

Distr.
GENERAL

19 June 2012

ENGLISH ONLY

**UNITED NATIONS ECONOMIC COMMISSION
FOR EUROPE (UNECE)
CONFERENCE OF EUROPEAN STATISTICIANS**

**Work Session on the Communication of Statistics
(Geneva, Switzerland, 27-29 June 2012)**

Session 1: Measuring Effectiveness of Communications

Engaging with the media – showing its value

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I INTRODUCTION

1 Media relations officers the world over are very good at dealing with issues in the here-and-now but we often don't give ourselves time to reflect and evaluate before we become caught up in the next big issue.

2 We are great at dealing with crises – usually caused by someone else's mistakes. We think on our feet. We understand the need for clear messages, consistency and prompt action. Often, we are good at being proactive – laying the foundations, building the relationships and placing the stories that make for a smoother relationship with the media.

3 However, what we often don't do so well is step back and look critically at what we have done, examine the components and their outcomes and see the lessons. No doubt we all do it individually and for our own benefit. That is what creates experience – a most valuable asset. But, in such economically restrictive times, we need to justify our work to others and answer the simple question: 'How effective have we been?' How can we help others not to make the same mistakes or, better still, do things the right way in the first place?

4 This paper uses the Census in 2011 in England and Wales as an example and looks at what media engagement achieved during the 'field operations period'. How did we raise extra public awareness using non-paid media coverage to enhance the paid-for advertising programme?

II THE BRIEF

5 The Office for National Statistics runs a census of population every ten years in England and Wales (Scotland and Northern Ireland run separate but parallel censuses). With each decade the task of engaging with the people becomes increasingly more complex and more difficult. There are around 20 million households in England and Wales and it is necessary to reach every household and get a record for every person in that household. This always requires a substantial communication, awareness and compliance campaign.

6 In 2011 it was important that communication should be planned, coordinated with other activities and wholly aligned with the objectives of the organisation. We needed to demonstrate the value of the census to a sceptical public and a new government

7 The media relations campaign ran from July 2010 to June 2011 and was closely linked with the marketing, PR, stakeholder and editorial strategies.

8 The media plan was based on unpaid media coverage and promotion, coupled with a rapid rebuttal process for negative publicity and proactive engagement of key media figures. The overarching objective was to maintain and enhance the reputation and trust in ONS to deliver a high quality census for the benefit of the public of England and Wales. This would be measured by the quantity, quality and relevance of the coverage of census activities in all facets of the media – from national broadcast and social media through to local news sheets. Key objectives were to raise awareness of the importance of the census and the main activities surrounding the field operation and to provide public reassurance of the confidentiality of personal data collected.

9 The strategy was proactive engagement with the media and, in particular, the regional and broadcast media which reach the widest population. However, there was also careful attention paid to the national media which wield significant influence over the general population both in positive and negative terms.

10 The strategic plan involved drip-feeding positive census stories at key moments in the census timetable along with rapidly rebutting any negativity. Media efforts were linked to the phases of ‘education’, ‘engagement’ and ‘enforcement’. Integration with marketing and advertising was vital.

11 All available channels to the media were used and delivery was through local and community officers as well as from the central census office. ONS senior leaders were trained to handle national and key local media; Census Area Managers (CAMs) were trained to handle their local media and provide local stories; and Community Advisers (CAs) were trained to deal with media appropriate to their specific local communities.

12 All media coverage was monitored for quantity and tone using a contractor service. Enquiries and contacts were logged by type, by subject and by organisation. CAMs and CAs also logged and reported media contact.

III Evaluation rationale

13 Measuring the positive impact of communication work, and acting on the information thus obtained, is vital to build credibility. Recession and changes in the media require us to justify our value as never before.

14 Communication measurement carried out in isolation without regard to organisational context has little value. A high or low measurement, based on favourable or unfavourable media coverage, is meaningless and possibly misleading if not relevant to the objectives of the organisation.

15 For the Census campaign, we used a standard set of questions:

- Where were we starting from?
- Which audiences did we need to reach?
- What are the messages for each individual audience?
- What would determine success and how is measured?

16 We used standard analysis methods such as SWOT (Strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats) and PESTLE (Political, economic, sociological, technological, legal and environmental). We looked at the audiences and prioritised them.

- 20 per cent of the audience needed more attention than the remaining 80 per cent.
- When a particular audience was difficult to reach, we sought intermediaries such as an organisation or society group relevant to that audience.
- We used community advisers to help us understand the audiences and the best way to reach them for the best return.

17 We considered the then newly devised Barcelona Principles. These principles are mainly aimed at evaluating public relations campaigns for the commercial sector but we considered adapting the principles to suit our objectives. They are a step forward but are not the complete answer.

IV The Barcelona Principles

18 The Barcelona Principles – the first global standard for public relations measurement, launched in 2010 – underline the importance of measuring outcomes linked to organisational objectives.

19 The seven principles:

1. Measurement and goal setting are fundamental to any communication programme
2. Media measurement requires quantity and quality measures; quantity measures on their own are not enough
3. AVEs (Advertising Value Equivalent) are not the value of communication
4. Social media can and should be measured
5. Measuring outcomes is preferable to measuring outputs
6. Business results can and should be measured wherever possible

7. Transparency and replicability are paramount to sound measurement

V Measuring the message – outputs v. outcomes

20 It is not easy to measure everything and the complexity and cost of measuring is often substantial, but measurement of effectiveness is important and justifies its share of the budget. But we needed to think about what we are measuring.

21 "Level substitution" is a common mistake – confusing an "outcome" (such as public compliance or behaviour change) with an "output" (evidence that a message was distributed). Many communication measures (such as total media coverage) reflect outputs, and it was important for us to record this, but it only evaluated our reach and not our impact.

22 Measuring outcomes is about understanding the degree to which good communication has changed people's awareness, opinion and behaviour. We used live management information (feedback) from the field to see whether we were getting the response rate that we desired and used targeted news releases, local advertising and an on-the-ground campaign using a big purple bus – yes, really – to boost responses.

23 Two examples were in a part of Wales (Ceredigion) where the initial return rate was lower than expected so an extra news release and local radio advertising were used to encourage more people to fill in their forms. In Pendle (Lancashire) we used extra media contacts and a visit from the bus where people in the street were encouraged to come and fill in their forms. Later we were able to detect a noticeable improvement in the returns from those towns.

24 What else did we observe and try to measure

- Results versus objectives – in the case of the Census did we achieve the response rates we wanted? The answer was yes. The objective was to achieve a 94 per cent return rate from across the country with at least 80 per cent from every local area including the hard to count inner-city and military areas – quite a tough objective today when compliance with surveys is so poor. The final figures are not yet available but we look certain to have achieved this.
- Hard evidence – amount of coverage in the right media. We used a media monitoring company and our own alerting mechanisms to count all broadcast and print coverage, assess it for tone (positive, neutral, negative), and assess reach for individual target groups
- Soft evidence – qualitative indications from people working in the field and with the public:
 - How aware was the audience of the message? We used national advertising awareness measures to assess this and they showed that, at the relevant time, the census advertisement was the 'most recalled' by the public.
 - Had the audience understood and remembered it? We used local and national responses rates and early online response to see how returns were going.

- Online tracking in real time via tweets, blog comments or online community threads. We used a monitoring company and our own staff to see if positive messages were being picked up and also as an early warning system in case of negative comments.
- Sample of the target audience to confirm that the campaign is working. In general we used feedback from the field force to pick up local compliance issues.

25 Measuring volumes of media coverage was useful but generally only told us about outputs. A large volume of ‘favourable’ media coverage only represented a successful **outcome** if it satisfied the objectives. However, we were also trying to keep any negative stories out of the public eye, or at the least minimised. The strategy was for proactive engagement and this enabled us to build good relationships with journalists and might have put them off from pursuing every potential negative story. We can indicate that this was successful by showing the relatively small number of negative issues compared with 2001.

26 It is also important to look at lessons learnt:

- How could we create a better brief or cover information gaps?
- How could we establish better benchmarks?
- How realistic were the objectives and the strategy?
- Which tactics worked best?
- What was the feedback from audiences and the people we worked with?

VI 2011 Census media campaign example:

Outputs – what was done

27 Evaluation work from Census 2001, and from the test and rehearsal, was used to shape the strategy and outputs for the campaign and provide the benchmarks. The focus was on working closely with the marketing and advertising schedules.

28 Outputs included a number of activities and services:

- News schedule – the planned drip-feed of positive census stories to target media
- National media proactive engagement – the laying of a background of trust and confidence in the competence of the census project.
- Work with broadcast programme makers – promoting awareness through documentaries and drama programmes.
- Media pack – an online service to provide the media with a one-stop shop for all census related information.
- Work with CAMs and CAs (local and regional work) – providing individual media contact with a local or community perspective.
- Senior leadership media training – creating a corps of senior spokespeople with an aptitude to promote key messages through all types of media.

- Management of contacts and distribution – a contact and distribution system held centrally.
- Social media – creating tags and encouraging influential followers through Twitter.
- Rapid rebuttal – backing up the proactive strategy with a fast and authoritative response to negative coverage or criticism.

Outcomes

29 Some of the headline measures including measures of outputs as well as outcomes:

- Over 4,000 news items were recorded and 27 news releases were issued. The ‘advertising value equivalent’ (AVE) was £8.5 million. AVE is a notional measurement not widely regarded as a valid measure of success, but it was relevant in this campaign because of the Government’s desire for media work to substitute directly for paid-advertising and this was a direct indicator.
- No anti-census campaigns achieved significant support from national media and damaging stories were minimal (absence of negativity is a positive measure!).
- The relationship with Press Association (UK general news agency) was particularly successful. It ran a succession of positive stories syndicated in regional newspapers and supported reach to the 80 per cent of ‘easy-to-reach’ public.
- A number of broadcast programmes were made including ‘This is Britain’ – an hour long documentary presented by Andrew Marr on BBC primetime TV reaching 1.9 million viewers, and the drama ‘32 Brinkburn Street’ which reached 1.8 million.
- Journalist feedback was positive for the media pack – photo images were downloaded over 500 times and film footage 23 times – this measured as a success in influencing the media to present a better picture to the public.
- More than 160 broadcast interviews were completed mainly by the Census Director and deputy directors. Challenging deadlines were met and few bids were turned down (many of the broadcast interviews were targeted at the 20 per cent hard-to-reach public).
- Media training created well-prepared local spokespeople and this was reflected in positive local coverage in most areas – half of all coverage was through local print and 18 per cent through local radio and TV (this was largely a measure of reach [output]).
- 157 CAMs and 41 CAs carried out interviews on local radio resulting in a further 500 interviews and mentions on 32 different radio stations. Over 200 items were recorded in Black Minority Ethnic media including interviews conducted in non-English languages. This produced a successful response outcome from some of the difficult 20 per cent of the population.
- A Twitter tag was created ‘@2011censuspress’ and over 200 followers achieved (hard to know how important social media was in communicating the media message).

- Over 20 rebuttal letters were published in a cross-section of media. This prevented dangerous negative publicity from becoming entrenched in the public mind.

Lessons learnt

30 This was a potent proactive media campaign that reached a wide audience using non-paid media coverage and maintained a mainly positive media mood. Just 11.5 per cent of coverage was recorded as negative. As a sub-group, however, national print media coverage was 30 per cent negative.

31 The negativity in national print media occurred largely in July 2010 at the beginning of the campaign when the new government called into doubt the future of the census. Coverage was overwhelmingly positive during the most important period of the campaign when householders were being asked to complete and return their forms (March, April and May 2012).

32 A number of lessons were learnt:

- More time should be committed to engaging with commentators whose prejudices against census were reported in some media and were the cause of most of the recorded negative stories.
- The proactive approach to working with the BBC brought significant benefits but fell short of a true partnership approach. Work was hampered rather than helped by a suggestion that advertising for the census should be carried by BBC. Some producers became wary that they were being used to carry government advertising disguised as feature stories when this was not really the case.
- Concerns about the future of census also stalled efforts to introduce census themes into popular soap operas.
- More focus should be placed on researching the plans for the TV and radio schedules and pitching to independent producers. More work should be done, too, with producers in ITV, Sky, Channel Four and Channel Five.
- Regional fact sheets would be best produced outside the media team which was over-stretched.
- Media team relationships with some CAMs and CAs were not sufficiently strong and achieved mixed results. While most CAMs and CAs achieved regular good coverage, some achieved virtually none and made no contact with the HQ media team. To overcome this, consideration should be given to additional regional media managers to support local staff for local and community news.
- Extensive media training was a very successful policy. More research into the styles of interviewers on some radio stations might avert potentially negative approaches
- Tweeting is becoming a valuable tool in issuing reactive and proactive material quickly to target audiences. It played only a small part in this campaign but independent research indicates that its importance will grow rapidly.
- Rapid response to negativity worked well.

- Finding more independent voices to speak on behalf of the census would help media coverage carry greater weight.