational calls to create something good: effective messages are two parts solution to one part problem.
- Name the cause of harms – 'government decided' or 'leaders chose', avoid skirting blame – 'conditions worsened' 'harms were caused'. To believe a problem can be fixed through human action, people must believe human action caused it.
- Use verbs like *choose*, *create* and *decide* to imply current conditions deliberately constructed.
- Name what people come **for** more than what people leave **from**.
- Seize the moral high ground by talking about what's right, not about pragmatics or cost savings.
- People readily reject unpleasant facts that don't match their worldview and then doubt the credibility of the messenger.
- Get comfortable alienating your opposition – energise your base and persuade the middle.
- Calling to mind the nation or nationality damages our case, better to reinforce the audience as people.

Words that work

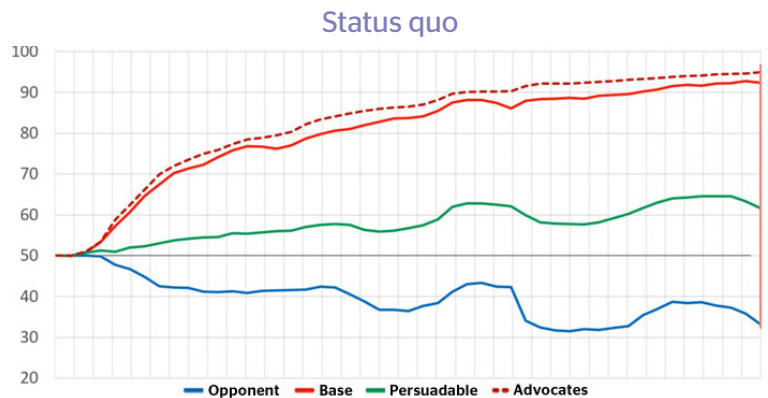
Replace	Embrace
✗ Asylum Seeker(s)	✓ People seeking asylum
✗ Australia(ns) should/must/can	✓ We should/must/can
✗ Fix our broken system, tackle the problem	✓ Create a fair and efficient process, fairly examine each (person's) case
✗ Comply with international human rights law, humanitarian and legal obligations	✓ Treat others the way we want to be treated, do the right thing
✗ Physical and sexual abuse, torture, inhumane, shunt people to remote prison camps	✓ Turn back to harm, denied basic rights
✗ Security, survival	✓ Live in peace, care for children, live free from danger, safety
✗ Be settled in Australia, be placed onshore	✓ Integrate into our communities
✗ Fleeing persecution, violence and torture	✓ Seeking safety, rebuilding their lives where it's safe, looking to set up a safe home
✗ It is not illegal to seek asylum, not a security issue, not a threat, no need to fear, myth busting	✓ It is legal to seek asylum, it is an issue of basic rights, foundation of human dignity
✗ Survive, not seeking a better life	✓ Flourish, prosper, thrive
✗ Injustices being perpetrated, harm being inflicted, conditions worsened	✓ Government choosing to detain, [Name] decided to deny rights

Messages to avoid

As part of the research, the current messages we are using as refugee and asylum-seeker advocates were also tested. As you can see from the results, our current 'status quo' message does not appeal to those whose hearts and minds we are trying to persuade.

Status quo message

It is not illegal for refugees to come here and Australia must fulfil its humanitarian and legal obligations to asylum seekers and refugees under international law and the Refugee Convention. Seeking asylum is a humanitarian issue rather than an issue of border security or defence, and people fleeing persecution, violence and torture must be treated with compassion and dignity. Mandatory detention in offshore facilities is cruel and inhumane. As signatory to the Refugee Convention Australia must fairly and efficiently assess the applications of all asylum seekers who arrive in Australian territory, including territorial waters, irrespective of their mode of arrival.



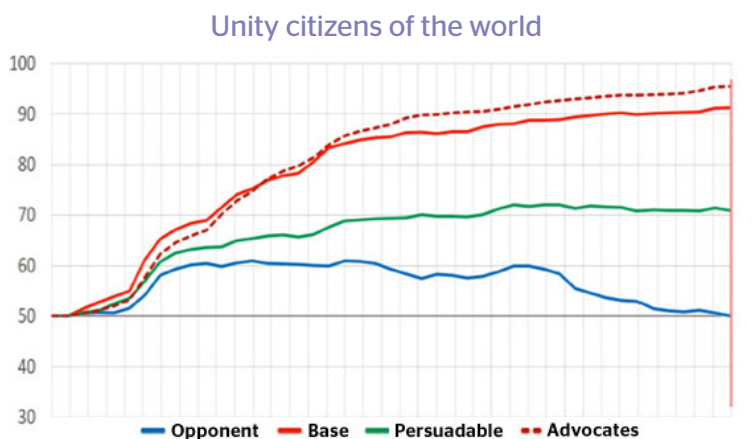
What works – best leading arguments

Dial testing led by Troy Burton and focus groups directed by John Armitage provided critical insights into messages that unequivocally moved the persuadables toward our solutions.

Unity/citizens of the world message

No matter our differences, most of us believe that all people deserve to live in peace. Our policies for people seeking asylum should respect human dignity and take place in full public view. Doing what's right means upholding people's basic rights to safety and fairness.

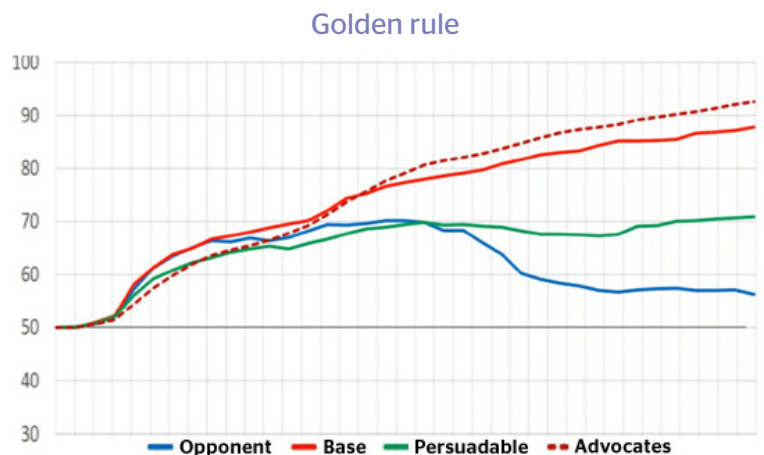
We cannot turn an issue of human rights into political bickering. We all have a stake in making the world a safer place, so we need to fairly examine each person's asylum case in a safe space and quickly integrate the people requiring asylum into our communities. This isn't a matter of right or left, but quite simply a matter of right and wrong.



Golden rule message

Most of us strive to treat others the way we'd want to be treated. If any one of us feared for our life or for our family we'd like to know that others would help us to safety. Throughout history, people have risked everything for the hope of a better life. We must ensure people's basic right to live free from danger.

By creating a fair and efficient asylum process we can show that, when people are in harm's way, we'll do the right thing. When we treat people seeking asylum with compassion and dignity, they can get on with rebuilding their lives in our communities.



Next steps

Find out more about our plans to roll out the findings in Victoria, Queensland and New South Wales at www.asrc.org.au/righttrack.

To find out more about the work of the ASRC, go to www.asrc.org.au or about our research and to and stay involved, email commeng@asrc.org.au

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Research partners

