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Topic - Education and outreach strategies for communicating with hard-to-reach respondents

Using a Diversified Communications Campaign to Target Diverse Audiences

Submitted by the United States Department of Agriculture, National Agricultural Statistics Service¹

I. Introduction

A. About NASS and the Census of Agriculture

1. The mission of the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) National Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS) is to provide timely, accurate and useful statistics in service to U.S. agriculture. As part of this effort, the agency conducts the Census of Agriculture every five years. The census is a complete count of farms, farm operators and agricultural production in the United States. It provides the only source of consistent, comparable and detailed data about U.S. agriculture at the national, state and county levels.

2. The first U.S. Census of Agriculture was taken in 1840. Responsibility for conducting the census rested with the U.S. Department of Commerce's Bureau of the Census until 1997, when it was transferred to NASS. NASS is a relatively small federal agency, with approximately 1,100 employees in its Washington, DC, headquarters and 46 field offices around the United States. In addition to the Census of Agriculture, NASS conducts hundreds of surveys and issues nearly 500 national reports annually, focusing on production and supplies of food and fiber, prices paid and received by farmers, farm labor and income, and myriad other topics.

B. The Challenge

3. Unlike NASS's ongoing sample survey programs, the success of the five-year census depends upon the participation of *all* U.S. farmers and ranchers, not just the large producers who operate the majority of the land, produce the majority of the agricultural products and are responsible for the majority of sales. However, results from the 2002 Census of Agriculture indicated significant under-coverage of farms and ranches in the lowest value-of-sales categories. These categories include a high concentration of small farms and farms with disadvantaged or minority operators.

4. Traditionally, these individuals have been difficult for NASS and USDA to identify. Many of them do not avail themselves of USDA services such as loan, price support and conservation programs. They are also less likely than other farmers to join traditional farming organizations or to read farm-related magazines. In addition, they may face language barriers or cultural barriers such as mistrust of government or reluctance to share personal or financial information with a government entity.

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C. Laying the Groundwork

5. In an effort to improve its coverage of previously undercounted populations, NASS worked to expand the 2007 census mailing list to include more minority, female, limited-resource, part-time and small farm operators. NASS reached out to several community-based organizations (CBOs) and other groups that serve these populations, seeking their assistance in identifying potential farm and ranch operators who might not have been counted in the past. As a result, the 2007 census mailing list included a total of 3,194,373 names and addresses, compared to 2,841,788 in 2002.

6. However, NASS realized that simply adding these individuals to the census mailing list was not enough. Thus, in conducting the 2007 census, the agency engaged in an unprecedented level of public outreach in order to help all farmers and ranchers understand the importance and benefits of census participation, as well as to improve awareness and response among previously under-represented populations. Since the NASS staff only included two full-time public affairs specialists at the time, we engaged the services of Osborn & Barr Communications (O&B), a marketing and communications firm specializing in outreach to agricultural and rural audiences. O&B worked with NASS to develop and implement a national census marketing plan and to assist NASS's 46 field offices with local outreach.

II. Campaign Implementation

A. Research and Planning

7. As a starting point, O&B conducted a series of focus groups on NASS's behalf, including three comprised of farmers and ranchers representing various races, geographic areas and types of agricultural production. Through the focus groups, it became clear that many of them were cynical about the value and purpose of the Census of Agriculture, and that this attitude aligned with their unfavorable attitudes towards USDA and government as a whole. Participants found it difficult to articulate the benefits of taking part in the census. Also, while they were familiar with USDA, participants exhibited little or no awareness of NASS.

8. Focus group participants were asked to evaluate various potential messages and images relating to the census. They responded most positively to the concepts of "benefiting one's community," "shaping the future," and "having a voice."

9. Based on this feedback, NASS made the strategic decision to focus not on generating awareness of NASS as a government agency, but rather on the creation of a census "brand." O&B assisted NASS in developing the various brand elements, including a distinct census logo and accompanying artwork, as well as themes and key messages. All were designed to help counteract negative perceptions, create positive feelings, and emphasize the benefits of census participation to the agricultural industry, local communities and farmers themselves.



**2007 CENSUS OF
AGRICULTURE**
YOUR VOICE. YOUR FUTURE. YOUR RESPONSIBILITY.

10. The theme "Your Voice, Your Future, Your Responsibility," along with supporting messages and artwork, became the driving force behind the census outreach campaign. NASS strove to reinforce brand

identity in the minds of farmers and ranchers by using a variety of communications channels before, during and after the data collection period. Through an integrated marketing communications campaign that incorporated partnership building, public relations, advertising and Internet outreach, NASS sought to significantly increase response rates among targeted populations and generate a record number of responses overall.

11. The 2007 census marketing campaign was organized around four key strategies, which will be described in the following subsections:

- Partnership
- Public Relations
- Paid Advertising
- Producer Contact

12. Another key element of the campaign was a dedicated Census of Agriculture Web site that was separate from, but linked to, NASS's agency Web site. The site, www.agcensus.usda.gov, incorporated the 2007 census artwork and themes and was designed to be a user-friendly, "one-stop shop" for all census-related information. It included answers to frequently asked questions, sample census questionnaires, news releases, video and audio files, downloadable publicity materials and graphics, and links to past census results. All of NASS's other census-related communications were designed to drive people back to the Web site for more information.

B. Partnership

13. In promoting the 2007 Census of Agriculture, NASS was faced with the challenge of reaching out to all types of farmers and ranchers nationwide, including many individuals with whom we had not previously communicated. Not only did we need to find these people, but we needed to establish some level of credibility among them. Therefore, NASS actively sought the cooperation and support of entities that had existing relationships with these farmers and ranchers and had already earned their trust and respect. Such organizations included farming and ranching associations, businesses that provide goods and services to the agricultural sector, and community-based organizations (CBOs) that serve small, minority and limited-resource farmers and ranchers.

14. NASS officials met with the leaders of more than 30 national farm organizations and agribusinesses. At these meetings, we spoke about the importance of the Census of Agriculture to them and their constituents or customers, providing concrete examples wherever possible. We also gave them a "promotional partners' toolkit" of turnkey materials – including talking points, news releases, newsletter articles and camera-ready artwork – that they could easily incorporate into their regular communications with their members or customers.

15. NASS also reached out to community-based organizations (CBOs) and other minority-serving institutions. These groups were critical partners, since they understand the needs and cultural nuances of the populations they serve and have already earned their trust. Approximately six weeks before the census was mailed, NASS hosted a workshop attended by representatives from 32 CBOs nationwide. In addition to learning more about NASS and the census, participants worked together to develop preliminary partnering plans for promoting the census among their constituents. By the end of the workshop, 21 plans had been developed and many more were submitted in the days and months that followed.

16. Most of the CBO partnering plans focused on setting up "Census Days" across the country. At these events, local farmers and ranchers could receive hands-on assistance – in languages other than English, when necessary – with filling out their census forms. NASS provided up to \$2,500 in support for each of these local events, to be used for publicity, workshop materials, facility rental, refreshments and related expenses. In total, 188 census Days were conducted in 28 states.

17. In addition to partnering with farm organizations, agribusinesses and CBOs, NASS also worked closely with other agencies within the Department of Agriculture. NASS is a relatively small agency, with staff concentrated in Washington, DC, and 46 state-level offices. Meanwhile, several of our sister agencies deliver programs and services directly to farmers and therefore have a strong local presence. So NASS worked with these agencies to provide their local personnel with the tools and information needed to answer farmers' questions about the census. Outreach tactics included an educational Webcast for county Extension agents and local USDA staff.

C. Public Relations

18. NASS employed an aggressive public relations strategy as the cornerstone of NASS's 2007 Census of Agriculture outreach campaign. Given our limited budget, the goal was to generate as much free, or "earned," media coverage as possible. Fortunately, U.S. agriculture has an active trade media, with numerous print, broadcast and online outlets dedicated to reporting news for and about the farming industry. NASS definitely benefited from having ongoing working relationships with many of these media outlets and with professional media organizations such as the National Association of Farm Broadcasting and the American Agricultural Editors' Association. We were able to draw on these contacts for assistance in promoting the 2007 census nationwide. However, we also needed to look beyond the traditional farm media since we were seeking to reach non-traditional audiences.

19. One of our primary challenges was to maintain a consistent national message and "brand" for the census, while meeting our field offices' need for flexibility and customization. Since our field offices are staffed by statisticians rather than public affairs specialists, it was also important that they have turnkey, easy-to-use tools to help them communicate effectively. From customizable news releases, to radio public service announcements, to sample newsletter articles and letters to the editor, all materials were designed to ensure that the field offices could effectively deliver the census message to local media and that it would be easy for media outlets to carry the message on to their farming and ranching audiences.

20. Following are some of the specific tools and tactics NASS deployed as part of its public relations strategy.

21. **News Releases** – News releases were timed to coincide with a variety of events, including holidays, planting and harvesting seasons, and census milestones and deadlines. To increase the opportunity for media pick-up, some news releases were issued not just in print, but also in audio and video formats. All national-level materials were distributed electronically and posted to the census Web site for download. At the state level, NASS field offices customized the news releases with locally relevant information before distributing them to their own media contacts.

22. To broaden our media reach, NASS utilized external services for production and distribution and certain releases. For instance:

- To reach Spanish-speaking audiences, we disseminated news releases via Hispanic PR Wire, a service that reaches more than 2,000 Spanish-language publications across the United States.
- Since most U.S. farmers cite radio as their primary source of daily information, we collaborated with the National Association of Farm Broadcasting's News Service to produce and distribute audio news releases, in MP3 format, to hundreds of radio broadcasters nationwide.
- To improve visibility in small media outlets, including rural, daily and weekly newspapers, NASS distributed print-ready feature news stories – also called mat releases – through the North American Précis Syndicate.
- Finally, NASS used O&B's services to produce and distribute a video news release that aired on local news stations and on several syndicated and cable television programs.

23. **Radio Public Service Announcements** – Given the prevalence of radio use in rural America, radio public service announcements (PSAs) were an important element of the census campaign. NASS and

O&B created several 30- and 60-second PSAs that were distributed to broadcast outlets and posted on the census Web site for download. Many stations donated airtime and ran the spots free of charge.

- To put a more local face on the census, we produced PSAs featuring individual state secretaries of agriculture discussing the importance of the census to the rural communities in their respective states. These were distributed prior to the census mailing.
- During the data collection period, we distributed national PSAs featuring Baxter Black, a nationally known “cowboy poet” and humorist.
- After the census response deadline, we distributed PSAs featuring Ed Schafer, who had just taken over as the new U.S. Secretary of Agriculture. He thanked the farmers and ranchers who had already responded to the census and gave a final reminder to those who had not yet responded.
- To reach non-English-speaking audiences, NASS also distributed PSAs in Spanish and Navajo. The Spanish versions were produced in cooperation with the University of California and the Navajo spots were produced in cooperation with local leaders of the Navajo Nation, the largest American Indian tribe in the United States.

24. Print Public Service Announcements – To help meet the varying needs of print publications, NASS and O&B created a series of camera-ready print advertisements in various configurations and file formats, all echoing the census theme and artwork. The ads were provided to NASS’s 46 field offices for inclusion in local newspapers, magazines and organization newsletters and were also posted on the census Web site for easy download and use.

25. Letters to the Editor and Opinion Columns – NASS and O&B also created sample letters to the editor and opinion articles (op-eds) that could be customized by local agricultural leaders. These pieces were used by NASS field offices and partner organizations and published in a variety of local newspapers, trade publications, farm organization newsletters and other outlets.

D. Paid Media

26. Because there were certain target audiences that were difficult to reach through partnership or public relations, NASS also employed a limited paid media strategy that was narrowly targeted to reach previously under-represented populations. We first analyzed previous Census of Agriculture data to determine where there were high concentrations of minority farmers and where 2002 census response rates were low. Based on this data, NASS then created broad-based awareness about the census by using a media mix of print, radio and Internet advertising prior to the February 4, 2008 response deadline.

27. Print Advertising – To target our advertising effectively, our print media mix included a combination of horizontal publications, those covering a variety of topics but focused on a specific state or geographical region, and vertical publications, those focused on a specific agricultural sector or topic but having more of a national reach. The horizontal publications we utilized were predominantly regional farming publications in areas with higher minority populations and/or historically low census response rates. The vertical publications were those targeted at lifestyle and hobby farmers, minority farmers, and beef and fruit producers.

28. Radio Advertising – Limited air time was purchased on rural and Spanish-speaking radio stations in the four top states with the highest concentrations of minority farmers: Texas, California, Florida and Oklahoma. The radio ads provided a final “call to action” prior to the census response deadline. To trigger an emotional connection with listeners, they featured a dialogue between a father and a daughter, conveying that farmers’ participation in the census will help ensure a brighter future for their community, their farm and their own children.

29. Internet Advertising – NASS turned to Internet advertising during the data collection period primarily to reach organic and small farmers. Our online outreach, via banner and pay-per-click advertisements, aimed to drive Web surfers to the Census of Agriculture Web site for more information. NASS ran banner ads on agriculture.com, one of the leading agricultural Web sites; Grower Magazine

Online, a site targeted to fruit and vegetable growers with content in both Spanish and English; and OrganicGardening.com. In addition, NASS used pay-per-click advertising on Google and Yahoo, the top two Internet search engines, targeting people searching for information relating to minority farmers or hobby farming.

E. Producer Contact

30. To further reinforce the census messages being disseminated through the media, our partner organizations and other channels, NASS sought to establish a visible presence at the establishments and events that agricultural producers frequent. NASS created point-of-purchase materials, including brochures, posters, tent cards, counter displays and window decals, all of which featured the census theme and artwork. Our 46 local field offices distributed these materials to local banks, retailers and grain elevators and other places where farmers conduct their day-to-day business. In addition, the materials were distributed at USDA's county-level service centers, where farmers go for local program support and assistance.

31. In addition, NASS had visible presence at hundreds of national and local conferences, trade shows and other agricultural events attended by farmers and agribusiness leaders. We created display banners featuring the census artwork and messaging and also incorporated these elements into promotional literature and inexpensive, yet useful, giveaway items such as insulated can/bottle holders, memo pads, magnetic message boards and pencils.

32. NASS representatives exhibited and spoke to groups ranging from the American Farm Bureau Federation (the nation's largest farm organization) to the National Beekeeping Federation, and from the National Congress of American Indians to the American AgriWomen. These events provided the opportunity for more personal contact with farmers and farm-related organizations and an additional chance to reinforce the census messages being conveyed through a variety of other media.

III. Results

33. Like most organizations, NASS struggles to quantify the impact of its public relations efforts. However, a look at 2007 census results indicates that NASS's outreach to previously underrepresented populations yielded significant benefits, enabling us to do a much better job of reaching and counting small, minority and women farm operators.

A. Census Numbers

34. The overall 2007 census response rate was 85.2 percent, which was on par with past censuses despite the overall decline in response rates for government surveys. Because of our expanded mailing list, the 2007 census generated a record number of usable responses, improving the quality of the data overall. Unfortunately, NASS is unable to calculate response rates among specific subgroups, including women and minority farmers, since we did not know census participants' demographic details when mailing out the census forms to them.

35. The 2007 census counted 2,204,792 farms in the United States. This represents a 4 percent increase from 2002 and indicates the leveling off of a downward trend in U.S. farm numbers over the past 70 years. The results show that America's farm operators are becoming more diverse, with the increase in female and minority farm operators significantly outpacing the increase in farm operators overall. When compared to 2002, the 2007 census counted:

- 30 percent more farms with female principal operators;
- 10 percent more farms with principal operators of Spanish, Hispanic or Latino origin;
- 124 percent more farms with American Indian or Alaska Native principal operators;
- 78 percent more farms with Asian operators;

- 64 percent more farms with principal operators of more than one race; and
- 5 percent more farms with Black or African American principal operators.

36. The 2007 results also show significant growth in the number of farms in the lowest value-of-sales categories, including a 16-percent increase in the number of farms with sales of less than \$1000. These lower sales categories include a high concentration of farms with disadvantaged or minority operators.

37. The changes in farm numbers are part of a normal cycle of new farms starting business and existing farms going out of business. However, procedural changes – including methodological improvements and expanded outreach activities – also appear to have contributed to the growth in farm numbers, particularly among previously undercounted groups.

B. Media Impressions

38. As far as quantifiable media coverage, NASS's public relations efforts generated more than 26 million media impressions, far surpassing our goal of 15 million impressions. This includes coverage in magazines and newspapers generated via news releases, direct pitches and other means. This figure does not capture coverage provided in newsletters and other communications by partner organizations, nor does it capture radio or television coverage.

39. In addition to the free or "earned" media generated through public relations efforts, the limited print advertising purchased by NASS generated an additional 2.7 million print impressions in publications targeted to reach minority growers, low-response states and part-time or "hobby" farmers. The online banner and pay-per-click advertisements generated an additional 2.6 million impressions, with nearly 10,000 Web surfers clicking through for more information.

D. Awards and Accolades

40. The U.S. Department of Agriculture has cited NASS's 2007 Census of Agriculture outreach efforts to minority, limited-resource and other underserved farmers and ranchers as one of Department's top civil rights accomplishments of the past year. These efforts also garnered accolades from the Rural Coalition, an alliance of regionally and culturally diverse organizations whose mission is to support small and minority farmers, farm workers and rural communities. At its 30th anniversary gala, the organization presented NASS with a national award citing NASS's "partnership and dedicated and invaluable service to community-based organizations and people."

41. In addition, NASS's efforts to brand the 2007 census garnered recognition from the National Agricultural Marketing Association (NAMA). In the 2008 "Best of NAMA" competition, NASS and Osborn & Barr were named first-place winners and national finalists in the Corporate Identity category for their census theme and accompanying artwork. NASS competed against major corporations for this award, which was the first for a government agency .

E. Intangibles

42. Finally, while it is impossible to measure, one of the most important results of NASS's 2007 Census of Agriculture outreach is the relationships that have been developed with key individuals and organizations. Community-based and minority-serving organizations, farm group large and small, agricultural and mainstream media outlets, USDA employees nationwide, and farmers and ranchers of all types, races and income levels are now more aware of the Census of Agriculture and its importance to the entire agricultural sector.

43. The relationships that have been formed, the trust that has been built and the awareness that has been fostered will continue to yield dividends for NASS and the entire U.S. Department of Agriculture in the 2012 Census of Agriculture and beyond.