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Getting our message across: Strategic reflections on modernizing statistical communication

"An outgoing expert personality" – using a brand platform as a tool to improve external communication

Note by Statistics Sweden

Summary

This document presents how Statistics Sweden is using a brand platform to improve the external communication and to engage better with users. Among other things, the platform describes how Statistics Sweden wants to be perceived by the users in every kind of interaction. It is a known fact that there is sometimes a gap between how the staff at Statistics Sweden feel about the users and how the users perceive that attitude. One area where the platform has been used with success is the Statistics Service that answers questions about statistics by phone and email. The most important tool was a series of workshops where the staff of Statistics Sweden (about 10 people) created their own guidelines on how to express Statistics Sweden's personality linguistically, with the support of a plain language expert. Through regular audits of their email replies by the plain language expert, it is made sure that the work leads to concrete improvements.

The document is presented to the Conference of European Statisticians' seminar on "Getting our message across: Strategic reflections on modernizing statistical communication", Session 1: "Strategic communications" for discussion.

I. Introduction

1.	Regular surveys show that the general public has great confidence in Statistics Sweden, but these surveys also indicate that the majority know very little about what this government agency does. It is also known that many people confuse Statistics Sweden with other survey companies, including commercial ones. Furthermore, there seems to be a gap between how Statistics Sweden's staff feel about the users and how the users see Statistics Sweden. The staff want to be helpful, friendly and engaging but in their external communication, Statistics Sweden often come across as introvert and hard to understand.

2.	To improve the external communication and engage better with users, the communication department, in collaboration with human resources department and an external consultant, have created a brand platform. The platform consists of, among other things, a logo, a graphical profile, guidelines for using pictures and colours, as well as a personality for Statistics Sweden.

3.	The personality describes how Statistics Sweden wants the users to perceive the agency when they visit the website, attend seminars, read emails and letters or report data in surveys, in short, in any kind of interaction with Statistics Sweden. The personality is intended to be the core guide to all external communication.

4.	This document is focused on how Statistics Sweden has used the brand platform to communicate better via the so-called Statistics Service that answers questions about statistics by phone and email. The most important tool was a series of workshops in which the staff of Statistics Service created their own guidelines on how to express Statistics Sweden's personality linguistically. Through regular audits of their email replies by a plain language expert, it is made sure that the work has led to concrete improvements.

II. From directives and steering documents to brand platform

5.	"But I am not outgoing, I am an introvert. So are most people in this department!" This is not an uncommon reaction when Statistics Sweden's personality (see the box below) is presented to the staff. The personality is the component of the brand platform that is intended to guide all external communication. It describes how Statistics Sweden wants to be perceived by the target groups, regardless of channel and medium.

Statistics Sweden's personality:

Statistics Sweden is an outgoing expert personality that:

- is passionate about their job;

- instils great confidence;

- is contemporary in expression;

- participates in the public discourse.

6.	As part of the implementation of the brand platform, staff of the communication department regularly present the personality to colleagues in other departments. Invariably, this leads to interesting discussions. Apart from the reaction mentioned above

about being introverts, another common reaction is "yes, the personality describes exactly what we are like". It is of course encouraging that the statisticians are comfortable with Statistics Sweden's personality description. However, this reaction also reveals the assumption that a positive attitude towards the recipient is converted into text without effort. Unfortunately, this rarely happens – training is often needed to communicate successfully. This is where the personality can play an important role. Introvert statisticians need not worry, though. Employees can be as introvert as they like, but in their external communication, they must contribute to Statistics Sweden's personality so that the organization is perceived according to the brand platform.

III.   The work process to create the brand platform

7.   In 2014, the Director General decided that Statistics Sweden should have a brand platform. A project group was formed with six people from the communication department, one person from human resources and one external consultant. The main objective of involving human resources was to include employer branding in the project.

8.   The work process consisted of three steps. First, the project group went through the relevant internal and external steering documents, including directives from the government, the Official Statistics Act, the European Code of Practice, as well as Statistics Sweden's 2020 Strategy and the communication strategy. The purpose was to extract Statistics Sweden's commitment to the community—users, respondents, paying customers, general public, researchers. What does Statistics Sweden *have* to do and what does it *want* to do?

9.   The second step was to put these results into words, a description of what Statistics Sweden is and what sets it apart from other similar organisations in Sweden.

10.   The third part of the brand platform process was to convert the description into, among other things, a visual identity and a personality, i.e. a description of how Statistics Sweden wants the recipients of the external communication to feel about the organisation when they are communicating with it. After the work was finished, the brand platform was handed over to consultants in graphic design to create a redesigned logo and a graphic manual that expresses a consistent visual identity across channels and media. The final step is the implementation phase.

Example of implementation: email replies from Statistics Service

11.   In 2017, Statistics Service replied to 13,200 telephone enquiries and 5,500 e-mail enquiries about statistics. Statistics Service is one of the most important channels for external communication and, therefore, an important area to start implementing the brand platform.

12.   It was the task of the plain language expert (a member of the brand platform project group) to help Statistics Service to improve their emails using the new Statistics Sweden personality. In total, individual members of Statistics Service spent c. 5 hours each on workshops over a period of 6 months. First, the plain language expert conducted an audit against criteria of plain language and reader friendliness (in accordance with the Swedish Language Law) of around 10 emails per staff member. The results of this audit showed several strong points, such as that most emails:

- contained only relevant information;

- had the most important information first;

- were not more formal than necessary;

- were free of writing mistakes.

13.   However, problems were also found, mostly relating to reader-friendliness in 70% of the email replies. In general, the replies were very short. Many of them consisted of little else than "Dear *N*", a link to a table, graph, file or database query, and "Kind regards, Statistics Sweden". The main problem with this is that without a description of the statistics that the link leads to, it may be unclear to the recipient what he or she has received in the email reply. As a consequence, the recipients may ask themselves "Is this what I asked for? Or is it merely something similar? Is it useful to me?" This kind of confusion is of course unnecessary. Most email queries to Statistics Service contain a core question: "Do you have statistics on …?" or "How many …?" It is an obvious goal to give a clear answer to the core question.

14.   In addition to this, another result stood out: in around 10% of the email replies, the sender stated that they had looked for the statistics on Statistics Sweden's website but were unable to find it. None of the replies contained a comment on this.

15.   The process towards improving the email communication began with a discussion with the Statistics Service group (c. ten people) of the result of the audit. The initial goal was to agree on the problem and to relate it to Statistics Sweden's personality. The conclusion of the discussion was that two components of the personality were especially relevant to the email communication with users: "outgoing expert personality" and "instils great confidence". It was agreed that in the majority of the replies, the group did not fully express an outgoing expert personality and risked not instilling great confidence.

16.   The task after that was to create editorial guidelines, based on the results of the audit and the personality. In one workshop, devoted to revising examples of email replies, the core question discussed was "What should a helpful email reply that reflects an outgoing expert personality and instils great confidence look like?" The finished guidelines are shown in the box below.

Editorial guidelines for Statistics Service:

At Statistics Service, we

1. Explain what the recipients get from us.

2. Always include links to the statistics – not just the figures.

3. Express that we understand that scb.se can be tricky to use when users state that they have tried but failed to find the statistics on our website.

4. Express regret if we are unable to help.

5. Apologise if something went wrong.

6. Invite the recipients to get back to us if they have more questions.

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17.   To ensure good quality, follow-up audits of email replies have been conducted by the plain language expert. The plan is to continue with follow-up audits every 6 months. After each audit, there was a short workshop, in which the plain language expert

presented the results and discussed with the group what measures to take to improve the results in the next audit. So far, two follow-up audits have been completed. The first one was conducted a couple of months after the guidelines had been finished, and the second one around six months later. Like the initial audit, 100 emails were included. In the follow-up audits, the emails were reviewed against the new guidelines, so the results of the two audits are only partly comparable to those of the initial audit. The results of the follow-up audits are shown in Table 1.

Table 1
The portion of replies that adhere to the guidelines

Guideline	Follow-up audit 1	Follow-up audit 2
1 Explain what the recipients get from us	80%	75%
2 Always include links to the statistics	90%	75%
3 Express that we understand that scb.se can be tricky to use	20%	40%
4 Express regret if we are unable to help	40%	56%
5 Apologise if something went wrong	0% *	100% **
6 Invite the recipients to get back to us if they have more questions	40%	78%

*) There were only 3 instances where the guideline could be applied.

**) There was only 1 instance where the guideline could be applied.

18.   The most important improvement in the follow-up audits concerns guideline 1. In the initial audit, only 30% of the replies were found to be complete and clear. In most cases, the problem was that the reply included a link to statistics on Statistics Sweden's website, but without any description of the contents of that statistics. In the first follow-up audit, there is a notable increase from 30% to 80% complete and clear replies.

19.   However, the results also show that further improvements are needed in most other areas. Guidelines 3-6 were only followed in 40% or less of the replies in the first follow-up audit. In the second follow-up audit, the adherence has increased but more work is needed to reach a satisfactory level.

20.   The final interesting finding is that due to a misunderstanding, the guidelines were not distributed to the group until after the follow-up audit. This means that the improvements in their communication were the result of the workshops, not the guidelines themselves.

IV.   Ownership and audits for concrete change

21.   The main issue of the work presented in this paper is how to implement a brand platform and create concrete change. Everybody knows that a document with guidelines

is not enough. Statistics Sweden believes that the process chosen, as described above is a successful one. Recent research about plain language work in Sweden and Denmark also shows that a short training, e.g. half a day or a day, most often does not lead to change.

22.   The main finding is that there are two keys to success of the work:

- **Ownership**: The most important step was to establish a standard for high quality email replies from Statistics Service. A crucial factor is that the group decided on the standard and guidelines. The plain language expert guided the group and supervised their work throughout the process, but did not provide them with the guidelines;

- **Audits**: Regular audits make up another important component of the work. The first audit was necessary to identify problem areas in the communication. The follow-up audits help keep the group involved and maintain continuous improvements.

V.   Conclusions and recommendations

23.   At Statistics Sweden, service, accessibility and usability are increasingly important aspects of the mission. One reason for this development are increased legislative demands in the shape of new or revised laws e.g. the Language Act, the Discrimination Act, Administrative Procedure Act, and the European Web Accessibility Directive.

24.   A brand platform is an excellent tool to ensure high and consistent quality of the external communication, across channels and media. However, for a brand platform to have effect, the implementation is crucial. Good written communication is hard to produce. At Statistics Sweden, everyone is expected to communicate externally and most employees are not communication professionals, so they need support and guidance.

25.   In sum, it is fair to say that statistical institutes need to work harder to communicate in a more user-friendly way in order to fulfil Statistics Sweden's mission to enhance the use of official statistics in society. Exchanging experiences and ideas about this with other statistical offices would be very interesting.