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Session 4: Internal Communication

Engaging Employees through a Strategic Communications Plan

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I. Overview

The U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) National Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS) created its first-ever communications plan less than one year ago. Development and implementation of the plan is employee led. The overall objective is to improve the perceived value of NASS products and services among data users, data providers and employees. The key underlying message for the NASS employee is that "everything you do helps NASS deliver its mission. You are the face of USDA NASS (including headquarters, field offices and enumerators) and every interaction is critical to the public's perception of NASS."

The focus of the internal communications efforts are: a) direct and transparent communication to and with employees (non- human resource related); b) employee participation in communications planning and implementation to create employee buy-in at all levels for the strategies and tactics and ensure their success; and c) products and services that enable employees to communicate more effectively. The implementation of the plan is well under way. Efforts to measure the effectiveness of efforts are just beginning.

A. About NASS and its Public Affairs Section

1. The U.S. Department of Agriculture's National Agricultural Statistics Service conducts hundreds of surveys of farmers and agricultural businesses every year. The data collected result in reports covering virtually every aspect of U.S. agriculture. Production and

supplies of food and fiber, prices paid and received by farmers, farm labor and wages, farm finances, chemical use, and changes in the demographics of U.S. producers are only a few examples. NASS's mission is to provide timely, accurate and useful statistics in service to U.S. agriculture.

2. The importance of agricultural statistics in the United States government is documented as far back as President George Washington. As an early compiler of U.S. agricultural information, Washington corresponded with land holders asking for information on farmland prices, commodity prices and crop yields. "Collecting, arranging, publishing, and disseminating, for the benefit of the nation, statistical and other useful information in regard to agriculture" was central to President Abraham Lincoln's purpose for establishing the U.S. Department of Agriculture 150 years ago in 1862. Today, NASS proudly carries forth this responsibility.
3. Even with such a long history, NASS only established an office to focus on marketing and public affairs about 10 years ago. The agency hired its first director with professional communications qualifications only 6 years ago. This year the Public Affairs Section (PAS) created its first strategic agency communications plan. The plan supports the agency mission by targeting the needs of NASS staff and external data users and data providers. Communications plans created and implemented in the past, were limited in scope and focused only on specific programs or initiatives within the agency.
4. The USDA Research, Education and Economics (REE) mission area, of which NASS is a part, conducted a public affairs program review of the agency in 2010. The resulting recommendations sparked a number of actions, including development of the strategic communications plan. A number of the recommendations are reflected in the agency today and in the plan.
5. An underlying ethos is that the Public Affairs Section and the strategic agency communications plan fully support the work of each employee throughout all of NASS's programs and initiatives. Ultimately, the PAS strives to provide the most effective, timely and easy-to-use tools and services that help each employee fulfill the agency mission.
6. A new, employee-led Communications Advisory Council (CAC) 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, and meet as frequently as biweekly depending on their involvement in CAC task forces. This ground-up approach ensures investment in the product and process, provides strong endorsement from the CAC members, and ensures communications measures will be effective across the agency.

B. Communications Challenges

7. NASS announced a radical agency reorganization at about the same time as the communications planning process began. The reorganization process has caused uncertainty, low morale and heavy workloads among employees.

8. Both NASS and USDA announced voluntary early retirement opportunities in the past year due to budgetary constraints resulting in about a 10 percent reduction in work force at NASS. These retirements have caused loss of agency knowledge and increased workloads.
9. Recent criticism in the press about government in general and the accuracy of our statistics specifically threaten to erode confidence in the data, participation in surveys, and already low employee morale.
10. A decentralized structure with 46 field offices and different levels of public affairs expertise and interest within each creates challenges.
11. PAS is challenged by continued, but lessened, skepticism among agency statisticians about the value and role of the communications function.

C. Communications Opportunities

12. NASS has an internal culture that is unique to USDA. Historically, the agency has ranked first in employee satisfaction among USDA agencies. This rating has dropped to 4th of 16 USDA agencies, but is still near the top.
13. Employees have great pride in their work, the mission of the agency, and the culture of the NASS “family.”
14. There is support from leadership for the marketing, customer service and public affairs functions and the recognition that these functions are more important than ever in a time of change.
15. A decentralized structure with 46 field offices and different levels of public affairs expertise and interest within each is beneficial because of local agricultural knowledge and relationships with local reporters and farm organizations.
16. A professional communications team that is dedicated to directly helping staff and therefore the agency achieve continued success in its mission by providing effective products and services is in place.
17. A new communications plan developed primarily by employees, who are committed to implementing it. The CAC also had the opportunity to contract with an agriculturally-focused communications firm to help develop the plan. This firm assisted with primary and secondary research, led creative brainstorming sessions, and facilitated group discussions on what to include in the plan.

II. Internal Communication as Part of an Overall Agency Communication Plan

A. Existing Internal Communications Modes

18. *Intranet* – NASS currently has two actively used intranet tools. Staff and leadership primarily use the Nassnet for official agency information sharing while they use the second, NASSportal, for a mix of official NASS information and staff-related personal and professional announcements. These two vehicles provide timely one-way information sharing.
19. *Quarterly newsletter – The Roundup* is the agency’s quarterly newsletter for staff and retirees. It is a traditional newsletter, sharing agency initiatives and news, human resources information, news from field offices, professional development tips, and a message from the administrator, for example. It has evolved from print-only format to an electronic format. We hope to shape it into a blog-type format to share news with active dialog. However, some staff and most retirees still want a printed document and we’ve yet to find a way to provide retirees with access to the blog-type product in a secure internal environment.
20. *Video Teleconferencing* – NASS installed video teleconferencing equipment in each field office and in multiple conference rooms in the Washington, D.C., headquarters this year. This equipment has made face-to-face meetings across the nation a normal way of doing business. It has also afforded leadership an efficient way to communicate important news directly to staff.

B. New Internal Communications Initiatives

21. *Weekly field office updates and monthly video conferences* – Recently, the Public Affairs Section began including information in existing weekly e-mail communication to the 46 field office directors to help bridge the information gap between headquarters and the dispersed field staff. Information could include updates on promotional materials for surveys, trade show participation, and celebratory initiatives such as the USDA 150th anniversary activities. It is also an effective vehicle for feedback on PAS training, services, products and new initiatives. Similarly, PAS now participates in regular field office video conference calls.
22. *Minding the Media* – PAS provides daily news clippings to leadership and any interested staff. We also provide a weekly report to leadership on press contacts and results. This shows results and value to leadership and to the staff who frequently speak with the media. We are expanding the news distribution and clipping services to assist field offices with their media-based efforts to tell NASS’s story.
23. *Consistent Identity Task Force* – A consistent identity is the foundation for any successful organization. A task force of the employee-led CAC is working to create (and refresh) uniform standards for the way employees and offices present themselves to the public. Members conducted research on best practices and how offices currently present themselves. They are now presenting to leadership new standards for use of logos, e-signatures, letterhead, news releases, voice mails, PowerPoint presentations, etc., for approval. The goal of this effort will be to increase knowledge of NASS products and services, to expand recognition of NASS as a survey sponsor, and to create more positive attitudes toward NASS.

24. *Census Communications Task Force* – This CAC task force on the census of agriculture taps the expertise of NASS employees in headquarters, in the field, 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.
25. *NASSshare* – NASSshare is an electronic bulletin board that provides a way for employees to share and discuss ideas with and ask questions of their NASS co-workers and management. It is a way for staff to directly address management, with an option of anonymity. This two-way communications method will help to bridge the information gap identified through research and addressed in the communications plan. “Sometimes there’s a disconnect between field offices and headquarters. Field offices will tell you one thing and headquarters will tell you another.” (Source: Data user discussion group conducted by NASS, 2011). Development of the tool is complete and training is underway with an early June launch planned.
26. *Bi-weekly Messages from the Administrator* – Every two weeks the Administrator sends updates on various topics to all NASS staff. These messages provide accurate and timely information directly from the Administrator. The alternative and previous situation is a lack of transparency and an inability to address misinformation and rumors, particularly related to the agency reorganization.
27. *USDA Blogs* – The primary audience for these monthly (or more frequent) blogs is external parties interested in USDA and NASS matters. The blogs accentuate the expertise of NASS staff at all levels, recognize their accomplishments, and highlight the positive work they do. This builds credibility inside and outside NASS and provides a positive morale boost for the blog author and those involved with the featured initiative.
28. *Train the Trainer Tactics* – Long-range planning data revealed that enumerators are concerned about how to explain the value of NASS data to farmers; they feel too much of the work of convincing producers to answer a survey falls on them. The Public Affairs Section, in partnership with those who administer various surveys, has started to provide information focused on “what’s in it for the farmer/data provider.” This approach expands or refocuses the traditional survey promotional materials and training events. A newly available tool is the iPad tablet, which all field enumerators will soon have. For two surveys, PAS piloted videos and a document library on the iPads to communicate the survey benefits to the enumerators so they would have more tools at their fingertips to use in convincing farmers to participate.

III. Results of Engaging Employees in Communications Planning

A. Implementation of the Plan

29. The employee-led Communications Advisory Council is proving to be an effective way to engage employees, gain support across the agency for the communications plan

strategies and tactics, and ensure the initiatives successfully address employee and agency needs.

30. The CAC, with PAS support and guidance, is actively and effectively implementing the plan they helped develop and advising the Public Affairs Section on strategies and tactics. Members of the CAC meet regularly to discuss their particular project.

B. Results and Measurements

31. 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.
32. A government-wide employee satisfaction survey is underway. We will soon know whether NASS employees say they are more or less satisfied with their jobs and the agency than last year. This survey will help assess some of our communications tactics and inform future direction.
33. The Public Affairs Section will soon conduct a survey of agency employees to gauge the value and utility of its products and services.
34. To measure data providers' perceived value of NASS products and services – and therefore the effectiveness of tools provided to help 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. We plan to conduct the survey later this year.

IV. Conclusion

35. NASS is committed to a unique employee-led approach to communications planning and implementation. We are seeking valid, survey-based feedback from data users, data providers and NASS staff to measure results. Formal survey results and informal touchpoints will continue to inform adjustments to and future direction of the communications strategies and tactics. Employee engagement through and catalyzed by the Communications Advisory Council is the cornerstone of achieving success.