

CONFERENCE OF EUROPEAN STATISTICIANS

UNECE Work Session on Communication and Dissemination of Statistics
(13-15 May 2009, Warsaw, Poland)

Topic - Managing communication and credibility

**BUILDING A STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS PLAN: THE STATISTICS
CANADA EXPERIENCE**

Submitted by Statistics Canada¹

I. INTRODUCTION

1. Effective communications is fundamental to the success of any organization. It plays a vital role in helping an organization achieve its business objectives beginning with identifying and understanding client requirements through to communicating priorities and objectives and delivering high-quality results. An organization that communicates well both externally and internally also creates the foundation for a dynamic and interesting workplace where informed employees are motivated and committed to the organization, thus reinforcing its success.

2. This draft strategic communications plan sets out a proposed vision, mission and strategic commitments to help guide operational communications at Statistics Canada. It is the product of ongoing consultations across the Agency to build understanding about the role of communications, and agreement on strategic direction. The plan is corporate and focuses on the whole organization. Its success depends on the collective commitment of all employees.

II. CONTEXT AND ENVIRONMENT

3. Every organization faces unique challenges and operates within a distinct public environment. Understanding this context and environment is critical to establishing a strategic approach to communications that is both realistic and appropriate.

¹ Prepared by Jonathan Massey-Smith. This draft plan is provided to the work session for discussion purposes only. It has not been endorsed by Statistics Canada.

A. Public Profile

4. For a government institution, Statistics Canada has extraordinary “brand” recognition among Canadians: public opinion research shows that over 90% of Canadians have heard of Statistics Canada and 80% have a positive impression of the Agency. Canadians are generally familiar with what the Agency does and recognize the importance of participating in surveys. In addition, growing numbers would prefer filling out a survey on-line, particularly younger Canadians. However, Canadians cite a lack of time as one factor discouraging them from participating in surveys.

5. Public recognition of Statistics Canada is not surprising given the extensive and ongoing media coverage of Agency’s work. Over a one-year period, for example, the Agency was mentioned in 81% of the 311 editions of the Globe and Mail, one of Canada’s largest national newspapers. At last count there were some 3,600 blog posts citing Statistics Canada.

6. Public trust in Statistics Canada is reflected by the fact that rarely do observers question Statistics Canada’s findings which on occasion produce results that are uncomfortable for some stakeholders. Public debate spurred on by the Agency’s work focuses on substantive issues rather than the believability of the numbers.

B. Relations with Clients

7. The Agency’s business clients – largely federal government departments – report high levels of satisfaction with the Agency’s ability to understand and meet their needs. However, they have some concerns over the timeliness and cost of the work, according to client satisfaction surveys.

8. One ongoing point of contention is the Agency’s policy of charging for its data.

C. Perceptions of Employees

9. There is high morale among employees of Statistics Canada. In the last government-wide survey, 92% of Statistics Canada employees said they are proud of their work, 96% said they are committed to the success of Agency, and 91% said the Agency is a good place to work.

D. Some Key Challenges

10. Despite its positive public profile, Statistics Canada faces a number of challenges from a communications perspective. Among them:

- It is increasingly difficult to reach large numbers of Canadians through traditional communications channels. With the plethora of media choices and the advent of new media like Web 2.0, communications has shifted from broadcasting to what could be considered “narrowcasting.” In addition, almost 20% of Canada’s population are

born outside Canada, creating language and cultural challenges in communicating with large segments of the population.

- The nature of journalism has changed. The “24-7” news cycle results in less emphasis on providing context in media reports while increased media competition puts more emphasis on generating headline-grabbing stories, subjecting institutions to increased likelihood of inaccurate or sensationalistic media coverage. Yet Statistics Canada’s relationship and reputation with media are extremely important given that media are its major conduit to reaching large numbers of Canadians.
- There are concerns about the growing burden on survey respondents and, with the proliferation of cell phones and “call block” technologies, there is more difficulty reaching them.
- The Internet has become the principal dissemination channel for the Agency. But, because of the anonymous nature of the Web, the Agency knows less about its customers today than when print ruled.
- The workforce is ageing and there will be a large turnover in the next few years. Like other organizations, Statistics Canada faces challenges in attracting new employees to replace those retiring, and in transferring knowledge from one generation to the next.
- Resource constraints are impacting the Agency’s ability to deliver its statistical program. Statistics Canada must find new, more efficient ways of doing business to respond to fiscal pressures. This factor alone is incentive enough to ensure communications is focused on supporting the Agency’s bottom line and corporate priorities.

III. MANAGING COMMUNICATIONS EFFECTIVELY

11. Communications is a shared responsibility and must be co-ordinated with other areas of management. Clear working links must be maintained between communications and other core functions: policy and program management, service delivery, human resources management, information management, and the management of information technology.

12. Statistics Canada will adopt a three-part approach to help manage communications effectively. Specifically, it will:

- 1) Establish a Communications Management Framework outlining clear roles and responsibilities for communications throughout the Agency. This is similar to frameworks for other corporate responsibilities such financial management, human resources/performance management.
- 2) Continually engage management to provide strategic direction and feedback on major communications issues through committees such as the Dissemination and Communications Committee, the Daily Editorial Board, and Policy Committee.
- 3) Develop a corporate strategic communications plan setting out a broad vision and commitments to help focus communications activities across the Agency.

IV. OUR VISION, MISSION AND COMMITMENTS

13. The vision, mission and commitments outlined in this plan are designed to set the broad framework for operational communications activities across the Agency over a medium-term period (one to three years) with an annual review of the plan to reflect changing circumstances and emerging priorities as required. Some specific strategic directions are provided under each commitment. Operational activities will be developed as part of the annual business planning process.

A. Our Vision:

❖ Timely, effective and integrated communications to support the Agency's business objectives

14. The vision reflects the overarching principal that communications must be focused on supporting the Agency's core business objective which is to ensure that "Canadians have access to objective, high-quality, non-partisan statistics, statistical products, services and analyses on Canada's economy and society that fulfill legal requirements, are relevant to policy formulation and decision makers, and are responsive to emerging issues."

15. This vision is also in keeping with the broader objective of the Government of Canada's Communications Policy which is to ensure that communications across government are well coordinated, effectively managed and responsive to the diverse information needs of the public.

B. Our Mission:

❖ Increase access to and effective use of our statistical information while improving public understanding and participation in our programs

16. The mission is directive in outlining in how communications is expected to contribute to achieving the Agency's core business objective. It encompasses a broad spectrum of activities that go beyond increasing access and understanding. For example, it includes activities designed to increase Canadians' capacity to use statistical information more effectively, the development of easy-to-use statistical tools to help build that capacity, and communications support for the operations of the Agency (e.g. internal communications, marketing, licensing, corporate communications).

C. Strategic Commitments:

17. To provide strategic focus to communications, the Agency has identified four specific commitments that reflect and respond to the environment and unique circumstances currently facing the Agency.

- (a) Plan and manage communications effectively:** The Agency will integrate communications planning into its ongoing business planning process and identify internal and external communications requirements when planning, managing or reviewing programs, policies or initiatives. All parts of the Agency will work closely with communications experts to manage their communications requirements.

Key actions to support this commitment:

- Identify major initiatives requiring communications support, and develop specific communications plans for each initiative as required;
- Provide strategic direction and implement improvements to strengthen the Agency's official release program;
- Regularly engage senior management to seek input, generate interest and keep them abreast of major communications issues and activities (e.g. through various management committees);
- Participate in national and international forums to share best practices and lessons learned on strategic and operational communications;
- Strengthen recruitment, retention and development of communications professionals to ensure there is capacity to deliver value-added advice and services.

- (b) Improve our Web presence:** The Agency will improve its management of the Web through clear and strong governance with corporate direction on content driven by a clear understanding of user requirements. It will pursue opportunities for increased collection via the Web and encourage the use of new technologies to increase capacity to use statistical information effectively.

Key actions to support this commitment:

- Develop and adopt a strategic plan for the Web outlining corporate goals and objectives and clarifying governance and strategic business principles;
- Identify key priorities for immediate attention including investments to better understand and track visitor patterns and requirements, to establish a robust program of ongoing user consultation to address user concerns in a timely fashion, to expand collection via the Web, and to build new respondent relationships via the Web (e.g. providing surveys results directly to respondents);
- Work closely with subject matter experts to encourage development of new tools and use of new Web technologies to make it easier to use statistical information.

- (c) Strengthen and expand outreach:** Reaching out to key target groups to increase the use of statistical information is critical to supporting the Agency's *raison d'être*. The Agency already engages in a number of outreach activities to raise awareness and build capacity to use statistical information effectively – for example, outreach to ethnic media, Aboriginal groups and with the education sector. It will look at opportunities to undertake more outreach, in particular leveraging third parties to help strengthen and expand the Agency's reach.

Key actions to support this commitment:

- Undertake a pilot project to leverage major business groups to help raise awareness and capacity in this sector, as part of a broader plan to develop a corporate approach to outreach.
- Strengthen current media outreach activities, including with community-based media and non-traditional media.

(d) Build our brand: Statistics Canada already possesses the elements of a strong brand: It has singular distinction as the only comprehensive provider of statistical information on all aspects of Canadian society, and the perceived quality of its work gives the Agency widespread credibility. It will employ communications to further build its brand, ensure coherence and consistency across all channels of communication, and thus maximize the impact of its communications activities.

Key actions to support this commitment:

- Adopt and adhere to a corporate look to ensure consistency in the Agency's external image, together with consistent messaging to support corporate initiatives like recruitment;
- Engage in more corporate communications activities to inform key audiences about changes designed to improve the statistical program as well as Agency accomplishments;
- Strengthen internal communications to ensure employees are aware of new priorities and have the tools to deliver effectively, including the use of new technologies such as Web 2.0.

V. NEXT STEPS

18. Consultations on this plan will continue with management teams across the Agency. Approval of the plan will be sought from appropriate committees once consultations are completed. The plan will then be communicated to employees. Tools and methods will be developed to monitor progress and assess performance against the commitments in the plan.