

CONFERENCE OF EUROPEAN STATISTICIANS

**UNECE Work Session on Communication and Dissemination of Statistics**  
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Topic - Education and outreach strategies for communicating with hard-to-reach respondents

**IMPROVING RESPONSE ON THE UNITED STATES ECONOMIC CENSUS  
THROUGH COMMUNICATION, COORDINATION, AND OUTREACH**

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**I. INTRODUCTION**

1. Every 5 years the U.S. Census Bureau conducts an Economic Census covering the non-farm, private economy. The Economic Census provides the foundation for most statistics about the American economy and the industry and geographic detail businesses and communities need for economic development.
2. In November and December 2007, the Census Bureau mailed Economic Census forms to nearly five million businesses nationwide. We used more than 500 separate versions of the basic form, each tailored to particular industries. The forms were due roughly 60 days after mailout, on February 12, 2008. Results were to be released starting in early 2009. This ambitious schedule depended on timely and accurate responses from millions of businesses from small, single-location firms to large businesses with thousands or thousands of locations.
3. Response to the Economic Census is required by law (Title 13, U.S. Code). Obtaining needed information has been an increasing challenge. Poor response affects the cost and jeopardizes the accuracy of census results. In the 2002 census total rate reached 84 percent, but this level was not reached until April 2004. Our performance goal for the 2007 Economic Census was an 86 percent response rate, by October 2008.
4. The Census Bureau conducted a comprehensive communication program to encourage business response to the 2007 Economic Census. The effort involved systematic improvements in and coordination of operation, and communications, managed businesses relationships, and promotional activities, with particular emphasis on low response industries such as construction, landscaping, restaurants, and commercial printing. The result was reversal of a fifteen-year downward trend in response rates as well as a dramatic improvement in timeliness of response.

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## II. PROCESSING IMPROVEMENTS

The 2007 Economic Census was collected primarily by mail [Attachment B]. Forms were mailed in late 2007, and replacement forms were mailed at about monthly intervals during March through June 2008. Paper returns were captured using a Key From Image system.

### A. Electronic Reporting

5. Electronic tools are a boon to accounting and payroll professionals reporting information to government agencies. The tools simplify many tasks and allow these individuals to accomplish more with fewer resources. The same professionals who complete census forms also complete tax and other documents, and expect to find electronic tools for nearly every reporting task.

6. The Census Bureau developed *Surveyor*, an electronic reporting tool, for the 2002 Economic Census. Respondents could download the tool to their computers and work with nearly every economic census form. While the software facilitated interaction with businesses' internal spreadsheet records, only the most determined respondents were able to master its interface. Nevertheless, more than 500,000 business locations were reported using *Surveyor* in the 2002 census.

7. We were determined to develop a more intuitive interface for the 2007 Economic Census that was easier for respondents to use in their computing environments. We conducted an extensive requirements gathering effort that involved hundreds of businesses. The updated software produced self-documenting spreadsheets that businesses could download, manipulate, import, and submit via the Internet.

8. The first *Surveyor* release was issued of in November 2007, and we received the first electronic response in mid-December 2007. We issued monthly software updates through mid-2008 based on additional user requirements. Total electronic response increased from 9.4 percent in the 2002 census to 28.8 percent in the 2007 census, and multi-location electronic response increased from 28.8 percent in the 2002 census to 49.5 percent in the 2007 census [Attachment A].

### B. Automated Business Help Site and Secure Message Center

9. The Census Bureau first implemented a toll-free number for respondents in 1987. It was included on nearly all cover letters and forms. Businesses used it to request information and get help with their forms.

10. For the 2002 Economic Census we introduced a web-based Business Help Site (BHS) to assist respondents. It allowed respondents to read FAQs and automated several features of the toll-free number: verify that forms were received, get replacement forms; and get filing extensions. There were few changes to the site for 2007; nevertheless the site experienced fourfold growth in traffic.

11. New concerns about privacy arose during the 2007 Economic Census. There is a growing wariness of requests for information in an increasingly public world. Respondents asked to be assured that the form they received was valid. The quantity of these calls surprised managers familiar with earlier censuses. The calls reflected suspicion of any unfamiliar request, regardless of how official it appeared. In response, we posted a new topic on the Business Help Site (Box 1).

#### Box 1. Frequently Asked Questions

Is the form I received a valid census form?

How to confirm that an Economic Census form is legitimate:

- Compare the form you received with [sample forms](#) online
- The form uses the correct return address
- The return envelope the correct return address
- The form was approved by the Office of Management and Budget.
- The Census Bureau seal is shown on the form.
- The form shows the correct due date, such as February 12, 2008.
- The form refers to Title 13, United States Code"

12. E-mail communication was an essential tool during the 2002 Economic Census. Businesses and census analysts used e-mail to share information, ask questions, and submit responses. The 2007 Economic Census was conducted in a different security environment: new concerns about identity theft and widely reported security lapses at government agencies increased the visibility of information security. E-mail communication with respondents was found not to be secure and discontinued. Instead, we developed a Secure Message Center that allowed business and census users to communicate with confidence.

### **III. DIRECT COMMUNICATIONS WITH BUSINESSES**

Processing improvements, electronic reporting, and online resources are not enough. We supplemented these with managed relationships with very large companies, communication with smaller businesses via intermediaries and news media, and targeted mail and telephone follow-ups with nonresponding businesses.

#### **C. Advance Information**

13. In April 2007, well ahead of data collection, we mailed special folders including information about the census to the 15,000 largest companies. The packages also included a Contact Exchange Card that asked who at the company would coordinate census reporting. In the 2002 Economic Census, businesses that completed this card had a response rate 5 percentage points higher than those that did not. For 2007 we provided an online version of the card. One third of businesses used it rather than mail back the post card. We attained a 92 percent response rate and expected the improved information would yield better response from those companies.

#### **D. Account Managers: Personal Contact with Large Companies**

14. The very largest companies have enormous importance because they account for a substantial share of GDP. Since the 1992 Economic Census we have conducted an Account Manager (AM) program to address large companies individually. For the 2007 Economic Census, 170 AMs worked with 1,200 very large companies. Each AM worked with up to ten companies. We asked AMs to contact the company's reporting coordinator and offer assistance with reporting. AMs identified and minimized obstacles, advocated use of electronic reporting tools, and facilitated timely reporting. In 2002, responses were received from 92 percent of these companies, but that mark was not achieved until fourteen months after the due date. Our performance goal for 2007 was to match the 92 percent response rate, and to accelerate response by six months.

15. AMs received extensive training including refusal-avoidance strategies and use of various of tools including electronic reporting. We developed a reporting calendar to help companies understand and manage their reporting burden. We provided contact management software to record AM activity, and management information reports to track AM activity and company performance. AMs made thousands of contacts with large companies between March 2007 and October 2008, and made personal visits to over 100 companies. By October 2008, large companies had attained a response rate of nearly 97 percent, well above the original goal.

#### **E. Reminder Calls**

16. Most Economic Census respondent communications are conducted by mail in a series of letters, reminders, and replacement forms [Appendix B]. Our team of telephone interviewers made reminder calls during July through September, 2008. In all, we made reminder calls to about 15,000 multi-location businesses and 90,000 single-location industries in industries with low response. Interviewers used a scripted a message emphasizing the reporting requirement and the importance of the census. Interviewers attempted up to three calls to a company, on three different days. After the third unsuccessful attempt they left a scripted voice mail message, as follows:

*“This is a courtesy call from the United States Census Bureau, reminding you that the 2007 Economic Census due date has passed and your census form is still due. Response to the economic census is required by law. Failure to return your census form can subject your business to legal penalties. Please call us on 1-800-233-6136 to discuss ways to keep your business in compliance.”*

We estimate that nearly half of the companies just receiving a voice message returned their form without any additional interaction with us.

Box 2. Outcome of Telephone Calls	
Follow-up call outcome	Percent response
Claims to have filed	72%
Promises to file	69%
Requests replacement form	93%
Voicemail or left message	49%

#### IV. PUBLICITY AND OUTREACH

We conducted a public information campaign to set the stage for the 2007 Economic Census. We worked with trade associations, other non-governmental organizations, and government agencies to raise awareness of the Economic Census and encourage business people to watch for the forms. The objective was to reinforce messages in the questionnaire package, advance information mailing, and other communications.

##### F. Awareness and Response Promotion

17. We conducted focus group research in 2006 to assess respondent awareness of the economic census, learn how they obtain information, identify the best messages, and determine the best ways to distribute them. We determined that the Internet has emerged as a vital tool for respondents, and that business people increasingly look to associations to validate what they hear. The reporting requirement remains a strong motivator, but respondents also want to know how the data will be used.

18. The focus groups made it clear that businesses are unaware of the Economic Census. In response, we developed a new web site, [business.census.gov](http://business.census.gov). It would be a destination for businesses and associations to obtain facts about industries and local areas, and guidance in completing census forms. The site offered a creative first exposure to the 2007 Economic Census. For businesses, the site provided answers to “frequently asked questions” about the census, a discussion of “What’s New,” and examples of how people use the data. For news media and intermediaries, the site provided sample articles, PSAs, and other resources.

19. We developed a series of Industry Snapshots for 2,000 industries and industry groups. The reports combine basic industry statistics on establishments, employment, payroll, and revenue with population estimates. They include a “Compare Your Business” table that businesses could use to benchmark their figures values against industry metrics.

##### G. Communicating with Intermediaries

20. **Trade Associations.** The Census Bureau has strong ties to many trade associations: they review our forms and help deliver census results to their members. Research showed that businesses also look to associations to validate the reporting requirement. We developed a list of about 2,000 trade associations.

21. We placed special emphasis on industries with a history of poor response: in the 2002 census, outstanding forms in just 20 industries accounted for nearly 3 percent of total census mailout. For example, the National Restaurant Association and the National Association of Convenience Stores helped reach out to businesses in those industries. Associations contacted during this effort were sympathetic to the challenge we face,

observing that they also have a difficult time obtaining responses from small and businesses.

22. We learned in recent years that many preparers of Economic Census forms are payroll professionals and are members of the American Payroll Association APA and similar organizations. We also worked with broad-spectrum organizations, including the United States Chamber of Commerce and National Federation of Independent Business, organizations that respondents often look to for information. We worked actively with these groups, met with dozens of organizations, to obtain coverage of the census in their newsletters and links from their websites.

23. **Chambers of Commerce and Business Media.** We developed a nationwide list of about 4,000 chambers of commerce, in communities across the country with significant numbers of businesses. Chambers were particularly effective partners and provided significant numbers of newsletter entries and web links. We also assembled a list of business reporters at newspapers and business journals nationwide. As with the chambers of commerce, we sent tailored messages tailored to the local area. A significant number of small businesses calling our toll-free number mentioned an e-mail from their chamber told them their census form might be past due.

24. **Scheduled Communications.** We developed a Media/Associations web page with editorial content for news stories, PSAs, banner ads, and other information. The also site included geographic and industry data, and estimates of the forms being mailed to an industry or area, that organizations could use in their communications. Organizations used these materials to craft stories informing their members or readers about the economic census. In all, we developed a list of 10,000 organizations including associations, chambers of commerce, national and regional business journals, Census Bureau-affiliated organizations, and state and local governments. We sent a total of eight e-blasts with tailored messages that organizations could forward directly to their members. We asked them to help explain the importance of the census to their members and provide a link from their web site to [business.census.gov](http://business.census.gov).

25. **News Media.** The Census Bureau has strong relationships with national and regional news media through our Public Information Office (PIO). The PIO also has an extensive array of tools to communicate information about Census Bureau programs. We issued a series of news releases, and special reports. We also conducted an audio news conference featuring three Commerce Department officials and two association partners.

26. In all, daily web searches identified over 600 news clips and other placements on partner websites between November 2007 and April 2008 showed that messages were placed throughout the publicity period, and appeared throughout the United States in all important media markets. Analysis of the response data shows that there appears to have been impact on response resulting from the targeted outreach. While early 2007 response by all companies actually was below 2002 levels, a subset of historically low-response industries actually showed a less significant decline [Attachment C].

## H. Strategy of Stridency

27. Every census, some companies report late. This may be necessary, for example when fiscal years end late in the calendar year or businesses undergo merger or reorganization. Private firms and very small businesses are often reluctant to share financial information with the government. They may question the how the Census Bureau will protect their data.

28. Among very large businesses, we made high-level contacts with historically noncompliant companies earlier in the census process; for example, we sent a copy of the Advance Information package to their CFO. In all of our contacts we stressed the reporting requirement and importance of the census, and suggesting ways to ease their reporting burden. Nevertheless a few companies are doggedly unresponsive. In August and September 2008 the Chief Counsel for Economic Affairs from the U.S. Department of Commerce sent letters to the CEO, CFO, and General Counsel of more than 100 very large companies. The letters strongly reminded businesses of reporting requirement. All of these companies contacted us within days of receiving the second letter (from the Chief

Counsel), and most ultimately reported.

29. We also sent letters from the Chief Counsel to about 440,000 single location businesses and some 15,000 multi-location businesses. These letters were different from earlier reminders: replacement forms were not enclosed. Most businesses receiving these letters returned their census forms.

30. Analysis of response statistics shows that multiple contacts are necessary to obtain responses from the desired number of businesses [Box 4.]. Thus the scripted follow-up calls and scripted voice mail were very effective, and were complemented by the subsequent letters from the Commerce Department's Chief Counsel. For example, we received responses from 69 percent of businesses that promised to return the form.

After the Chief Counsel letter was sent, that percentage climbed to 85 percent. Even the scripted voice mail message was effective: responses were received from about half of businesses that received a message. That percentage climbed to 70 percent after these businesses received a letter from the Chief Counsel.

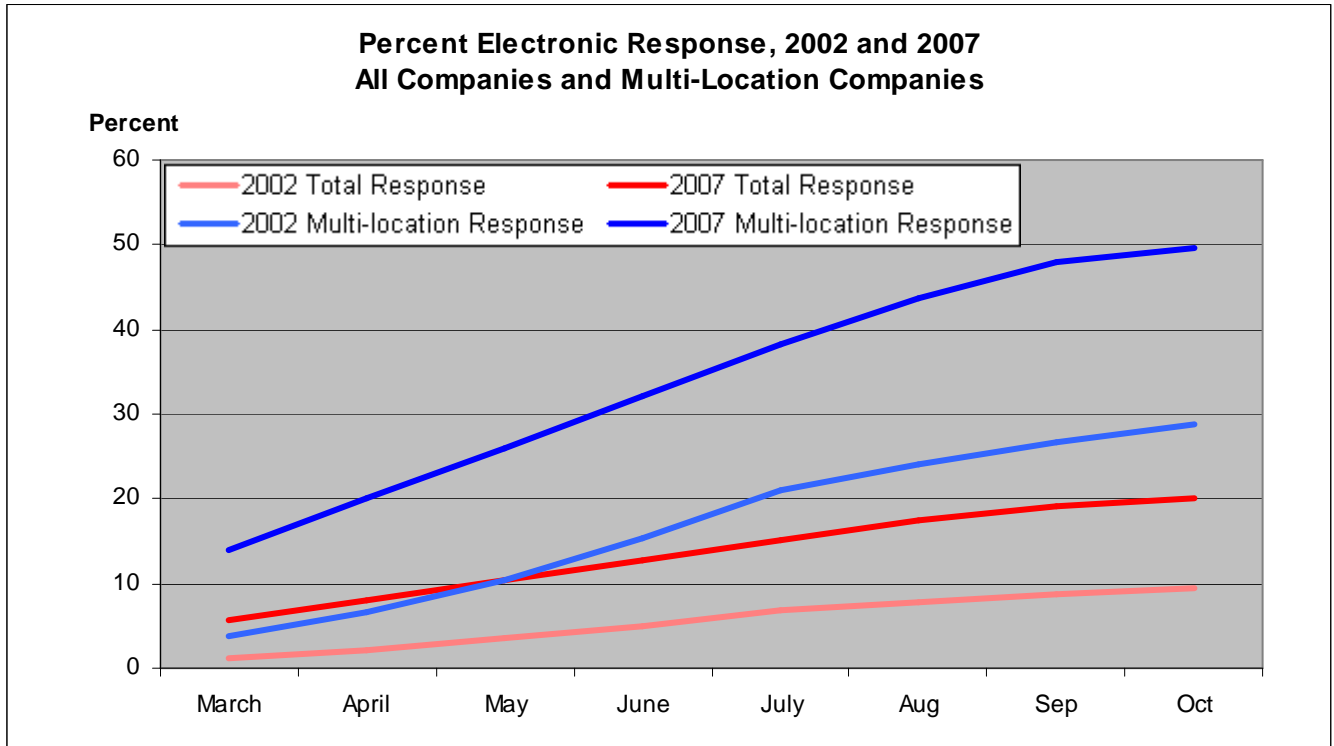
**Box 3. Outcome of Telephone Calls And Chief Counsel Letters (based on a sample of 8,500calls)**

Follow-up call outcome	Percent response	Response after subsequent Chief Counsel letter
Claims to have filed	72%	86%
Promises to file	69%	85%
Requests replacement form	93%	95%
Voicemail or left message	49%	70%

### **I. Conclusion**

31. The comprehensive 2007 Economic Census communications and outreach plan achieved and surpassed its stated response goals. Not one single act or strategy can be pointed to reason for success. Rather, a combination of efforts contributed to this outcome. Well-designed forms, carefully scheduled questionnaire mailings, and electronic reporting tools that meet user needs paved the way. Targeted e-blasts to intermediaries and managed relationships with large companies contributed significantly. Well-crafted reminder telephone phone calls and legal reminders provided the finishing touch. In the end, we attained 87 percent total response and nearly 97 percent by the largest businesses. The keys were good planning and timely integration of resources.

32. Now the U.S. Census Bureau must use the same communications channels is to promote awareness and use of the data as they become available. We will continue to find new and creative roles for business.census.gov. In the end, the published data, distributed effectively and usefully, may be the most important ambassador for future census collections.



Appendix B

**2007 Economic Census Contact Activity**

**Contact Exchange Cards** (*Online form for respondent entry & Census data capture*)

Initial Mail-out	Mar-07
Follow-up mailing	May-07
Call center reminder calls and data capture for mid-size multi-location companies	Jun-07
AM reminder calls and data capture for largest multi-location companies.	Jun-07

**Regular Mail operations**

Classification form mailout	Oct-07
Largest multi-location company mailout	Oct-07
Remaining mailout	Dec-07
First follow-up, may include replacement forms	Mar 08
Second follow-up, may include replacement forms	April 08
Third follow-up, may include replacement forms	May 08

**Chief Counsel letters** ["Fourth follow-up"]

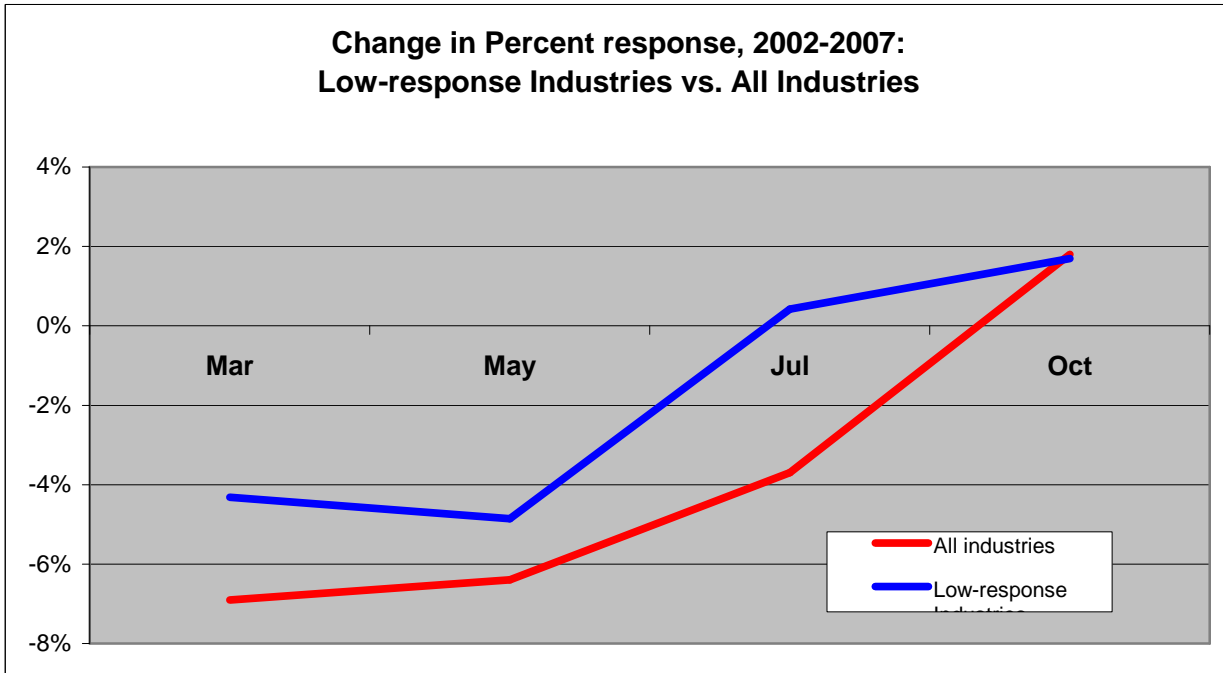
Single-location companies	
Classification forms -- clerks took data over phone	June 08
Single-location companies	July 08
Small and mid-size multi-location companies	Aug 08
Multi-location companies	
100 large mid-size companies; customized with CEO name and address	Sep 08
150 from the largest companies, completely customized letters	Aug-Sep 08

**Telephone Operations**

Regular phone unit for incoming calls	Ongoing
Outgoing reminder calls to mid-size multi-location companies [2 rounds]	May & Aug 08
Incoming calls, companies with classification forms receiving Chief Counsel letters	June-July
Outgoing reminder calls to small multi-location companies and 90,000 single-location companies in selected industries	July
AM reminder calls to largest multi-location companies in scheduled 'waves'	



**Change in Percent response, 2002-2007:  
Low-response Industries vs. All Industries**



**2002 - 2007 Response Rate Comparisons**

