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Strategic communications framework

Strategic Communications Framework for Statistical Institutions

Note by the High-Level Group for the Modernisation of Official Statistics project team on strategic communications framework

Summary

Recognizing the importance of strategic communications, the High-level Group for the Modernisation of Official Statistics selected strategic communications as a priority project for 2018. The objective of the project was to guide statistical offices in the development of a strategic approach to protect, enhance and promote the organization's reputation and brand. The draft *Strategic Communications Framework* was endorsed by the annual HLG-MOS workshop in November 2018.

This document presents the main parts of the *Strategic Communications Framework* without annexes. Full version of the document can be consulted in English.

The full text of the *Strategic Communications Framework* has been sent to all members of the Conference of European Statisticians (CES) for electronic consultation. Subject to a positive outcome of the consultation, the CES plenary session will be invited to endorse the Framework.



I. Introduction

1. Official statistics are operating in a competitive and challenging environment—one that has changed significantly over the last 20 years and accelerated greatly in recent years. For traditional users of official statistics, the value and importance of official statistics are undisputed. Yet, for the average citizen, digital and social media revolutions mean that more people have instantaneous access to various data sources outside official statistics. The 24/7 news cycle is a reality, trust in government is decreasing and the “fake news” phenomenon is growing.
2. Now more than ever, timely and relevant data and stories produced by statistical organizations are essential to healthy democratic societies since they remain the only independent, impartial, trusted and reliable sources of official statistics. For official statistics to be beneficial to society, policy debate and decision making, they must be known, understood, communicated and used.
3. Strategic communication is a relatively new concept for most statistical organizations, which have traditionally focused their efforts and resources on dissemination practices and systems.
4. In some statistical organizations, communication is given little attention or is seen as a low priority. In others, however, it is growing in importance as many are realizing the value of effective communication to maintain and enhance the relevance of official statistics in today’s society.
5. Communicating official statistics is more than writing press releases or answering user questions and requests. Statistical authorities need a modern, proactive communication strategy with clearly defined key messages, and must use different channels to reach various target audiences.
6. A strategic communication function can guide the development and implementation of a communication strategy. This has particular relevance for the world of official statistics, where communication and dissemination have traditionally focused on expert users. With the changing environment, statistical organizations must learn to communicate more effectively and directly with citizens and improve statistical literacy across all audiences.
7. A productive, professional communication function can help position the statistical organization to succeed in this highly competitive environment. Communication professionals can work in partnership with the statistical organization’s leadership board and staff to develop a communication strategy that supports the statistical organization’s mission, demonstrates the value of official statistics and enhances the competitive advantage offered by the statistical organization.
8. Recognizing the importance of strategic communication, the High-level Group for the Modernisation of Official Statistics endorsed a priority project for 2018—the Strategic Communications Framework Project. The objective of the project is to guide statistical offices in the development of a strategic approach to protect, enhance and promote the organization’s reputation and brand. Project members—communication experts from across the world with support from the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe—are pleased to present the outcome of this work, the Strategic Communications Framework.
9. The framework intends to help statistical organizations maximize their corporate image through proactive user consultation; engagement with and understanding of target audiences; channels, tools and approaches designed to meet particular audiences’ needs; messages tailored to various audiences; media engagement; and measurement of the results and impact of communication activities. The framework also includes proposed skill sets to support a professional external communication program, a communication maturity model and roadmap, and guidelines to create a proactive response strategy to issues that have the potential to cause reputational damage.
10. The framework and all its components are offered as a guideline and are not intended to be prescriptive. Statistical organizations are invited to use the framework in its entirety, or to use elements that help support their organization’s business model and brand.

II. Content of the Strategic Communications Framework

A. Chapter 1: Assessing the statistical organization

1. Branding

11. The purpose of this section is to define what branding is as it relates to statistical organizations. It also describes the process to position, develop, review, confirm or redefine a brand.

A. What is branding?

12. A brand is much more than a logo (the badge an organization wears), a visual identity (the colour scheme and complementary theming across its products and web estate) or a tagline (its purpose, for example: data, evidence decisions). Branding is all of these things and more. It is how the organization is living its values and how it is presented to and perceived by the public.

13. Branding is the process by which products or services are distinguished from their competition. Branding permits an audience to develop associations (e.g. status, prestige) with these products or services; this eases the decision-making process and can lead to the generation of market leaders and dominators.

14. There is no single unifying definition of what branding or a brand is and although a number of definitions exist, with most following a similar thread, there are often subtle differences depending on the market environment (its pressures etc.) in any given country.

15. One consistency, however, is that a brand should cover the breadth of organization. It should be the golden thread that runs through all products and outputs, it should be closely linked to the vision and values, and it should resonate with all who encounter it (from staff to stakeholders).

16. The following definitions provide a useful way of understanding the many facets that will require consideration when approach branding, and may help to provide a route in to the challenge:

- A brand is a name, term, sign, symbol, or design, or a combination of them, intended to identify the goods and services of one seller or group of sellers & to differentiate them from those of competition. (American Marketing Association, 2012. *AMA Dictionary*)
- A brand is more than a label employed to differentiate among the manufacturers of a product. It is a complex symbol that represents many things. The net result is a public image, a character or personality that may be more important for the overall status (and sales) of the brand than many technical facts about the product. (Gardner, B.V. and Levy, S.J. 1955. ‘The Product & the Brand’, *Harvard Business Review*, March/April)
- A brand emerges as various “authors” tell stories that involve the brand. Four primary types of authors are involved: companies, the culture industries, intermediaries & customers. (Holt, D. B. 2004. ‘How Brands become Icons’, Boston: *Harvard Business School Press*).

B. Why is branding important?

17. A mature brand is part of an organization’s DNA. It is the cohesive thread that runs through an organization’s strategies, objectives and core purpose. A strong, developed brand should be omnipresent and should represent the organization’s:

- Personality—how it interacts with its stakeholders
- Identity—how others recognize it and the image it portrays
- Reputation—how it is perceived and described by others.

18. To stakeholders, a successful and distinguished brand heralds quality and elicits trust. With that comes loyalty. An organization's brand should evolve and adapt to organizational and environmental changes.

19. Branding plays a core role in an organization's corporate communications. Well-developed branding reinforces what an organization says and does, while poorly developed branding can undermine or confuse an organization's reputation.

20. Successful brand implementation will enable statistical organizations to maintain their reputation for independence and modernize their offerings, which will increase their value in a world with more data and increasing levels complexity.

21. A brand is important for statistical organizations because it:

- Builds trust, gives you credibility and will differentiate you from others who work in the same or similar field/business
- Results in implicit reuse of your information by users
- Demonstrates relevance
- Bridges the gap between how others perceive you and how you live your values.

22. As a statistical organization, you have a brand whether you acknowledge it or not. Therefore, it is important to control and own your brand.

C. *What to consider when branding a statistical organization*

23. One of the most important considerations when developing a brand is to do so holistically; this facilitates a smooth embedding process and ensures staff remain engaged with the defined values. Internal stakeholders remain as important as the perceptions of those outside the organization.

24. Crucially, there is also no pre-set time in which a brand needs to be re-developed. While a brand should be under constant review to ensure it resonates and aligns to a statistical organization's vision and values, there is nothing that dictates it must change at any given point in time. Likewise, if the ongoing reviews determine that a brand remains viable, change should not take place just for the sake of change.

25. Branding and its review is not a 'do it once' task; it is ongoing and iterative.

26. The only other consideration is whether a strategic re-branding – either wholesale or simply visual – could be helpful following a crisis or significant business change. The alternative would be to place a significant focus of restoring the existing brand and its values, with the communication team playing a central role in this re-establishing process.

2. Communication Maturity Model

27. This section provides a Communications Maturity Model designed to help statistical organizations gauge their current external communications maturity, and to propose areas for improvement.

28. The following are the main applications of the model:

- **Descriptive:** The maturity model serves as a diagnostic tool that enables national statistical institutions to assess where their current capabilities lie in terms of their external communications activities and, therefore, their current maturity level
- **Prescriptive:** The maturity model can be used to identify desirable maturity levels. The model suggests actions to reach a desired maturity level
- **Comparative:** The maturity model serves as a comparative tool since it allows for external benchmarking among other organizations.

29. The model sets out five maturity levels:

- (a) Initial
- (b) Reactive
- (c) Structured and proactive

- (d) Managed and focused
- (e) Continuous improvement.

30. Within each level, capabilities that are most relevant to the field of communications are set out as follows:

- Organizational level / leadership / management policy
- Strategic orientation
- Media engagement
- People
- Processes
- Technology
- Budget
- Metrics.

31. High-level criteria are described for each capability level to help statistical organizations evaluate their performance and identify a path forward.

3. Skill sets of a professional external communications programme

32. To operate effectively in today's highly contested environment—characterized by a fast-paced 24-hour news cycle, vitriolic social media and fake news—high-performing statistical organizations have established and well-resourced professional external communications programmes.

33. Professional communications programs will look different from one statistical organization to another, depending on their organization's needs, objectives and available resources. There is no preferred or recommended structure. However, there are eight broad functional areas that an external communications programme could include:

- Leadership and management
- Strategic communication and brand management
- Media relations
- Content creation
- Website management
- Stakeholder engagement
- Social media
- Digital media, graphic design and data visualization.

34. Statistical organizations traditionally do not have a great understanding of communication. Effective communication requires qualifications and experience. Communication without these requirements risks not being taken seriously and becoming a dumping ground for unwanted staff. Qualifications are therefore important. As a general rule, a professional communications function will employ staff with either:

- Professional qualifications (e.g., communications, journalism, marketing, advertising, multimedia/visualization production, channel management or a related field)
- Qualifications through relevant experience (the more experience, the more senior the position).

35. While some people without either qualifications or experience may work in a communications area, to maintain professional authority, they should be the exception (below 10%).

36. Communication skill sets in an organization can either be developed in-house or can be outsourced. The type of skill set needed in a statistical organization also depends on the

level of maturity of the organization (see section 2 of chapter 1). The more mature an organization, the less likely it is to outsource tasks and skills.

37. For example, in a communications organization with an “initial” or “reactive” maturity level, the following skill sets might be partially or completely outsourced:

- Social media (excluding strategy development)
- Website management / most website tasks
- Digital design and data visualization
- Media relations elements, such as monitoring or event planning
- Content creation elements, such as new multimedia production.

38. Most communications organizations tend to recruit or develop the following skill sets in-house:

- Management and leadership
- Strategy development (e.g., in social media and strategic communications)
- Basic content creation and production/dissemination
- Stakeholder relations management, public relations.

39. The number of financial resources available is also a consideration when organizations determine whether to develop (in-house) or to buy (outsource). For example, outsourcing the creation of digital and visual content (e.g., infographics, video and online applications) in larger volumes might be more expensive than producing that content in-house. However, if the organization only uses this type of content occasionally, then outsourcing may be a more practical approach. Each statistical organization has to assess the local environment and business operations to determine which skill sets must be maintained in-house, compared with the efficiency or practicality of outsourcing.

40. No single organizational structure or combination of skill sets will work for every statistical organization. The aforementioned skill sets are not prescriptive, and structures will change and evolve depending on the demands of the statistical organization at a particular time.

B. Chapter 2: Designing and implementing strategic communications

41. This chapter offers guidelines on how to create an external communications strategy and how to develop an issue and crisis management strategy—both of which are critical elements of an effective communications program.

1. Guidelines for creating an external communications strategy

42. This section outlines the main elements and steps for developing a comprehensive external communications strategy and provides suggestions for an implementation plan. Each statistical organization is unique, and the guidelines should be adapted to suit the needs of individual organizations.

43. This section will describe the following elements to consider to develop an effective communications strategy:

- Values and principles
- Environmental scan
- Communications objectives
- Audience segmentation
- Communication channels
- Content strategy.

A. Values and principles

44. The communications strategy should be aligned with the values and principles that underpin statistical organizations and that are defined by the Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics. These will guide the development of the communications strategy and decisions related to implementation.

45. The following values should guide the development of a statistical organization's communications strategy:

- Ethical
- Independent (without influence)
- Honest
- Trustworthy
- Transparent.

46. The principles upon which a statistical organization should establish its communications activities include:

- Impartial
- Visible/vocal
- Equal access
- Relevant
- Timely
- Flexible
- Confidential/secure
- Innovative
- Use of appropriate tone, content and channel for the identified audience.

B. Environmental scan

47. An environmental scan provides information that organizations can use to design new objectives and strategies or modify existing ones. Environmental scanning is defined as the careful monitoring of an organization's internal and external environments to detect early signs of opportunities and/or threats that may influence current and future plans.

48. The following elements should be considered in an environmental scan:

- **SWOT analysis**—What are your strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats? Strengths and weaknesses relate to the internal environment. Opportunities and threats relate to the external environment
- **Stakeholder scan**—What are key stakeholders, influencers and commentators saying about your statistical organization? What issues are other statistical organizations facing that may be relevant to your organization?
- **Past or similar activities**—Have similar activities been undertaken before? What were the results or lessons learned? What changes were implemented as a result? What worked well, and what did not work?
- **Market or opinion research**—Externally, have you tested stakeholder or public views through surveys, focus groups or other market research? Internally, are there employee satisfaction surveys, focus groups or other feedback sources that could provide insight into the level of employee engagement and satisfaction? Summarize relevant findings; do not just point to a report. All research should be referenced and made available to all interested parties
- **Existing metrics**—Review metrics for important insights into the statistical organization. The review could include metrics from the organization's website, social media and networking sites; contact centre metrics; and national and

subnational survey response rates. Identify both negative and positive issues; these will help inform key messages and communications activities.

C. Communications objectives

49. The foundation for a communications strategy is an overarching objective established by the organization's leadership. The objective should convey the need to align the strategy to the organization's corporate objectives.

50. Objectives can differ from one institution to another depending on the country's level of development, or its statistical system. Objectives should be designed to supplement each other and focus on what is to be achieved.

51. Communications objectives generally focus on one or more of the following:

- Informing - increasing awareness about the importance of statistics in everyday life; promoting official statistics and the work of the statistical organization
- Understanding - exchanging meanings, learning, reducing misunderstandings and misinterpretation of statistical data
- Changing attitudes - shifting perceptions
- Altering behaviour - persuading the audience to act differently and heeding a call to action.

52. Objectives should be clear, measurable and specific, but may also be qualitative. Their focus should be the target audience outcome. What do you want the audience to think, feel and do as a result of the communication? Defined objectives turn a general statement into a specific, quantifiable, time-sensitive statement of what is going to be achieved and when it will be achieved.

D. Audience segmentation

53. Statistical organizations engage with and provide information to a variety of audiences. They tend to engage with their audiences directly (through targeted releases) or indirectly (through the media).

54. Direct engagement is only effective if an audience is clearly defined, its characteristics are known, and the message is directly tailored for their consumption. Distributing a general, undifferentiated message to several distinguished audiences will likely be less effective than separate, tailored messages. Therefore, segmenting the general public into different groups based on a set of characteristics is the first step to creating specifically tailored messages.

55. This section describes potential audiences and groups. Some people may be members of more than one group. The sum of all audiences is the general public, which can be addressed as a whole.

(i) **Policymakers**

56. Policymakers work in organizations, governments and other authoritative bodies to develop and execute public policy. Their views of the statistical system are often anecdotal and occasionally critical. Policymakers may not be aware of the support that statistical organizations can offer, or they may not be interested in engaging with members of the statistical system.

57. Examples of policymakers could include:

- Ministers, special advisors and senior civil servants (current or former)
- Mayors, local government cabinet members, political advisors and senior officials
- Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, European Union and United Nations leaders and senior officials.

(ii) **Influencers**

58. Influencers govern, control, oversee or question policymakers, and influence their behaviour and decisions. Their views are occasionally critical. Influencers are more likely to

see statistical outputs, but they may not see the need for or the benefit of engaging with the statistical community. They also provide an essential channel to reach all citizens.

59. Examples of influencers could include:

- Politicians
- Members of think tanks and interest groups
- Academics
- Commentators and senior journalists
- Business leaders
- Civil service leaders
- Leaders from non-profit organizations (the third sector).

(iii) Scrutinizers

60. Scrutinizers observe government, administration, policy makers and influencers in a critical manner, acting as watchdogs to increase accountability. They believe their work is for the public good. Scrutinizers can be supportive of statistical work, but they can also be critical. Their views are typically not collected systematically since they are generally vocal in making their problems or issues known.

61. For policy makers, influencers, and scrutinizers, a proactive and concerted communications effort is the best approach to maintain these relationships.

62. Examples of scrutinizers could include:

- Parliamentary committees and scrutiny committees
- Other national statistical leaders
- International bodies (e.g., Eurostat, international statistical organizations)
- Statistical and digital bloggers, journalists, commentators and social media influencers
- Academics
- Information commissioners
- Privacy commissioners and campaigners
- Open data campaigners.

(iv) Partners

63. Partners are people or organizations that provide statistical organizations with services crucial to core statistical processes. Their satisfaction levels and views of data providers are often unknown.

64. Examples of partners could include:

- Funders
- Survey respondents
- Administrative data providers
- Syndicators and aggregators
- Academics and other innovators.

(v) General public

65. The general public is comprised of a variety of audience groups with different interests and motivations. For a statistical organization, reaching the general public is not always a viable option since the audience is too diverse. It is more effective to send narrow, targeted messages to specific groups or target audiences.

E. Channels

66. A channel is the medium through which a message is transmitted to its intended audience. The best channel for reaching a specific audience depends on many factors, particularly regional/local circumstances. This section presents a list of communication channels. Each channel has a particular set of characteristics that supports different forms of content for different audiences. For example, Instagram is well suited to reach the younger population through short, visual messages. However, this would not be the recommended channel to reach senior citizens.

67. Using multiple channels to reach target audiences is essential. However, this does not imply that every channel must be used. The message must be consistent, and content should be specifically tailored to each channel.

(i) Direct channels (owned)

68. Direct or owned channels are under the control of the statistical organization and can be used to send messages directly to the end user. Direct channels are an effective option for reaching target audience subgroups.

69. Offline channels include all means of communication in a non-digital format, mostly in the analogue (or brick and mortar / paper) world. Offline channels could include:

- Direct contact between people (e.g., events or press conferences)
- Presentations by a statistical organization's representatives (e.g., conferences, courses and seminars)
- Printed media (brochures, reports created by the statistical organization and advertising campaigns [national or local]).

70. The value of offline channels should not be underestimated. They can reduce misunderstandings and can help build strong client relationships.

71. Online channels are digital communication channels that can be accessed by devices with an Internet connection, such as computers, smartphones and tablets. This type of channel includes websites with specific formats such as online video platforms, online courses and Internet search engines (e.g., Google and Bing) that index websites and online content.

72. Social media is another way to spread your message online. One way to tap into target audiences is to connect with people who have a large online following (e.g., creative influencers, opinion makers and bloggers) and to encourage them to share the statistical organization's message with their community.

73. Social media channels specialize in offering direct contact between users and established user communities. Most social media can be accessed online through special applications installed on users' devices. Applications include:

- Facebook / Facebook Messenger
- Twitter
- Instagram
- YouTube
- LinkedIn / SlideShare
- Snapchat
- Google+
- Pinterest
- WhatsApp
- Flickr
- Facetime / Skype / Google Hangout
- Reddit.

74. There are also online platforms like crowdsourcing, which invites the public to share data and information, and there are always new channels on the horizon. Future channels may use artificial intelligence (e.g., Siri and Alexa).

(ii) Indirect (non-owned)

75. Indirect or third-party channels can be used to reach groups beyond those identified in the direct channels. They are the best option for reaching the general public. Examples include:

- Press/media (print media, broadcasting media and online news media (often part of the mainstream media)), which distinguish between general media (nationwide news media, regional media), and targeted media (business and professional titles)
- Online social media communities (organized around influencers such as YouTubers and bloggers).

76. Statistical organizations can nurture these channels by partnering with them to serve their information needs. These partnerships can allow for a greater level of control over external messages and can help ensure that stories include the statistical organization's information.

77. Indirect or third-party channel groups are outside the direct control of the statistical organization. These channels can reach a large audience that would not normally be accessible to a statistical organization

(iii) Crossovers

78. Extra exposure is gained when a message that is successfully launched in an earned audience on social media is picked up by a news medium (e.g., newspaper, radio and television) and redistributed to its audience. This is called a crossover. A statistical organization's message can migrate from direct social media channels to indirect channels. A crossover is likely to happen when there is a lot of engagement or debate within the targeted social media community (e.g., when other influencers start to participate in the debate). A crossover can also work in the reverse when a message that starts in news media goes "viral" on social media.

G. Content strategy

79. An effective content strategy maps out the right mix of channels to reach the identified audiences. The content (message) must also be tailored to the audience subsets. A successful campaign knows the audience and reaches them through a variety of channels. A cross-media approach leverages a variety of channels, so the audience gets the optimal message. The following paragraphs outline the steps to develop a content strategy.

(i) Identify the audience

80. It is important to identify the audience that the statistical organization wants to influence before starting to communicate. It is necessary to conduct demographic research, create audience profiles and analyze the impact that the issue has on the audience. This may involve examining the audience's current position toward the product, service, program, organization or issue, and identifying any barriers to changing their awareness, attitudes or behaviour.

(ii) Choose channels

81. Based on the audience profile, the next step is to analyze the most effective communication channels to engage them. It is important to assess the characteristics of each channel and consider the awareness, knowledge, attitude and behaviour of their users.

(iii) Choose content type

82. The strategy should indicate the best content formats for each channel. Some suggestions include the following:

<i>Channels</i>	<i>Products</i>
Social media	short video (<1 minute) simple infographic image
Online	video (>2 minutes) text and graphs images podcasts blog/crowdsourcing
Print broadcast	text graphs infographics images
Event	live streaming presentation press conference

(iv) Develop key messages

83. Key messages are the main points that you want the target audience to hear and remember. They are an important part of the communications strategy—they create meaning and headline the issues to discuss.

84. Key messages must address the communications objectives and align with communication values and principles. These messages can be incorporated into communication tools, such as media releases, fact sheets, webpages, social media posts or signage.

85. If the communication campaign relates to a specific issue, an environmental scan should be performed prior to creating the key messages. Changes in the environment may lead to changes in the messaging. Who is talking about the topic? What is their position? What is going on locally, regionally and internationally? Is the issue political or legislative? Have there been methodological changes or unexpected results?

86. There are two steps to construct key messages:

(a) Clarify audience objectives—Identify the audiences and what to say to them. Is it important to increase their awareness, improve their understanding, or change their perceptions or behaviour? In other words, what does the organization want the audience to think, feel or do? Key messages should link back to overarching communication objectives;

(b) Create messages—Key messages should be clear and succinct, and written with the target audience in mind. The communicator should write messages from the audience perspective. Focus on what the audience cares about and show what benefits them (not what benefits the statistical organization). Messages should be written in plain language, without jargon or bureaucratic prose.

87. The key messages should cover three key elements:

(a) Describe what is happening using the five Ws (who? what? when? where? and why?)

- Who should care? Why should they care? What's in it for them? (benefits)
- What is happening?

- When is it happening?
- Where is it happening?
- Why is it happening? (context)
- (b) Call to action
- What should the audience do?
- (c) What is the one take-home message that the audience should remember?

88. The following questions may help to create the key messages:

- What information is currently being communicated? Does it need to change?
- What are the benefits to the audience?
- What is the one take-home message that you want the audience to remember if they forget everything else?
- What is the story? How can you make the message relatable?

(i) Matching key messages to audiences

89. Once the overarching key messages have been identified, it may be necessary to further tailor the messages to specific audiences and/or channels.

90. Key messages need to be targeted to audiences and channels. This ensures that the communication reaches the right audience with the right message for the right channel.

(ii) Set the timing or periodicity of your campaign

91. A calendar can be useful for planning several products in combination. To engage indirect media (press/news media) and influence them to develop high-impact, prominent news products, the following techniques can be used:

- Create an in-house release (press conference) with a short media lock-up; make spokespersons/specialists available to journalists
- Release information by owned media with a longer embargo period (no lock-up, but controlled distribution to trusted media parties)
- Set a release time for the convenience of news media (e.g., midnight, afternoon)
- Develop social media posts, videos, email blasts
- Provide technical backgrounder and reports.

(iii) Evaluate the campaign impact for each channel

92. Evaluation is a key component of any communication activity. It helps to understand what worked well and provides lessons learned for the planning of future activities. For more information on how to evaluate communication activities, please refer to chapter 3.

2. Guidelines to develop a crisis and issue management strategy

93. Within the broader context of a strategic communications framework, it is critical to remember that sometimes things go wrong. All statistical organizations encounter challenging issues and sudden crises. The purpose of crisis and issue management is to mitigate the damage that adverse events may trigger by ensuring that statistical organizations are well prepared to respond to problems publicly, in a timely and appropriate manner. Sometimes the immediate task might simply be quieting a sudden uproar. Other times, it might be the more laborious work of re-establishing trust.

94. Though it may be hard to remember in the middle of a high-stress crisis or troublesome issue, adverse events also provide an opportunity for a statistical organization to reinforce its brand and demonstrate the organization's commitment to integrity and transparency in concrete and visible terms. Challenging events can originate within the statistical organization, or externally.

95. Internal issues could include:

- Statistical issues—estimation errors, methodological shortcomings
- Corporate issues—corruption, conflict of interest, incompetence, unwise public statement by an employee (especially on social media)
- Continuity issues—system failures (e.g., website down)
- Security issues—confidentiality breaches.

96. External issues could include:

- Reputational attacks—allegations of bias, distortion and fake news
- Political interference (real or perceived)—premature disclosure of data by political actors, pressure to change or reschedule releases, and national or international political instability
- Continuity issues—severe weather events, cyber-attacks, and violence in or near the worksite
- Statistical issues—stakeholders challenging data (e.g., affected groups disagree with organization's estimates).

97. Many of these events will require coordinated responses from multiple areas within the statistical organization. Staff in information technology, statistical methods, administration, security, etc. may have significant roles to play. In some circumstances, a business continuity team may be assigned overall responsibility. In all cases, however, corporate communications will be vital.

A. *Crisis and issue management principles*

98. At the heart of crisis and issue management lies the brand that the statistical organization has crafted (see section 1 of chapter 1 on branding). Effective crisis and issue management builds on the institutional values the brand embodies (taking advantage of the organization's reputation for integrity and accuracy) and works to reinforce or re-establish that brand by demonstrating the organization's commitment to transparency and accountability, even under trying circumstances.

99. Consistent with general communications principles, during an adverse event, a statistical organization should:

- Communicate facts as quickly as possible
- Provide updates as circumstances change
- Ensure the safety of its community and the continued operation of essential services to its stakeholders.

100. The statistical organization should convey what it knows in a timely fashion, using multiple forms of media. It should not speculate. Providing factual information is especially important in the first minutes and hours of a crisis. The goal is to be transparent, accountable and accessible to all stakeholders, while respecting legal and privacy obligations.

B. *Crisis or issue?*

101. Not every adverse event is a crisis. Understanding the difference between a crisis and an issue is essential to the development of an appropriate and effective response.

102. The two primary considerations to assess whether an adverse event constitutes a crisis or an issue are the level of immediacy and the threat level. Some communications experts recommend decision matrices with many more considerations. Regardless of the specific methodology chosen, distinguishing issues from crises will always require a degree of sound professional judgment. Therefore, in the crisis/issue matrix, some cells have a gradient shading to indicate that decisions are not always clear-cut. For example, an adverse event that takes place in real time with a medium threat to the organization might be considered a crisis in some circumstances, and an issue in others.

103. A crisis can be identified when an adverse event is currently taking place or will take place in the immediate future, and when the risk is severe or the level of attention paid by outside actors is high. A crisis is characterized by a threat to an organization's long-term reputation. Crises have the potential to disable or interrupt an organization's operations. Crises may include injury, illness or death, and typically garner high levels of attention in the traditional media, on social media and in the political establishment.

104. Examples of crises could include:

- Leak of data before the announced release date (either accidental or deliberate)
- Delay in issuing high-attention indicators past the announced release date
- Significant error in data that have been cited by a public official and detected after release
- Employee misconduct (arrest or public blunder)
- High-profile cyber attack
- Prominent figure attacks the integrity or accuracy of statistical organization.

105. If the crisis requires a response by the statistical organization, that response needs to be immediate. The organization's top leadership will need to be aware of the situation and be involved in decision making. Finally, a full response to a crisis typically involves multiple bodies, including a variety of specialists within the statistical organization, and outside actors such as media, stakeholders and partners.

106. An issue, by contrast, can be identified when an adverse event can reasonably be anticipated in the future, or the threat level and attention level are moderate. When addressing an issue, the statistical organization's staff often have adequate time to assess the situation, understand the problem, and consider multiple solutions before selecting and implementing an approach to reduce the negative impact. All or most critical operations can continue as normal. No injury, illness or death has occurred.

107. Examples of issues could include:

- Embarrassing misprint in a published news release
- Delay in issuing a low-attention indicator past the announced release date
- Government closure due to a delay in passing a budget.

108. Depending on the nature of the issue, the organization's top leadership may need to be aware of the situation and be involved in decision making. In other cases, issue management can be delegated to middle or even front-line management. Again, a full response to an issue may involve multiple specialists within the statistical organization as well as outside actors.

109. The purpose of issue management is to identify potential problems early, and to implement strategies that will resolve the issue in a manner that produces a positive (or at least neutral) outcome for the organization. Effective issue management greatly reduces the likelihood that a situation will evolve into a crisis. Conversely, an inadequate response to an issue increases the likelihood of a subsequent crisis. There are no guarantees; therefore, all issue management strategies must include careful monitoring of any ongoing situation to recognize when a tipping point into a crisis may occur.

110. In many ways, strategic issue management is structurally similar to crisis management in that it follows the same general sequence of steps. However, there may be more flexibility in developing a response to an issue since there is more time to weigh options, consult with stakeholders, and decide on appropriate and effective mitigation procedures.

111. The following section will first address crisis management in a communications context, and then will discuss how issue management differs.

C. *Crisis management*

112. There is no universal process for managing crises. Different external environments and internal cultures will lead to different approaches. Figure 7 in the full document demonstrates a crisis management process that uses a strategic, planned and controlled

approach. Individual statistical organizations might start here and modify steps as required, or they may read it for ideas but design their own procedures from scratch.

(i) Phase 1—Advance planning

113. The purpose of advance planning is to assign responsibilities, define procedures, prepare draft responses (standby statements) to be used during a crisis, and obtain organization-level buy-in before any adverse event takes place.

114. Advance planning begins with establishing the organizational infrastructure necessary to respond rapidly with full organizational authority. The first, foundational step is to establish a crisis communications team composed of senior management, and to delegate broad institutional authority to the team. The crisis communications team is the central element in any crisis communications plan. The team determines and enacts the communications tactics best suited to the crisis situation and must have the appropriate authority to act on behalf of the organization with little or no further consultation. An explicit assignment of responsibilities makes this possible.

115. The normal structural activities common to all teams must take place, such as collecting and distributing contact information, establishing ground rules (e.g., quorum and decision-making process) and determining expected team communication vehicles (e.g., teleconferences or in-person meetings). These activities have particular significance in the context of this team since they need to take into account the possibility that a crisis will not schedule itself conveniently during regular working hours when all team members are present at their desks.

116. In addition, the team should allocate specific roles to team members. These roles and responsibilities may change depending on circumstances but approaching a crisis with default predetermined assignments simplifies and streamlines the response.

117. Finally, if any crisis communications team members would benefit from additional training on their roles and duties, then that training—including periodic refresher training for all team members—must be arranged.

118. Establishing the organizational infrastructure also includes developing and fostering a good early-warning system. This starts with implementing a solid environmental monitoring program, where both traditional media and social media are tracked continuously in as close to real time as is feasible.

119. Embedding threat identification within the organizational structure can fill gaps that media monitoring does not cover. This means instituting a corporate culture where staff at all levels are on alert for potential threats and adverse events, know how seriously the organization treats such threats, and are aware of both the importance and the procedures for reporting events up the organizational ladder to senior management. This is critical to recognizing internally triggered events before they become part of a public conversation. Although staff may be reluctant to acknowledge problems or to bring problems to the attention of their superiors, communicating and frequently reinforcing an institutional message of “no surprises” is key.

120. To strengthen the early-warning system for externally triggered events, it is also useful to develop relationships with outside stakeholder networks so that they are also encouraged to recognize adverse events and threats that might affect the statistical organization, and so they know whom to notify.

121. The second stage of crisis management advance planning involves thinking ahead to potential threats and preparing optimal reactions. This activity can be broken into seven steps.

Step 1 Review lessons learned from prior experiences

122. All statistical organizations have experience responding to adverse events, whether a formal crisis management plan has been in effect or not. The starting point for future planning involves reviewing effective past responses, missteps that hampered previous responses, and how previous responses could have been improved.

123. Crisis management plans should also be reviewed and refreshed on a regular basis, and always in the aftermath of a completed crisis.

Step 2 Identify likely crises

124. Based on past experience and on an assessment of the current technological, social, and political climate, generate a list of potential adverse events that the statistical organization may face in the future. Try to include as many reasonable crisis situations as possible without being diverted into outlandish or low-probability events.

125. There is overlap here between crisis and issue management, on the one hand, and risk management on the other.¹ In particular, the risk management assessment process includes identification, analysis and measurement, and weighting (i.e., prioritizing risks). Risk identification can feed into communications planning by pinpointing some of the more likely issues and crises, though it cannot be expected to identify all the threats a crisis communications plan should address. Crisis and issue management, in turn, can feed into risk analysis and weighting by specifying measures that can be taken to mitigate problems when they arise.

Step 3 Define key audiences

126. Understanding the audiences and stakeholders that a statistical organization may need to reach when responding to an adverse event depends, in large part, on the nature of the event. There are many potential audiences that will want information during and following an incident, and each has its own information needs. The challenge is to identify the most significant set of stakeholders for a given situation, and to anticipate the type of information that can and should be provided to them.

127. For a statistical organization, potential audiences might include:

- Data users
- Respondents
- Journalists (conventional and new media)
- Other government agencies
- Political appointees
- Employees.

128. Audiences are not just passive recipients of information; they may also be key allies in implementing constructive responses to adverse events. Just like external stakeholder networks can assist a statistical organization in threat identification, they can also be helpful defending a besieged organization, and can sometimes make statements that would be inappropriate for the organization to make itself. Expressions of support from external stakeholders may have a higher level of credibility within their networks than the same statements issued by the statistical organization.

Step 4 Plan scenarios

129. Once a list of potential crises and the key audiences associated with each one has been developed, it is time to plan effective communications responses. Planned responses need to include:

- What will be communicated?
- When will it be communicated?
- How will it be communicated?
- Who will do the communicating?

130. Among other considerations, the preferred communication channels need to be specified. Should the organization's response be in the form of a press conference, a news advisory, a website post, a tweet, or some combination of these?

¹ See <https://statswiki.unece.org/display/GORM/Risk+Management> for additional details.

131. Planning needs to be as realistic as possible, taking into account that the early stages of a crisis are typically filled with a great deal of uncertainty, and possibly with incorrect information within both the statistical organization and the public coverage.

132. There are situations where the best response by a statistical organization is not to issue any communications at all. However, when the organization determines that communication is in the best interest of the organization and its stakeholders, the communication needs to be rapid, honest and reliable. Often this translates to an initial statement (e.g., “We are assessing the situation and will report when we know more”), followed by further detail once the situation is better understood.

133. Planning also needs to account for the fact that, when other institutions become involved in an adverse event, the required coordination between organizations often delays effective responses and communications. This may be especially true when law enforcement or other branches of the judicial system are engaged.

134. Statistical organization employees can be different from external stakeholders in terms of their information needs and the channels available for reaching them. Therefore, it can be beneficial to include specific examples of internal stakeholder outreach in scenario planning.

135. In addition to developing scenarios for specific situations, it can be useful to develop a generic scenario that lays out a sequence of steps that can be referred to when completely unanticipated situations arise. This generic scenario will be fairly vague but can serve as a helpful starting point to manage crises that take a statistical organization by surprise.

136. Scenario planning is best done as a group, including the members of the crisis communications team and others with insight into past successes and failures.

Step 5 Prepare standby statements (could be included in Step 4)

137. Some statistical organizations have procedures in place that require that public statements go through one or more levels of review and approval (often including a legal department) before they can be issued. The higher the visibility of a communication, the more stringent the review and approval process tends to be. This can impose substantial delays on communications, during which, in the event of a swiftly unfolding crisis, the opportunity to mitigate damage can be diminished or effectively eliminated.

138. Standby statements are draft communications templates that address a particular type of problem and include placeholders for specific detail.

139. Standby statements are written, reviewed and approved in advance. Therefore, when an organization is responding to a crisis under time pressure, details can be inserted and the statement can be issued quickly.

140. Standby statements provide an opportunity for the statistical organization to explicitly reference its brand by embedding key messages. This must be approached delicately so as not to generate offence or ridicule but can be effective when done well.

Step 6 Conduct simulation exercises

141. A plan is only useful if it can be executed properly. Testing the crisis communications plan is critical for two reasons:

- Testing uncovers shortcomings, gaps and inefficiencies in the plan
- Testing prepares participants to successfully perform the activities their role requires.

142. Generating an actual crisis for testing purposes is risky, so a simulation exercise is required. Tabletop exercises have proven useful in evaluating and practising crisis communications plans.

143. A tabletop exercise is an activity where the crisis communications team, led by a facilitator, gathers to walk through simulated emergency situations. Members of the crisis communications team review and discuss the actions they would take in response to a particular scenario, testing the crisis plan in an informal, low-stress environment. The tabletop exercise clarifies roles and responsibilities, can identify additional personnel who would need to be pulled in as the crisis evolves, and can identify additional mitigation and

preparedness needs. Tabletop exercises also work as a reminder of small but important details, such as alternate assembly points and whose responsibility it is to contact political appointees if the organization head and deputy are both unreachable.

144. Tabletop exercises are never completely realistic, and therefore cannot provide a comprehensive test of operational capability. They are, however, low cost and relatively easy to conduct, and as such can be repeated on a regular basis.

145. Any deficiencies in the plan uncovered by the tabletop exercise should be corrected.

Step 7 Be prepared

146. Crises are inevitable. Statistical organizations must integrate that understanding into their organizational culture and prepare rigorously. This includes practising responses until they become ingrained. To be successful, advance planning needs to integrate lessons learned from previous crises, be comprehensive and detailed, and ensure buy-in from the highest level of the statistical organization.

(ii) Phase 2—Executing the plan

147. The purpose of the execution phase is to efficiently and effectively manage a live crisis. When an adverse event has been detected and reported, the communications manager must:

- Quickly gather as much information available
- Alert senior management
- Launch the crisis communications team.

148. Typically, the first report of an adverse event does not include complete information. It can take hours, sometimes even days, for the full scope and impact of an event to be known. It may take even longer for the cause to be reliably identified.

149. The communications manager will need to make a rapid judgment call: based on preliminary, incomplete and possibly inconsistent information, is the situation sufficiently grave to launch the crisis communications team? Perhaps the greatest pitfall to avoid at this stage is being too thorough in investigating the situation, thereby losing valuable time. Once launched, the crisis communications team can follow a sequence of steps.

Step 1 Assess the situation

150. The preliminary information the team receives is probably incomplete and possibly inconsistent. Nevertheless, the crisis communications team needs to evaluate the information on hand and determine whether to treat the situation as a crisis. If not, the matter can be referred to other parties for issue management or program-level follow-up.

151. If the situation is a crisis, the team should continue.

Step 2 Consult the crisis communications plan

152. The crisis communications team will find the scenario in the crisis communications plan that either addresses the existing situation or is close enough to the existing situation that it can be used as a model, or they will use the generic scenario. The selected scenario will provide guidance on whether an active or reactive communications strategy is desirable, or if no communication at all is preferred.

Step 3 Confirm or tailor plan elements

153. Since few, if any, actual crises will conform exactly to the scenarios detailed in the crisis communications plan, the chosen response during initial planning needs to be reviewed. The crisis communications team must either affirm that the plan should be executed as originally envisioned or modify elements of the plan to better suit the specific event.

154. The elements that must be confirmed or tailored include:

- Key audiences
- Response strategy/sequence
- Standby statements

- Communication channels.

Step 4 Implement the strategy

155. At this point, the crisis communications team has a detailed roadmap of actions to take and should implement the chosen strategy with the agreed-upon modifications.

156. The key to a successful crisis management execution phase is an efficient and effective process with timely decision making.

Phase 3—Evaluation

157. The final stage, after the crisis has been weathered, is to follow up on any promises made during the event (such as providing more information or being available for an interview), and to evaluate the effectiveness of the completed communication process.

158. The review process should occur promptly to ensure that the lessons learned are fresh and comprehensive. The evaluation results should trigger a review of the crisis communications plan to improve future responses.

D. *Issue management*

159. Strategic issue management is similar to crisis management in basic structure and follows the same general sequence of activities. Since the immediacy of an issue may be less than that of a crisis, there is often more flexibility to develop and implement a response, including time to collect additional information, weigh options, consult with experts and stakeholders, decide on appropriate and effective mitigating procedures, and refine the strategy as the situation unfolds.

160. Some issues can be highly time-sensitive. For these situations, it is recommended to follow the more thorough steps outlined in crisis management.

E. *Communication and risk management*

161. There is an important connection between crisis and issue management and risk management. Effective communication is a critical component of both.

162. Information, communication and reporting comprise one of the five components of the 2017 Revised Enterprise Risk Management Framework issued by the Committee of Sponsoring Organizations of the Treadway Commission. Enterprise risk management requires a continual process of obtaining and sharing necessary information from both internal and external stakeholders, which flows up, down and across the organization.

163. Communication is an important tool for disseminating information and promoting awareness and understanding of risks and risk management decisions. To ensure that relevant information is collected, organized, synthesized and shared, statistical organizations should establish a communications approach that supports the enterprise risk management framework and facilitates the effective application of risk management.

164. Risk management is a broad process to prevent a risk from materializing and to reduce its consequences. A crisis communications plan is implemented when an event has already taken place and risk management has failed. Communications strategies and plans could be fundamental responses and controls to prevent a risk from occurring and to mitigate a risk's impact and consequences.

165. Furthermore, a communications process itself can have risks that must be identified, assessed and managed. It could be useful to apply the risk management approach to communication planning to limit the inherent risks of the communication response, and to prevent communications from become an exacerbating factor that trigger further escalation of an issue or crisis.

C. **Chapter 3: Evaluating external communications**

166. The Communications Maturity Model described in section 2 of chapter 1 can be used to evaluate the effectiveness of an external communications function. The model can be used to evaluate the effectiveness of the organization's communications function and to identify

areas for improvement. This chapter explicitly examines the importance of evaluating communications activities, and the ways in which evaluation can be conducted.

167. All communications activities should be measured and evaluated to confirm that they achieve communications objectives. Measurement and evaluation should be a consideration throughout a communications activity and should not wait until an activity has concluded.

168. Done effectively, measurement leads to iterative improvements to communication. Evaluation can guide future activities and strategy development. Measurement also presents opportunities for continuous improvement and helps organizations develop an understanding of the impact of communications activities. In turn, an evaluation demonstrates the tremendous return on investment that good communication can provide.

169. Key performance indicators (KPIs) should also be identified at the start of the activity, not when the final results are in. KPIs should demonstrate the impact of the activity on organizational goals and, if they are already in place, provide an effective benchmark that allows for easy tracking of improvements and progress.

170. When developing KPIs, it is important to recognize and distinguish between output measures and outcome measures. Output measures track the statistical organization's activities. These are typically reasonably easy to collect. Outcome measures track the effect those activities had on the intended audience. These are often difficult, sometimes impossible, to collect. Nonetheless, outcome measures are the gold standard of evaluation.

171. Three types of common communication measures can become KPIs:

- **Activity-based**—if no other measures are available, report what you did (e.g., three newsletters, 10 seminars and seven webpages).
- **Measures of communication channels**—quantitative measures (e.g., number of webpage hits and views, dwell times, phone calls, attendees, Twitter retweets/likes, Facebook comments/followers) indicate the uptake of information.
- **Analytical**—these measures bring quantitative measures together and complement them with qualitative understanding. These are the most detailed measures, and they provide a deeper understanding of performance. They address awareness, understanding, behavioural change, sentiment, share of voice, ownership and the difference between creating and informing the news.

172. Using a combination of measures, particularly with an increased use of analytical measures, can help to evaluate the contribution that communication makes to the overall project outcome.

173. It is important to recognize the difference between communications objectives and business/program objectives. Communications objectives typically focus on what the audience is expected to think, feel or do differently because of the communications activities. Business/program objectives present the results that a manager hopes to achieve in a project or business enterprise. Recognizing the difference allows for a separate and objective evaluation of each set of objectives. For example, communications objectives could be met, but the project may not have met all its business/program objectives. This usually means that the initial business/program objectives were faulty.

174. Thinking about objectives can help identify issues or areas for improvement within the communications or program implementation. It also promotes the maturity and professionalism of the communications industry.

175. A number of questions can be asked to help assess the success of communications objectives separately from the success of the business or project. These include:

- Did you reach the right audience?
- Did you use the right communications tools and/or channels?
- Did your audience understand your messages?
- Were decisions taken as a result of your messages?
- Did the target audience take action as a result of your messages? Was it the desired action?

- Did you comply with the budget? If not, why?
- What would you do differently next time?

176. In addition to these questions, consider the following **PROOF** principles when measuring or evaluating communications activities:

- Pragmatic: Use the best available information source. Do not seek to generate perfect numbers instantly. Metrics should be fit for purpose. It is important to use what you have and to improve it through iteration.
- Realistic: Always seek to prove the things you can or acknowledge those you cannot. Evaluations should stick to the facts and only state what you know. Do not extrapolate meaning or conflate correlation with causation.
- Open: Record and share as much as possible. Do not hide results. Remember that communication objectives and business/program objectives are different, albeit closely linked.
- Objective: Remain honest now to learn for the future. Recognize both successes and failures. Record lessons learned.
- Fully integrated: Make evaluations ever-present, not add-ons at the end of an activity. Monitoring and evaluation should be embedded into your communications strategy, which is why you should start monitoring and evaluation at the beginning of your project.

D. Chapter 4: Conclusions and recommendations

177. The High-Level Group for the Modernisation of Official Statistics has recognized that a strategic communications approach is an essential component to maintain and enhance the relevance of official statistics in today's society.

178. Across the globe, statistical organizations are at varying levels of maturity in terms of their communications function. However, all have recognized the importance of building and maintaining relationships not only with expert users, but also with the general public. An effective communications function guides the development of a strategic approach to protect, enhance and promote the organization's reputation and brand.

179. This framework proposes a number of components that statistical organizations should consider when developing a strategic approach to its communications function. The following summarizes the recommendations presented throughout the framework:

(a) It is important for all statistical organizations to control and own their brand. To stakeholders, a successful and distinguished brand heralds quality and elicits trust and loyalty. An organization's brand should evolve and adapt to organizational and environmental changes.

(b) One of the most important considerations when developing a brand is to do so holistically. This facilitates a smooth embedding process and ensures staff remain engaged with the defined values.

(c) Statistical organizations can use the Communications Maturity Model to gauge their current maturity level, identify areas for improvement and design action plans to reach the desired maturity level. The Communication Maturity Model can also be used to evaluate the organization's communications function and activities.

(d) Professional communications programs will look different from one statistical organization to another, depending on the organization's needs, objectives and available resources. There is no preferred or recommended structure. However, there are eight broad functional areas that statistical organizations should consider: leadership and management; strategic communications and brand management; media relations; content creation; website management; stakeholder engagement; social media; and digital media, graphic design and visualization.

(e) The communications strategy should be aligned with the values and principles that underpin statistical organizations and that are defined by the Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics (United Nations, 2014²).

(f) To guide the development of an effective communications strategy, statistical organizations should consider the following elements: values and principles, environmental scans, communication objectives, audience segmentation, communication channels, and content strategy.

(g) Effective crisis and issue management is critical to protect and maintain a statistical office's reputation. All statistical organizations should establish a crisis communications and issue management process to better prepare the organization to respond quickly, efficiently and effectively when a crisis or issue occurs.

(h) Crisis communications and issue management protocols should be tested, and lessons learned from the testing and implementation of the processes should be used to inform and further enhance the organization's preparedness for successful responses.

² <https://unstats.un.org/unsd/dnss/gp/fundprinciples.aspx>.