

Distr.
GENERAL

ENGLISH ONLY

**UNITED NATIONS ECONOMIC COMMISSION
FOR EUROPE (UNECE)
CONFERENCE OF EUROPEAN STATISTICIANS**

Work Session on the Communication of Statistics
(Berlin, Germany, 27-29 May 2013)

**Experiences in Soliciting and Incorporating Feedback
from Diverse Data Users and Providers**

Prepared by Suzanne King, Public Affairs Section Head
United States Department of Agriculture, National Agricultural Statistics Service

Overview

1. The U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) National Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS) Public Affairs Section strives to help the agency increase survey response rates from data providers and make our data more accessible and usable to data users. Our overall objective of the agency's communications plan is to improve the perceived value of NASS products and services among data users, data providers and employees. Our premise that "one size does not fit all" guides our need to gather feedback that will help the agency develop effective products and services to meet contemporary needs. There are three primary strategies in the plan to customize products and services; to establish a consistent identity; and to position the agency as being contemporary.
2. Using three initiatives – the development of the agency communications plan, promotion of the Census of Agriculture, and general program input and evaluation – and the lessons we have learned through them, I want to share our experiences of soliciting and incorporating feedback from data users and data providers. I look forward to a meaningful discussion with counterparts in government statistical communications and dissemination about successes and best practices.
3. We have learned five primary lessons and seek feedback to enhance our efforts:
 - Understanding your audience and soliciting their feedback is necessary and invaluable;
 - Government rules make gathering feedback difficult;
 - Integrating feedback into realistic communications and survey initiatives is necessary;
 - Follow through and evaluation is difficult, even for the most realistic plans;

- Public and stakeholder engagement reaps rewards.

Understanding your audience and soliciting their feedback is necessary and invaluable

4. An employee-led Communications Advisory Council helped develop the agency's communications plan and now provides oversight and assistance implementing the communications tactics, as needed. Council members represent all parts of the agency, at all levels. They bring unique knowledge of locally diverse agricultural subject matter, audiences and their data needs.
5. Research to develop the communications plan identified primary audience segments of farmers, agribusiness, and industry associations as data providers. Academic researchers, government and policy makers at all levels, news media, industry associations, all data providers, food companies, students, and the public (if they know the data exists) are among the identified data user groups. There are many subgroups.
6. Focus groups and research reviews identified audience needs and validated the idea that one size does not fit all and that we need to customize our products and services; to establish a consistent identity; and to position the agency as being contemporary.
7. Focus groups helped refine our understanding of how data users view the agency and our data, as well as to identify specific ways to make the information more accessible and valuable to both data users and providers, that would otherwise be done by guess work.
8. There is one annual data user meeting that is open to the public to provide comments about our data programs. We've used this event to query data users about agency identity and to test out new products.

Government rules make gathering feedback difficult

9. Rules require approved documentation of purpose, questions, and method of gathering information, plus weeks if not months, of public notice prior to conducting research.
10. No more than a total of 9 people can be contacted to obtain program feedback or input without the above process.
11. These restrictions limit timeliness and scope, are inflexible but promote creativity.
12. Some methods we use to collect feedback on non-statistical products include twitter; a web form to solicit census "stories"; gathering information from third parties through the news media; engaging a self-selected group of data users who volunteered to provide feedback; the agency newsletter and internal surveys.
13. Twitter is a fast and easy way for NASS to ask people about our products and services and create dialog. We've started gathering these comments and references. An example is "Tell us how you use Census data. Send a tweet." One response, "We created our county ag profiles using quickstats census data. We love it."

14. Blogs allow us to introduce surveys and experts and to encourage dialog that will indicate how products and services are used. This route is controlled by our department.

Integrating feedback into realistic communications and program initiatives is necessary

15. A census task force of the Communications Advisory Council taps the expertise of NASS employees in the field, in headquarters generally, and in the Public Affairs Section to guide census promotion efforts. The group provides input and review of the content, appearance and delivery of the materials we use to promote the 2012 Census. NASS conducts the census of agriculture once every five years. The U.S. government conducted the first census of agriculture in 1840.
16. The census communications plan is a part of the overall agency plan and utilizes input gathered for the agency plan in addition to evaluations from the 2007 census. The plan is relationship based. It includes building and leveraging industry relationships; making available contemporary promotional materials for national and local use, including tool kit materials with a consistent graphic identity (sample opinion pieces; news releases, blogs, public service announcements, posters, tweets, etc.); earned media; and limited paid media placements in radio and print media. We distribute these materials using methods recommended and derived from user feedback and the agency communications plan.
17. Some of the distribution methods include downloadable materials on the public website; e-mail to partners; posting on agency intranet;
18. The agency uses similar outreach methods to promote routine surveys.
19. We recently piloted promotional materials and information on iPads that enumerators use to provide field-based tools.
20. Formal survey feedback from employees about the utility and effectiveness of tactics such as media training, census marketing materials, and the iPad-based training and promotion tools is positive. Suggestions are informing future efforts.
21. There are many, many more tools available and recommended based on user comments and elements of the communications plan, but we've prioritized based on what is available and what is realistic to accomplish. We've remained flexible and have provided additional tools as requested and needs are identified.

Follow through and evaluations are difficult, even for the most realistic plans

22. Full implementation of our plans is difficult. It would require alignment of financial, technological, programmatic and human resource priorities. Federal budgets are currently limited and progress on some technological advances is delayed.
23. Security and government policies and laws along with limited budgets and limited human resources make development and use of contemporary technologies that are commonplace in the private sector and expected by data users and providers nearly impossible. Examples of where resources don't align and customer expectations are not met include mobile applications, smooth business transactions, and easy access to our products.

24. The Public Affairs Section has successfully implemented the census communication plan because only realistic items were included. However, we at times are disappointed when business decisions and systems don't support the outreach completed.
25. We are looking for ways to evaluate the effectiveness of our efforts.
26. A post census survey is under development to evaluate efforts to encourage response to the questionnaires. We'll ask NASS employees and external partners if they used the materials provided, if they considered the materials effective, and what else they would have liked to have.
27. To measure data providers' perceived value of NASS products and services – and therefore the effectiveness of our tools in helping employees /enumerators communicate with data providers – the plan calls for conducting a survey to obtain a baseline. Because research shows most data users use the Internet to get data, the survey will be web-based.
28. The Public Affairs Section will soon conduct a more general survey of agency employees as well as informal discussion groups to gauge the value and utility of its products and services.

Public and stakeholder engagement reaps rewards

29. Partnerships developed with our broadly diverse data users—including influential individuals and organizations, universities, agribusiness and local government agencies—are proving effective in reaching survey and census recipients to encourage participation.
30. Awareness and use of our data as well as increased response rates are intended rewards of the promotional and partnership efforts under way.
31. Increased advocacy to ensure that NASS can collect and make available to the public the accurate, timely and useful data for which the agency is known is another benefit of engaging data users.
32. Goodwill and strong relationships have resulted from these outreach efforts. We try to build on them routinely.

Summary

33. Our communication plans are well founded with as much meaningful input from data users and providers as limitations allow.
34. We would like to increase dramatically our ability to reach and communicate with data users and providers to gather a continuous feedback – program improvement loop.
35. There are many ways to gather input to inform the development and evaluation of effective, contemporary communications, dissemination, and business efforts. We are using available tools we believe are effective.

36. We wish to engage our counterparts in government statistical communications and dissemination in a discussion of successes and best practices to improve our efforts.