

The Art of Building Trust when Communicating Statistics

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Abstract

This famous phrase “lies, damned lies, and statistics” describes the persuasive ability of statistics to be, intentionally or unintentionally, misused to bolster weak argument to the point of destruction, therefore creating a complete lack of trust and undermining the original point.

This misuse of statistics and data by any public spokesperson or official communications campaign is a very serious harm to democracy and our society at large. That is why the UK Statistics Authority monitors misuse carefully and intervenes publicly when concerns of this nature occur.

However, if numbers are used well, with care and positive intention, they can in fact be extremely helpful, powerful, inform good decision making and most importantly enhance trust.

In government communications, statistics, data, numbers, and evidence should always be used to inform and deliver impactful communications.

To do this effectively you must always have in your mind that any production and use of statistics by governments must command confidence in the statistics and organisations using them, with the aim of helping audiences understand the key messages.

Where to start...

Communications professionals are not always well-known for their numerical expertise and this can sometimes cause problems. During any busy day in the communications team, use of numbers in a press release, tweet, presentation, campaign, infographic, or any other purpose should always be carefully considered and checked no matter what the deadline or urgency to appropriately tell the story.

Using statistics requires a bit of thought and often gentle collaboration, to ensure the point lands understandably in the intended place.

Who can help...

Communications professionals should know and work in close partnership with their department’s appropriate wider analysts, to ensure that any use of statistics does not distract from your key communications messages, or itself become the story.

The art of using statistics in a helpful way is to form the right partnerships to convey the intended impact, to help tell the story, gain understanding, and enhance the organisation's reputation in the process.

It's essential that we are using numbers powerfully and correctly at the same time, to be accurate whilst also creating impact. This can only be done well in professional collaboration across your own department and within the context of wider government, conveying important messages whilst also developing trust.