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Topic (i): Reputation management for target audiences

MOMENTS OF TRUTH
About Confidence Building in Statistics Norway

Supporting Paper

Submitted by Statistics Norway¹

I. INTRODUCTION

1. The confidence of the public in Statistics Norway is vital in order for us to succeed. Without the confidence of the general public, statistics and statistics agencies would lose their roles in society. Our employees are building confidence on a daily basis.
2. The basis for a modern statistics agency's existence is *confidence among the population* in the official statistics. Where there is no confidence, those supplying the data will not provide the right information, users will not take the statistics seriously, and society will lack a common frame of reference. This common frame of reference is crucial to the development of society and democracy. Confidence is not something that exists by itself, but something that must be achieved and maintained. It can take several years to build confidence, but only a few minutes to break it down.
3. Public confidence within society can also be a prerequisite for a country's *parliament allocating money and prioritizing official statistics*. There will always be groups that are willing to finance individual statistics, but an official financing framework is necessary in order to have a complete statistics system and to obtain sources of financing for the more basic statistic areas such as population statistics and national accounts.
4. All contacts between the statistics agency and the outside world are *moments of truth* in the sense that these situations help to form perceptions of and attitudes towards the agency. Almost everything all employees do are examples of such moments of truth, such as when we are quoted or interviewed by the media, publications on the website and elsewhere, when we respond to questions via telephone, e-mail or visits, when forms are filled in, during interviews, when in contact with suppliers and the authorities, contact between employees and employees' private relations. These are all situations that contribute to forming the image that is presented to the outside world of the statistics agency and which show how confidence is built or destroyed.

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II. CONFIDENCE BUILDING, INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL PARALLEL

5. Confidence-building initiatives are carried out in *parallel externally and internally*, and have a *reciprocal effect* on each other. In order for the statistics agency to build confidence, employees must carry this through in all relations. It is not enough that we are professional in our contact with the media and other central user environments. Additionally, all statistics agency employees are responsible for building confidence; it is not just a managerial responsibility.

III. EXTERNAL CONFIDENCE BUILDING

6. Confidence must be built through good communication with the outside world based on:

- (a) *Quality*. The quality of statistics means they must be meaningful (compiled correctly), relevant (issued at the right time), that they reflect the users' needs, are accurate, intelligible and accessible to those requiring them. However, quality does not stop with the statistics; quality must permeate the entire organization – from management and personnel processing via administrative routines, to the switchboard and statistics work. Statistics Norway's quality initiatives are undertaken systematically, particularly within growth areas, whereby all major development work is carried out as project work, with a dedicated project participant who is qualified to carry out his task of ensuring that project work processes are quality assured.
- (b) *Visibility*. A visible statistics agency not only creates confidence, it is also vital in order for the employees to feel a sense of pride in the institution. However, visibility requires what is being seen to be perceived as positive.
- (c) *Honesty* in communication is a foundation for building confidence. In order for the statistics to be regarded as objective, they must be compiled on an independent basis.

7. Additionally, being at the leading edge of *a number of growth areas* also creates confidence. In Norway, a good example of a service that creates confidence is that of the tax authorities: Norway was one of the first countries to have the capability to approve tax returns via SMS and the Internet. A survey of users shows that the Norwegian Tax Administration increased confidence by 20 percentage points in the five-year period in which this service was introduced. The Norwegian Tax Administration surprised its users with a higher level of service and more modern communication than they were perhaps expecting. This not only increased the users' confidence in the communication of the department, but in the tax authorities as a whole. The reasoning behind the increased confidence is likely to be that if they are so progressive with their communication, they must also be fairly efficient and reliable with regard to tax issues as well. There were also other factors that contributed to the increased confidence. The equivalent is also considered for the statistics agencies' Internet services and the extent of electronic data capture.

8. It is therefore important to ensure that we have an organization that is capable of providing fresh specialist input, contact with the outside world, and of being sensitive to reactions to what we do. In order to provide fresh specialist input we must be able to take a *new look at what we count and report*. Retaining the time series over a period of time and not allowing the statistics agency to become an institution of the past is a balancing act. *Gender equality statistics, environmental statistics and ICT* statistics are relatively new areas and demand a central and natural place in the statistics product. The ICT statistics in Norway have been debated, with user groups comparing the extent of resources we used on ICT statistics to those used on agricultural statistics, and drawing a parallel to the significance of the industries in the gross national product. Not surprisingly, the agricultural statistics showed an unfair distribution. There is nothing wrong with this per se, but when the users feel the need to dispute our efforts in this way we are clearly not strong enough in a new statistics area. In this instance, we worked systemically and extensively on taking the users' needs seriously and expanding and improving the

statistics. Taking the users' needs seriously builds confidence. Criticism of this nature does not therefore need to destroy confidence if it is acted upon and is more the exception than the rule.

9. Clearly formulated *objectives* are crucial for the statistics agency's role in society and for building confidence. Understanding within the various sections of the organization is also important. This work is constantly presenting us with new challenges. Having as solid a foundation as the UN's regulations on statistics work and separate statistics legislation to underpin the work is not only beneficial but probably crucial for the statistics agencies with regard to confidence levels.

IV. TO BUILD A PROUD ORGANIZATION

10. There are many ways in which to build a proud and good organization via a *confidence-building interface* to the outside world. The current situation in Norway is that we are almost never put in a negative light in the media, so we don't therefore need to spend time and energy on defending ourselves. Statistics Norway has implemented a number of initiatives aimed at building confidence, which are working well.

11. Confidence-building initiatives are as follow:

- (a) The Internet service *ssb.no* is given a high priority and is Statistics Norway's main channel for publishing all official statistics. Everything is published first, and free of charge, at *ssb.no*, at fixed times and using leading edge technology. *ssb.no* is organized as a news channel and includes a statistics calendar for the subsequent four months. It uses xml and rss (and web services are coming soon) and does not regard pdf as anything other than an add-on product to the service. *ssb.no* has received a number of national awards.
- (b) *Decentralised spokesperson structure*. Those who serve the media know the statistics/research area the best. Media enquiries are always prioritised. Our challenge is to ensure that the employees are good intermediaries. It builds confidence with the media when they are able to talk to and have contact with the person who actually produced the relevant statistics.
- (c) Centrally in Statistics Norway, it is *the journalists who have contact with the media* when it is not appropriate to use a spokesperson. This creates confidence among the media because our journalists are often regarded as the extended arm of the media into Statistics Norway and not traditional information workers' lobbying the media.
- (d) *All users are treated equally*; no one receives new statistics before anyone else. This equal treatment has not been fully implemented for our analysis and research activities, but is now being assessed. Experience shows that equal treatment – particularly of the media – creates confidence, and that it is not whether the media is given exclusive information that determines their view on Statistics Norway, but how good the information is. Besides, it would be inconsistent with the public authorities' policy of openness to effectively obstruct other media from gaining access to publications.
- (e) When disseminating information, we focus on *well written text*, both in Norwegian and English. Writing in a way that people understand what is written creates confidence. The worst thing to do when trying to build confidence is to write in a way that the readers don't understand and subsequently feel stupid after reading one of our publications.
- (f) *A visible Director General*, who is an active part of society and who participates in the media, creates confidence. Traditionally in Statistics Norway's research work, our Director General fronts Statistics Norway in our presentations of cyclical trends and analyses of the Norwegian economy. This makes Statistics Norway more visible and is also an important factor internally whereby employees become proud of the institution and its role.

- (g) Our vision is "An institution that counts – and tells stories". Emphasising the storytelling creates confidence, interest and knowledge.
- (h) *Proud employees* build confidence. We have a number of initiatives aimed at creating pride in the organization. All employees receive a Christmas present from Statistics Norway, which is a simple and pleasant way of making the employees feel that they are acknowledged. We try to be open in our communication whereby all minutes are released on the intranet. We have appraisal meetings with all employees once a year where we give employees responsibilities – everyone is good at something – and follow them up. We aim to be the best and to work systematically with the employees to be just that.
- (i) Imparting knowledge via *courses*, using the best lecturers. Statistics Norway shares its knowledge with others in more ways than just presenting completed results.
- (j) A *service declaration* that explains what the users and other contacts can expect from Statistics Norway. All government departments in Norway have service declarations of this nature.
- (k) A modern, uniform *graphic profile*.

12. Internally, there are of course many more activities and initiatives that underpin the organization and which in turn create confidence in the individual interface between the institution and the surroundings. There are many fundamental aspects such as *good management, good working conditions, good pay and operating conditions, appraisal meetings and recruitment policy* that help to create good institutions with the best employees.

13. The goal of “*One Statistics Norway*” is a central challenge. We are working towards all statistics areas being treated as part of a whole, with common standards and definitions, collaboration with data suppliers and for the propagation of statistics to be carried out jointly and in a uniform manner. At the moment, it is the propagation of micro data based on register data to researchers that particularly needs to be coordinated, and contact and communication with the data suppliers that needs to be modernised and made more professional.

14. A particular challenge here is to create a *correlation between the statistics*, also in relation to statistics from other producers. A national statistics council has now been established for all Norwegian producers of official statistics in order to achieve a holistic line of thought for all official Norwegian statistics. Thinking holistically and showing that all official Norwegian statistics are part of an overall description of Norwegian society creates confidence. Statistics Norway has compiled theme pages in a number of areas in order to describe each theme as a whole, see <http://www.ssb.no/tema/> (only available in Norwegian for the moment).

15. Another challenge that is extremely important for the confidence in the institution, is the balance between the *dissemination of detailed statistics and the protection of privacy*. Detailed statistics are frequently requested and relevant to numerous user groups, but many of these are on the border of being able to identify individuals or revealing sensitive information about companies. The boundary is clear but the balancing act is difficult and often needs to be clarified in each case. Both insufficient and too much propagation of detailed statistics can diminish confidence.
