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Session 2: Changes in Communications

Statistics Canada Engages Online with Canadians

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Statistics Canada has a long-standing tradition of adapting its programs and services to meet the evolving information needs of Canadians. As the national statistical organization, the Agency is mandated through Canada's *Statistics Act* to collect and publish statistical information on the state of the country's economy and society.

An era of innovation

Three decades ago, Statistics Canada was well known as the most prolific publisher of the Government of Canada. Informative publications such as the *Canada Year Book*, *Canadian Social Trends* and the *Canadian Economic Observer* remained best-sellers for years. The introduction and increasing use of the Internet established the need to transform traditional publishing to leverage the immense possibilities that the World Wide Web opened to the information industry. Statistics Canada was one of the pioneers in the Canadian government to use the Internet to communicate with the public. In 1996, the Agency launched its official website and adopted an evergreen change agenda to remain in synch with users needs: from static to smart publishing, from maps to geographic information systems, from data tables to online databases, from order forms to e-commerce.

Today, with over eight million pages, the site is the largest Government of Canada website in terms of volume. It records 20 million visits a year, and offers a feast of daily factual information and topical articles about the many aspects of Canadians' lives presented in traditional and interactive formats. Also, as the Government of Canada was planning the introduction of its Open Government Initiative, Statistics Canada adopted an open data and open licensing policy in 2012, which opened its vault to give visitors free access to a vast repository of aggregate data that spans decades of statistical information available at the national and community levels.

It's about the journey

In 2005, as the evolution of the Statistics Canada website continued, research by the Agency's Internet content developers pointed towards Web 2.0 as the next step. Statistics on Internet use in Canada also confirmed steady increases from year to year. On the program side, Statistics Canada was looking for cost-effective ways to expand its consultations with users. Moreover, statistical users in the academic community were well versed in web applications and expected the same from government, and businesses were asking for increased connectivity and capacity-building tools to use our data. Still, online collaboration such as chatting and blogging were generally viewed as amusement for teenagers – not exactly the typical Statistics Canada stakeholders. Yet, as Internet communities started to grow, it became clear that users would welcome Statistics Canada in their online circles.

The Government of Canada established new common look and feel standards, which ultimately meant designing with templates for better navigation from site to site. Users and stakeholders expected more from the national statistical agency; we had data and information, they wanted increased access, and they wanted to participate in the process.

To lead transformation projects, Statistics Canada takes calculated risks, more commonly referred to at Statistics Canada as *disciplined innovation*. It is more a state-of-mind than an approach. It is a way of viewing the end results as a series of milestones that can evolve over time. Pilots, evaluations, readjustments... walking before running, then... going for the marathon.

Getting closer

In 2007, Statistics Canada entered the realm of online collaboration to increase information sharing and interaction with its data users. Social media presented a significant opportunity to:

- Demonstrate its commitment to engage with Canadians
- Establish a dialogue and respond to questions and concerns
- Consult with various stakeholders across the country in a cost-effective way
- Build networks and join online communities

The first attempt at a collaboration tool was modest, yet successful. In 2007, Statistics Canada created an online Census Consultation Forum on its website to share information with users and to gather their comments online. Implementation took careful planning and required close collaboration with our provincial and territorial stakeholders, as well as support from the Agency's senior executives.

In 2010, the Canadian Internet Use Survey conducted by Statistics Canada found that 58 percent of Canadians were active on social networking sites. So our earlier assumptions were right: the social media sphere was the place to reach Canadians. Statistics Canada launched

its first official social media account through the use of the micro-blogging site Twitter. At first, Twitter was used to promote the Agency's official release bulletin. A few months later, content was expanded to include highlights about the state of the economy and society, posting of employment opportunities, information about new services. Still in pilot mode, Statistics Canada did not respond nor engage with the public. The objectives of the pilot were to ensure the platform behaved as expected, to ensure the resource investment remained within set limits, and to test public reaction. All were achieved. Our senior executive committee was committed to expand the use of social media and enter the next phase of online engagement.

Taking stock

In 2011, to guide the expansion of Statistics Canada's presence across other social media channels, further research was conducted. It included stakeholder interviews and analysis, review of government policies, an audit of social media sites, development of a platform and content strategy, and a risk analysis and mitigation matrix.

This research led to the implementation of a comprehensive social media plan that allowed for an enhanced presence on Twitter, as well as the launch of two Facebook and two YouTube accounts.

Once again, disciplined innovation prevailed. To ensure successful execution employees had to be educated in the use of, and encouraged to participate in, social media activities. A strategic communications plan was deployed including:

- the creation of the Stay Connected Forum – a quarterly event where employees learn from social media experts, share best practices, and stay in touch with the latest trends in social media;
- the development of internal social media guidelines to guide employees in their use of social media and help them comply with related legislation and policies;
- the development of external social media guidelines to describe how Statistics Canada interacts with the public and how online discussions are moderated;
- the creation of a video to convey the guidelines to employees in a friendly and humorous tone;
- an Intranet portal that provides a corporate service to support program divisions in the dissemination of information to Canadians. It allows subject matter managers and specialists to submit content for posting on Statistics Canada's official social media accounts; and
- an interaction protocol for managing and monitoring the accounts.

The above tools have proven very effective in getting buy-in at all levels internally, and have created a sense of excitement among employees for the work done by Statistics Canada in social media. The success and effectiveness of the tools have also been recognized at the

government level, and the guidelines and video have been shared broadly with other government departments.

With the engagement of employees as informed content providers, and with strong support from senior management, we were ready for the next phase.

Reaching our goals

First we enhanced our presence on Twitter by publishing information every day about the latest data releases as well as information about our surveys. We also moved to engaging in real-time with Canadians. With over 50,000 followers, Statistics Canada is Canada's federal government department with the most Twitter followers.

Building on its experience with Twitter, Statistics Canada launched two Facebook pages and two YouTube channels on January 31, 2012. On Facebook, statistics on various features of our country, as well as information about our products and services, are posted. We have over 1,500 Facebook fans and our YouTube videos have been seen by 5,000 viewers.

For the 2011 Census data releases, we launched videos featuring a demography expert presenting the population and housing results. A bilingual (English and French) chat session also took place allowing participants to chat with an expert in real time. The success of this experience was based on strong collaboration between Communications Division and the Census Program. Currently the Agency is looking to expand this to its ongoing social, economic and environment programs.

In January 2013, the StatCan Blog was launched. The blog moves Statistics Canada beyond reporting on results, providing a glimpse of the agency's inner workings and future initiatives, while giving users a chance to comment and ask questions.

Success Factors

The success of Statistics Canada's undertakings on the social media front is based on four elements: disciplined innovation, strategic planning, collaboration, and vigilance. For each new tool, rules of engagement and a governance structure are established, supported by well-trained teams to guide the implementation. The processes are tested through simulations and the sites are monitored for compliance. The goal is to respond to Canadians' comments in a timely fashion. Employees at all levels are kept informed and engaged in social media activities. Lastly, the *Guidelines on the Use of Social Media at Statistics Canada*, define the roles and responsibilities and implement a formal process for employees to submit content for posting on official accounts.

Conclusion

Statistics Canada has led the advanced Canadian government experience in social media by adopting an employee-driven and stakeholder-focused approach to publishing and interacting online. It took the risk of empowering its employees in posting information about their programs in the public domain, and they engaged beyond our expectations. Statistics Canada dared to open its online walls to stakeholders and the general public to comment on, and react to, our programs and activities.

In supporting the Agency's mandate to provide Canadians with access to statistical information on the state of the economy and society, Statistics Canada's social media program is an incredible success. Complementary social media platforms were adopted to interact with a variety of audiences and to maximize the use of Canada's official statistics. The discussion forum and the blog reach an educated audience, Twitter is popular with news buffs, Facebook allows for more animated conversations, chat sessions provide a place for discussion on particular topics, YouTube shows statistics in action.

While the website remains the official dissemination channel, social media offers a new dimension to communications by fostering real-time exchanges in locations visited by our audiences on a daily basis. All of these activities are conducted with a view to transform and adapt Statistics Canada's programs and activities on a continuous basis.