

**Joint UNECE/OECD Work Session on Statistical Dissemination and Communication**  
(14-15 February 2005, Henley-on-Thames, United Kingdom)

Topic (i): Reputation management for target audiences

## **BUILDING THE REPUTATION OF A STATISTICAL OFFICE THROUGH EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION**

### **Invited Paper**

Submitted by the Office for National Statistics, United Kingdom<sup>1</sup>

#### **1. INTRODUCTION**

1. Independent and trustworthy statistics are the cornerstone of a healthy democracy. Statistics encourage debate, inform decision-making, both inside and outside government and allow people to judge whether the Government is delivering on its promises. For official statistics to play that key role effectively a very high level of public trust is needed both in the organisation that produces statistics and in the quality and integrity of the information it produces.

2. Building public recognition for the importance, independence, professionalism and good reputation of a statistical office is a long-term undertaking that depends on a complex range of interactions in order to succeed. Confidence is critical to the willingness of the public to trust statistics, to take part in government surveys and to follow policy recommendations based on official statistics.

3. Statistical information now has a role and a prominence it has never had before. Governments are making more strategic use of statistics in their performance measures and evidence-based decision-making. Citizens are looking to statistics both to help make sense of the world around them and to help judge the performance of their Government. The media are ever more cynical and reluctant to take Government produced information at face value.

4. Against this backdrop how do we maintain and build the reputation of our organisations and the statistics they produce?

#### **2. WHAT IS REPUTATION?**

2.1 Reputation is what other people think of us and is built on trust.

2.2 Trust is based on a belief in an organisation's good intentions and standards of behaviour.

2.3 Reputation is decided by others who observe the way we behave. In a real sense our users and customers 'own' our reputation and have the power to either build it up or run it down. Public

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opinion can close a company, remove a Government, stop a war or start a movement and statistical offices are not immune.

2.4 Reputation must be managed proactively and used to positively support the development and implementation of business strategy. People prefer to use the services of an organisation they trust. Employees want to work for an organisation they respect and whose values they trust.

2.5 Key stakeholders will want to support an organisation they have good relationships with. Ministers want to be proud of a statistical office that plays a key part in national life.

2.6 Reputation is a precious asset that can make or break an organisation. It can take years to build and seconds to lose. For these reasons it should be a key issue for senior managers and needs to be closely aligned with business strategy. Reputation management is not an add-on but should be an integral part of how an organisation manages its business.

2.7 This paper explores how good communication practice can contribute to building and shaping the reputation of a statistical office.

### 3. BUILDING AND MAINTAINING REPUTATION

#### 3.1 CLEAR OBJECTIVES

*The way to gain a good reputation is to endeavour to be what you desire to appear*  
Socrates 470BC – 399BC

3.2 The starting point for a strategic approach to reputation management is to be clear about what you want to be known and respected for. In ONS we aim to build our reputation on the following objectives:

- **A vital player in national life**  
The aim is for National Statistics to be recognised and acknowledged as a vital, essential and indispensable player in national life. Our information and services must be such that people cannot imagine doing without them.
- **The trusted source of information on every aspect of British life**  
The aim is to firmly establish National Statistics as the most trusted source of information on every aspect of social and economic life. Our information and analysis must be seen as the reference point from which others navigate and be accepted without question.
- **A world class statistical service**  
Our communication and services need to be clear, consistent, coherent and reliable. Quality and reliability should be implicit. Our brand identity needs to be strongly and confidently expressed in our every communication and be integral to the experience of our services.

#### 3.3 INTEGRITY AND POLITICAL INDEPENDENCE

*Integrity is doing the right thing even if no one is watching.*  
Anon

3.4 The past few decades in the UK has seen a marked decline in public trust in government institutions. There is a strong related association between trust in official figures and trust in government institutions, which has similarly declined. Not surprisingly there is greater distrust of statistics produced by government departments, which are seen to have a vested interest in their

results. There is a correspondingly greater trust in statistics produced by a specialist statistical office that has no apparent vested interest in the statistics it produces.

3.5 This is a big issue and the subject of great debate but with no easy answers in sight. A major ONS study on public trust – including both qualitative and quantitative research – is due to report at the end of February 2005. It is hoped that this will provide both useful insights and a benchmark for regular monitoring.

3.6 What is already clear is that the ONS should increase awareness of its role as a specialist statistical office and build a greater understanding of its freedom from political influence. We are currently engaged in a project to redefine and establish a clearer and more potent corporate identity. We plan to use this to build greater awareness and understanding and create a clearer separation between the statistics that ONS produces and those of other government departments.

### **3.7 ISSUE MANAGEMENT**

#### **3.8 Awareness of the potential for controversy**

*In war you can only be killed once but in politics, many times*  
Winston Churchill (1874-1965)

3.7 A big risk to the reputation of ONS is insufficient awareness across the organisation of issues with the potential to damage reputation. When dealing with potentially difficult issues it is essential to have advance warning and to put effort into good preparation, particularly in terms of providing clear briefing and explanation.

3.8 When mistakes that may have an impact on reputation happen it is important that those at junior level take things seriously and act quickly to head off disaster. It is then important that senior managers are involved and press officers informed at an early stage.

3.9 We have put in place better forward planning arrangements both within the communication function and beyond. This enables us to have greater foresight of potentially controversial issues and to take mitigating action earlier.

3.10 Mistakes and inaccuracies can be hugely magnified through publication on the web. Revising and withdrawing inaccurate figures from 23 copies of a publication is of a different order of magnitude than from data published electronically for an audience of millions.

#### **3.11 Senior level involvement**

3.12 It is essential that reputation management is regarded as the proper responsibility of the senior management team. Emerging issues need to be identified and considered at strategic level and responses developed that align with key principles and priorities.

3.14 In ONS the National Statistician, Executive Directors and communication staff (Communication Director and Chief Press Officer) meet once a week to consider the previous week's media coverage, to review forthcoming statistical releases and to identify any emerging issues that may cause difficulty. This session is invaluable in helping anticipate risk to the ONS reputation and in putting together action plans that help avert or limit potential damage.

3.15 On the more positive side, these sessions also provide a forum for discussing opportunities for building and enhancing reputation.

### **3.16 Rapid rebuttal/acknowledging mistakes**

*Honesty is the best policy. If I lose mine honour, I lose myself.*  
William Shakespeare 1564-1616)

3.17 Responding to media criticism openly and positively when it is justified and refuting the unjust rapidly and robustly are key to building trust and respect.

3.18 Being open and honest about shortcomings and disclosing the background fully and frankly has helped contain bad news and get it over with quickly. The story has not then had the capacity to ‘unravel’ over several days and the press has not pursued the issue in the hope that there is more to be uncovered.

3.19 A well-oiled system is in place for rapidly responding to any misrepresentation in the media. We aim to produce short, sharp rebuttal letters by noon. Follow-up calls are made to persistent critics with invitations to one-to-one briefings in order to foster greater understanding and build relationships. Out of 50 rebuttal letters sent last year, almost half were published.

3.20 As part of our policy on openness and transparency all rebuttal letters are now published on the web.

3.21 We take a ‘task force’ approach to managing long running issues. A small group of people actively manage the position and deploy a range of tactics such as briefing third party supporters, briefing critics, placing counter articles in the press and publishing background explanations on the website.

3.22 Corrections to errors in statistical releases are routinely acknowledged and highlighted on the homepage of the website.

### **3.23 UNDERSTANDING OUR AUDIENCES**

3.24 Understanding and responding to the needs of our users is a crucial starting point to building trust and confidence. It is only by developing this understanding that our users will feel that we have their best interests at heart.

3.25 A major programme of market research helps us understand what users need, how they want statistics delivered and what they wish to use them for. It enables ONS to make the most effective use of resources and best focus on the things that really matter to users. It also helps anticipate future needs to plan and invest more effectively.

3.26 The research programme is wide ranging and uses a variety of methods to stimulate discussion and response. It covers research on statistical services and products, web usability, public confidence and trust in statistics, brand identity, service delivery and the effectiveness of survey communication material.

### **3.27 CLEAR COMMUNICATION**

#### **3.28 Communicating in clear language**

*Without trust, words become the hollow sound of a wooden gong. With trust, words become life itself.*  
Anon

3.29 Communicating using clear and straightforward language that can be easily understood is essential in building trust. Complex sentence constructions, specialist jargon and general gobbledegook can make readers feel patronised, frustrated and angry. It can also make the issuing organisation look as if it is deliberately hiding something. Increasingly, the public expects government to communicate clearly and is critical and distrustful when it doesn't.

3.30 Clear communication is seen as central to the reputation of ONS and the trust and credibility of the statistical information it produces. There is a range of measures in place to help ensure that our communication is as clear as possible. These include experienced editors and communication professionals working closely with statisticians to produce information intended for a broad general audience. The Communication Division is responsible for setting and maintaining standards of plain English and clear communication in the top or presentational layer of information, such as news releases; topic based summaries on the website and promotional material.

3.31 Standards are maintained through training courses in plain writing and through the application of the *ONS house style and author's guide*. Besides encouraging staff across ONS to write in a clearer way, a small team of editors provides an editing and advice service to statistical authors.

### **3.32 Stories not data:**

*The more elaborate our means of communication, the less we communicate*  
Joseph Priestley

3.33 Statistics on their own mean nothing. It is only when they are applied to the lives of real people that they acquire true interest and relevance. The ability to tell a story and help people to make sense of the world around them is crucial to the understanding of statistics – and to their trust in them.

3.34 Presenting statistical stories and summaries is a key aspect of our approach to communication and reputation. This is exemplified in our approach to the web where we have developed a statistical news site with a top layer of easy to understand statistical stories. These are easily updated and complete in their own right as well as aiding navigation to other relevant summaries and to the in-depth articles and data in databases.

### **3.35 Direct, unmediated communication:**

3.36 The news media don't exist to present our case in the way we want it presented. They exist to sell their newspapers by entertaining their readers.

3.37 Although the media, with their enormous capacity to reach millions, is key to successful reputation management we must also use other more direct means of reaching key audiences. These will allow us unmediated direct access to key audiences so that we can put our case to them directly. The web presents great opportunities for direct and unmediated access to millions. For example, the National Statistics website currently has up to 700,000 unique visitors each month.

3.38 Other means of reaching important audiences are via magazines and newsletters and through personalised services such as telephone and email enquiry services.

3.39 New technology opens a wide range of new opportunities for direct communication included targeted email, customer relationship management systems and text messaging.

### **3.40 THE ROLE OF THE NEWS MEDIA**

*For most of the general population their only exposure to official statistics is via the news media... Today, television is the primary news source for citizens of industrialised countries.*

Communicating with the Media - A Guide for Statistical Organisations  
United National Economic Commission for Europe

3.41 Media coverage has a disproportionately high impact on ONS reputation and must be the area for most, but not all, attention.

3.42 Providing honest, dependable and accessible information to the government, professional users and the public, is one of the primary roles of a statistical office.

3.43 Free editorial coverage in the press, TV and radio is one of the most important and cost effective means of communicating statistical information to the broadest possible set of audiences. High profile releases from ONS, for example, often reach total audiences of around 30 million people.

3.44 Besides informing a wide audience of important statistical news, media coverage also encourages large numbers of people to seek further, more in depth information via the National Statistics website. Visitor traffic to the website rises in direct proportion to media coverage. Positive media coverage also enhances ONS credibility and reputation in the eyes of Ministers, Government and professional users. It also helps to improve survey response rates.

3.45 Although effective at reaching large audiences, the information we provide to the media is mediated by them and may not be presented in the way that we want it to be. The media has its own agenda – to entertain, generate debate and to sell newspapers or advertising space. It is in control of the message and has a significant role in making or breaking the reputation of the ONS.

3.46 In order to ensure that news reporting is as fair and accurate as possible we do the following:

- Establish good relations with journalists and commentators
- Produce clear news releases ready for use without alteration
- Look beyond the broad sheet media to serve a wider TV and radio audience
- Make special provision for the regional media
- Monitor and measure both the scope and quality of media coverage
- Provide media training for all statisticians who are writing for or presenting to the media

### **3.47 Good relations with journalists and commentators:**

3.48 Establishing good relations with journalists and commentators is simply good sense. Many of the journalists that cover statistical stories are ‘regulars’ and need to be treated as valued customers. Well-targeted news releases, telephone calls to alert them to important information and prompt handling of enquires all help make a journalist’s life easier and will build mutual respect and empathy. Such relationships may do much to mitigate critical coverage during difficult times.

3.49 Providing interviews and access to senior people, including the National Statistician, helps to put a human face to the organisation. It also helps establish openness and transparency and create greater understanding leading to better informed and more sympathetic coverage.

3.50 Direct access to statistical specialists is a feature of media management at ONS. Unlike other government departments, where only press officers talk to the media, statistical specialists present their work at media briefings and may talk directly to journalists with follow-up enquiries. Although

this, at times, is more challenging to manage it pays dividends in terms of increased openness and trust.

### **3.51 Clear and accessible news releases:**

*Styled and structured as a news story, the news release is a Department's shop window for its most cynical, influential and impatient clients. The objective is copy that is so clear, accurate and reader-friendly that the editorial process finds it impossible to improve.*

The Government Information and Communication Service Handbook – a Guide for Government Information Officers

3.52 A good news release must be timely, clear, properly structured, succinct, unambiguous and complete. The sole purpose of a news release is to communicate information to the public with as little modification as possible. Journalists cannot be expected to 'translate' statistical jargon or complex constructions and get it right. If they receive a poorly written news release they will either ignore it completely or they may attempt to rewrite it and introduce error and inaccuracy.

3.53 Preparing clear, interesting and relevant news releases is best approached as a joint endeavour between statisticians (who are experts in drawing out interesting and relevant analysis) and press officers (who are experts in writing for a news audience).

### **3.54 Achieving coverage in a wide range of media:**

*Television is the first truly democratic culture - the first culture available to everybody and entirely governed by what the people want.*

Clive Barnes

#### **1) Television**

3.55 Traditionally in ONS there has been an over concentration on national news paper coverage and little consistent effort to achieve coverage in a broader range of media including TV, radio, online, regional, ethnic, specialist and consumer. Although newspapers have an agenda setting role, to reach wider audiences we need to look to a wider range of media.

3.56 Research shows that in Britain national newspapers are the least used and also the least trusted medium for news. This follows an increasing tendency towards opinion and comment and an over sensationalism of issues rather than straight news reporting. Research shows that the TV, radio and the regional media – where reportage is straighter and more factual - are more trusted as sources of news. Online news sites also receive high trust ratings for similar reasons.

3.57 There are clearly considerable gains to be made in increasing trust in statistics and in reaching a wider audience with vital and relevant information. Reaching wider audiences via TV and radio and other forms of media bring new demands and challenges both for the communication teams and for statisticians.

3.58 To achieve TV coverage, it is not enough simply to send out a news release and hope for the best. Ideally, the story needs to be capable of being illustrated in a visual way and the TV programme advised of suitable filming opportunities. It helps if some background filming can be done in advance. Being able to suggest or to provide interesting filming and interview opportunities increases the likelihood of coverage considerably.

3.59 One of the most challenging aspects of achieving TV coverage for statistics is the internal culture of a statistical office. Organisations that are used to disseminating information to a narrow set of expert groups do not take naturally to the demands of popularising information for the mass media.

3.60 Examples of successful TV coverage includes the launch of Census population figures and the release of survey information on household expenditure. The Census launch achieved nearly six hours of TV and radio broadcast coverage seen by 30 million people. The press and broadcast coverage, if bought at standard advertising rates, would have been worth £6.5 million.

3.61 Media coverage drove up web traffic to a record 134,000 individual visitors in a single day. This resulted in a substantial permanent rise in visitor traffic to the website as the launch helped us to reach a large new audience for statistics. .

3.62 TV coverage of the ONS annual family spending survey, where we used an average family house to illustrate the results, was extensive and dominated that day's news agenda. Broadcasters were very enthusiastic and said it was one of the best-organised filming opportunities they had been invited to. During the month that the story ran, there was small but significant rise in ONS survey responses. The exercise won a major PR award and was highly commended for two others.

## 2) Radio

*I prefer radio to TV because the pictures are better.*  
Nine year old boy

3.63 Like TV, national and, particularly, local radio is among the most trusted and credible sources of information for the majority of the British population. This particularly applies to the BBC local radio network, which has a duty to provide information programming alongside the usual mix of news and music. A high percentage of people (70 per cent) receive their news and information via national and local radio. Radio, particularly the BBC local news network, offers many opportunities both on news and feature programmes for intelligent and informed coverage of statistics

3.64 Many of the proposals for increasing radio coverage are similar to those for TV. Particular attention needs to be paid to targeting radio stations and in tailoring material to their needs. Good forward planning, giving thought to painting a picture in words and the availability of trained and confident spokespeople is crucial. Radio has the advantage of being a very news hungry medium which ensures that press office effort is almost always rewarded with good coverage.

## 3) Internet

*People using the Internet want information fast. Should they discover when they access your site that it's badly written and organised, they may log off and never come back.*  
ONS house style and author's guide.

3.65 On-line news services offer great potential for reaching a wider audience with intelligent, well-reported statistical information. They are widely trusted by the public and have the advantage of being able to include links back to the ONS website for those interested in finding out more on a topic.

3.66 On-line news services tend to be small and understaffed and don't have the time nor resources to edit complicated material. This creates excellent opportunities for well presented, clear and interesting statistical stories. We have a good relationship with BBC News Online who use much of our material – provided it has popular appeal. The BBC website carries links to National Statistics Online and the resulting traffic accounts for around seven per cent of its visitors. This is a big growth area with much potential for wider coverage based more directly on ONS information and the ability to attract huge new audiences to our website



#### 4) Regional media

*A single death is a tragedy; a million deaths is a statistic.*  
Joseph Stalin (1879 - 1953)

3.67 Local information is of huge interest to a wide public. It has the potential to be of direct relevance and interest in a way that national news can never be. With devolution and greater local autonomy, regional media are assuming a much greater importance. Regional and local media are highly trusted by their audiences and offer credible outlets. They are news hungry and offer excellent opportunities for greater coverage of local statistics

3.68 Our latest media monitoring reports show that regional coverage is now outstripping national coverage. It has the added bonus of being more positive and almost never critical.

#### 5) Specialist and consumer media

3.69 Currently very little effort is made to understand these audiences and to tailor and target material at them but we regard them as the next frontier for getting statistical information to new audiences. We have plans to tailor material and targeting it at specialist media – babies names to parent magazines, Neighbourhood Statistics to the property press, for example.

#### 6) Media monitoring and measuring

*All wish to possess knowledge, but few, comparatively speaking, are willing to pay the price.*  
Juvenal

3.70 Media monitoring is a surprisingly effective tool for encouraging a greater volume of fair and accurate media coverage.

3.71 Media monitoring services are now very sophisticated and go far beyond the simple provision of a daily news cutting service. They can, for example, evaluate the tonal quality of coverage against whether information has been reported in a positive, neutral or critical way. Services can also track the coverage gained by each news release.

3.72 These new monitoring tools enable ONS to fine-tune its media coverage and to redirect its efforts to where it is best rewarded. It provides an excellent negotiating tool between statisticians and press officers, as the results of providing clearer, more interesting and relevant press releases are clear to see. Over time, such tools also provide an objective measure of Press Office performance, enabling objective targets to be set and measured.

#### 7) Training in media awareness and presentation skills

*Excellence is an art won by training and habituation.*  
Aristotle 384 – 322BC

3.73 Dealing with the media can be difficult and challenging and requires statisticians to have a good understanding of the media and to be trained as confident and effective presenters and spokespeople.

3.74 The ONS has a well-developed media training programme that is supported and valued at senior level. It aims to provide a good overview of the media context and how to present their work to maximum effect. A key goal is ensuring that statisticians are aware that they work for the benefit of all, including the public, and not just for a narrow set of like minded experts.

3.75 Media training is something that needs constant refreshing. For example, a statistician who regularly presents information to the media should go on a refresher course at least every two years. Prior to a major launch it is always worthwhile providing short refresher training for all the spokespeople on the subject in hand.

3.76 External companies with broadcast experience provide ONS media training. This ensures that sharp edge experience is applied to ONS needs. It also means that the courses have great credibility with ONS participants.

### **3.77 RELIABLE AND CONSISTENT SERVICES**

3.78 Providing reliable and robust services is key to building trust and confidence. It is important, for example, that our website is able to handle extremely high volumes of visits with no loss of functionality. We are also able to monitor and respond to visitor interest by highlighting topical subjects and revising content on an hourly basis when necessary. An integrated telephone and e-mail enquiry service serves as back up to deal with more complex queries.

3.79 Better corporate presentation with higher design standards and greater coherence and consistency in look and feel between different media - website, publications, survey information, event management – has helped present a more consistent and coherent face to the world.

## **4. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS**

4.1 A good reputation is something that the ONS can not take for granted. Trust and confidence are its lifeblood without which its figures will not be believed; people will not take part in its surveys and no one will act on the evidence presented. As trust in government declines and the media get more demanding and critical, so the ONS must take every opportunity open to it to build and maintain its reputation.

4.2 The top of the office should lead reputation management but it is also the responsibility of everyone who works for the organisation. The behaviour of all its employees – figurehead, receptionist, statistician, office cleaner – all impact people's views, opinions and ultimately trust in the organisation. Everyone who works for the organisation must have a clear sense of its role and mission and act in accordance with its values – for example on political impartiality and data confidentiality.

4.3 There are special challenges for the communication function, which is responsible for a large part of the interface between the office and the outside world. Communication via the web and news media are two crucial aspects. This paper offers some thoughts, suggestions and examples of how this complex and demanding challenge can be addressed.

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