Challenging Behaviour: Using behavioural science in ONS

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Office for National Statistics
The Office for National Statistics:

• collects and publishes statistics about the economy, population and society at national, regional and local levels.

• conducts the census in England and Wales every 10 years; in 2017 it carried out a Census Test to prepare for 2021.

• conducts surveys of businesses, households and individuals: participation in the census and business surveys is compulsory; participation in social surveys is voluntary.

• employs over 1,000 social survey interviewers, who work face-to-face, on the telephone and at ports and airports.

• collects data for core social surveys like the Labour Force Survey, and wins competitive tenders to run externally-funded surveys, such as the National Survey for Wales.
What is Behavioural Science?

Most of us believe that we are highly rational, making decisions on the basis of logic and evidence.

Psychological research shows that our actions and behaviour are influenced as much by automatic reactions as by our cognitive processing.

Behavioural science is about designing services and interventions to reflect the ways people really behave, rather than the ways theory or logic suggests they should rationally behave.
TEST

T = target
E = explore
S = solution
T = trial

EAST
Four simple ways to apply behavioural insights
Six ‘pilot’ projects

2017 Census Test
• Behaviourally-informed invitation and reminder letters
  CENSUS TEST LETTERS
• Behaviourally-informed calling cards, at no contact addresses
  CENSUS TEST CALLING CARDS

Social Surveys
• A behaviourally informed advance letter for the Labour Force Survey
  LFS LETTER
• An email intervention to build resilience in telephone interviewers
  TELEPHONE INTERVIEWERS

Engagement
• Networking to build staff engagement in ONS headquarters
  STAFF ENGAGEMENT
• Influencing stakeholders’ engagement with the Office for Statistics Regulation
  STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT
2017 Census Test

CENSUS TEST LETTERS

Invitation to participate online, but no field follow-up.

BIT created versions of invitation and reminder letters, drawing on principles of:
- social norms
- endowed progress
- general costs.

The reminder letters:
- used deadlines to invoke scarcity
- conveyed monitoring of non-response

Response to Census Test
(with invitation and three reminders)

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2017 Census Test

CENSUS TEST CALLING CARDS

Invitation to participate online, followed by field force follow-up

BIT created two calling cards: both made use of:
- implementation intentions
- prompts to help recipients plan when they would complete the census.

In addition, one included personalisation by the field worker.

Response to Census Test within 48 hours
(addresses which had not previously responded)

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BIT modified the LFS advance letter. The redesigned letter:

- was significantly shorter than the existing letter
- simplified content, stressing that respondents were chosen to represent their local area, and emphasising the expression of thanks.

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BIT worked with ONS’s Social Survey Division to improve the motivation and performance of telephone interviewers whose main task is to collect responses to the LFS.

The trial consisted of a series of eight email messages based on psychology research that were designed to boost interviewers’ well-being and, in turn, productivity.

The intervention messages were tested against neutral, control messages.

BIT found no significant difference between the treatment and control groups in this trial.
**Engagement**

**STAFF ENGAGEMENT**

Increasing social ties among employees should boost engagement. “Randomised Coffee Trials” are used to foster ties and boost morale.

BIT proposed that ONS trial a version of the Randomised Coffee Trial, matching individuals on employment and other characteristics.

The customer did not feel that the benefits outweighed the potential risks and costs, so did not proceed to run the trial.

**STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT**

The Office for Statistics Regulation (OSR) wanted to encourage Statistical Heads of Profession to engage positively with the Code of Practice for Official Statistics, through its presentation and articulation, and by changing its own way of working.

BIT produced:
- a literature review showing how existing research could help;
- a behavioural science toolkit; and
- a workshop presented at the team’s away day.
Randomised Control Trials?

RCT

- CENSUS TEST LETTERS
- CENSUS TEST CALLING CARDS
- LFS LETTER
- TELEPHONE INTERVIEWERS

No RCT

- STAFF ENGAGEMENT
- STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT
Useful Outcome?

RCT

- Census Test Letters
- Census Test Calling Cards
- LFS Letter
- Telephone Interviewers

No RCT

- Staff Engagement
- Stakeholder Engagement
Useful Outcome?

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Positive Effect?

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**No RCT**
- Staff Engagement
- Stakeholder Engagement
External or Internal Behaviours?

External

- CENSUS TEST LETTERS
- CENSUS TEST CALLING CARDS
- LFS LETTER
- STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT

Internal

- STAFF ENGAGEMENT
- TELEPHONE INTERVIEWERS
Useful Outcome?

External

- CENSUS TEST LETTERS
- CENSUS TEST CALLING CARDS
- LFS LETTER
- STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT

Internal

- STAFF ENGAGEMENT
- TELEPHONE INTERVIEWERS
Useful Outcome?

External

- CENSUS TEST LETTERS
- CENSUS TEST CALLING CARDS
- LFS LETTER
- STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT

Internal

- STAFF ENGAGEMENT
- TELEPHONE INTERVIEWERS
Useful Outcome?

**External**
- CENSUS TEST LETTERS
- CENSUS TEST CALLING CARDS
- LFS LETTER
- STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT

**Internal**
- STAFF ENGAGEMENT
- TELEPHONE INTERVIEWERS
Positive Effect?

External

- CENSUS TEST LETTERS
- CENSUS TEST CALLING CARDS
- LFS LETTER
- STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT

Internal

- STAFF ENGAGEMENT
- TELEPHONE INTERVIEWERS
Lessons Learned

• Don’t assume knowledge
• Involve customers in solution generation
• Explore risk appetite
• Behaviour change, not culture change
• Easier to influence external behaviours

• For internal:
  • Needs commitment
  • Difficult to communicate
Where successful, the gains can be large!