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Session 2: Communication with respondents and evaluation of communication campaigns

Communicating the NSO value proposition – ensuring that official statistics is a well recognized brand¹

I. Introduction

1. As a collective, national statistics organisations share a value proposition that is almost certainly under-exploited. NSOs offer a point of difference that data consumers can rely on when trying to make sense of the volumes of data of varying quality available worldwide. As a global statistical community focused on producing independent statistics of an enduring quality, we can and should do a better job of communicating our point of difference to the wider public. We can do better when explaining the quality of the information we produce and how it can be used to make decisions. We have to do a better job of raising public awareness of the unique value of our collective assets as a statistical community. These include: shared international standards; our standards of independence; our methodologies and practices; regular cooperation across borders; and intellectual capital that includes shared knowledge and tools.

II. Why branding?

2. We deliberately refer to branding instead of marketing. The explosion in freely available data worldwide presents both threats and opportunities for NSOs and signals the need for collective work to address those as a wider statistical community. If NSOs cannot articulate their value proposition collectively, we risk losing our relevance in a sea of data producers. To establish our place in this data landscape, we need to ensure the brand of “official statistics” is well-recognized. This work has assumed additional urgency in the current environment of rapid global change in how data is disseminated and the arrival of a host of new players publishing data to varying quality standards.

¹ Paper prepared by the Modernisation Committee on Products and Sources of the High-Level Group for the Modernisation of Statistical Production and Services (HLG). The paper is an updated version of ‘Marketing the NSO value proposition – a call to action and examples of good practice’ as presented at the 62nd plenary session of the Conference of European Statisticians in Paris, France, 9-11 April 2014.

3. We note that there are various approaches to the concept of “marketing” among NSOs – some are more commercially oriented than others and this may influence their approach to marketing. Many countries consider official statistics as a purely public good and do not seek to gain commercially from their outputs, while others may have a funding model that encourages them to seek revenue-earning streams and therefore could be more aggressive in their marketing policies. For the concept of “branding”, however, we expect it is easier to find a common position. We all benefit from establishing official statistics as a well-recognized brand.

III. Our unique values

4. The official statistics community possesses unique values and strengths that set us clearly apart from many other players in the field of statistics. Although these values are likely obvious to those within the statistical community, upon closer inspection none of them are self-evident to those outside our community.

5. As NSOs seek to open up their traditionally closed approach, we are finding that many commercial and not-for-profit organisations are eager to work with us as partners. That means we have something to offer – whether it be data, expertise or reputation.

6. Perhaps the greatest strength and point of difference for NSOs is our quality focus. We rely on sound methodologies to collect, process and analyse data. We explicitly define target populations, design efficient sampling schemes and make sure we correct for coverage errors and selectivity issues. We are transparent about our processes and products, and they are accompanied by descriptive metadata. We publish our release calendars so that our users know when new information becomes available. We make sure that our statistics are comparable over time, such that both levels and change rates are reliable indicators. Our consistent long time series are greatly appreciated by policy makers, who feed them into sophisticated analytical models. All in all, we go to great lengths to guarantee the quality of our statistical products and services.

7. The international network of official statistics organisations is another area of strength. Through this network, best practices are shared and coordinated development activities are carried out. In the past, these efforts concentrated mostly on concepts and methods, but increasingly tools and resources are being shared, too.

8. Official statistics usually have a firm legal basis that defines the institutional context and tasks, including unique data collecting privileges. The worldwide official statistics community has formulated its Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics, a set of ten principles that shows we are very aware of our role in the information system of a democratic society and that we know how we want to play that role.

9. We share standardized concepts and classifications that are designed to capture economic and social phenomena in a harmonised and comprehensive way and these are revised in a coordinated manner. Examples include the System of National Accounts (SNA 2008), which is used worldwide as the statistical framework for summarising and analysing economies; and the International Standard Classification of All Economic Activities (ISIC rev.4). The worldwide standards are flexible and may be adapted for specific purposes, such as the SNA 2008, which is elaborated into the European System of National and Regional Accounts (ESA 2010) because of the very important role of statistical indicators for policymaking in the European Union.

10. A strict confidentiality regime is another key value of our community. We make sure that we never reveal information about individual units – whether persons, households or enterprises. Data protection techniques include both anonymization algorithms for microdata and statistical disclosure control methods for aggregates. And data collected for statistical purposes is never used for any other purposes, like supervision or fraud detection. This is a basic prerequisite to maintain public trust.

11. We sit on top of huge, well-documented microdata sets, particularly in countries that have access to administrative data sources such as tax records and population registers. To increase public utility, many statistical offices have decided to grant restricted access to their data vaults. Only selected user groups like academic researchers are eligible, under very strict confidentiality and security rules. Being in a position to enable this type of scientific access to data provides another unique value.

12. Apart from restricted access to microdata, we aim for maximum accessibility of our statistical outputs like tables, visualisations, press releases, yearbooks and web publications. They are a public good that must be accessible for all end users, both for power users and those more casually interested in our data. Statistical offices are therefore among the frontrunners in adopting open data strategies. The G8 Open Data Charter prominently identifies statistics among its areas of high value data. This can only serve to further increase the value of our products.

13. Our independence is another key strength. While industry groups may publish statistics more quickly, because they have a vested interest users tend to approach the data with greater caution than they might with official statistics produced by an independent NSO.

14. Finally, an often forgotten asset is that most official statistics agencies have a very good reputation and a positive public image. Even when our work is being criticized and our reputation seems to suffer, this happens in a way similar to the criticisms of the weather forecast. Obviously people don't like to be surprised by a shower when a sunny day was predicted. The trust in official statistics becomes particularly apparent when analysts present alternative approaches for compiling statistics: they compare their results to official statistics figures as a benchmark.

IV. Our weaknesses

15. Every rose has its thorn: in addition to the many strengths presented above we suffer from a number of weaknesses. To be able to address them it helps to identify them.

16. One regular criticism concerns the timeliness of our products. In some cases annual statistics are produced with a delay of several years, which can reduce their usefulness and they are published only “for the record”. Similar situations apply for some quarterly and monthly statistics. This lack of timeliness is a growing concern for two reasons. First, the pace of society is increasing and users are becoming impatient. Second, the amount of alternative information sources (even of dubious or uncertain quality) is growing. Significant progress in this dimension means that compromises have to be sought in other important quality dimensions that are also in great demand, like accuracy and level of detail.

17. A further complaint is that our responsiveness to new user needs could be better. Here one of our strengths even turns against us. Regular statistical information sets are specified in formal work programs, international agreements or even

legislation. This leads to stability in production and reliability over time. To change specifications, however, depends on cumbersome procedures, which hampers flexibility and responsiveness.

18. Once we decide to develop a new statistical product, the time from design and development to production and publication of results can take several years. This is partly caused by our quality focus, but for the reasons given above we must reduce our time to market. This is particularly true in the area of big data. If we are not quick enough to exploit these sources others may jump in and start to compile statistics. The volatility of some big data sources also means that a design may become obsolete even before it reaches the production phase.

19. We are also struggling to translate our core values to the world of web surveys and big data. Traditional survey methods no longer apply – we have to find new paradigms to extract quality statistics from new sources. We may have to redefine our statistical concepts and solve selectivity or bias issues. We may even have to reconsider how to supply society with relevant and meaningful information.

20. New sources might also address the response burden for which we are often criticized. It is important to find a compromise between the developing products, adapting to the needs of users and reducing the burden of respondents.

21. Finally, our statistics have often limited appeal for individual users with specific questions. People and enterprises may want to know how they compare to their peer group. Local governments may require information at neighbourhood or street level for policy and planning decisions. Often such needs can be easily satisfied on request. But in some cases, we have the data needed but are still unable to answer the questions, due to either lack of resources or lack of powerful estimation methods. The standards that make us so trustworthy – including our confidentiality obligations, use of sample surveys and the need to minimise respondent burden – sometimes mean that we are not able to publish data to a sufficient degree of detail to meet user needs.

V. Current practices – examples from the NSO community

22. In order to deal with the challenges presented above and to explain or improve their value proposition, many individual NSOs have developed different approaches. Below we present a number of practices that seem worthwhile to share in this context.

A. NEW ZEALAND

1. Valuing the New Zealand Census

23. Statistics New Zealand recently commissioned a report that sought to measure the value produced by its five-yearly census. It sought to measure and quantify the benefits to New Zealand from the census and population estimates – essentially, it sought to place a dollar value on the information derived from the census and its associated population estimates. Its executive summary makes a firm statement: “The conclusion is clear: despite significant difficulties in developing a rigorous quantification, it is reasonable to conclude that the census delivers benefits well in excess of its direct costs.”² Author Carl Bakker noted that there are no agreed models for measuring the value of such statistics, so the process of estimation was complex.

² *Valuing the Census*, Carl Bakker, April 2013, Wellington, NZ.

Bakker concluded that information provided by the census and its associated population statistics provided a net present value of close to \$1 billion for New Zealand over a 25-year period.

2. Measuring use and trust

24. Statistics NZ surveys its users to determine their attitudes towards official statistics. The Use and Trust in Official Statistics Survey (2) has been conducted twice – in 2010 and in 2011, following guidelines developed by the OECD Committee on Statistics. It measures: awareness of government statistics, their importance, how they are used, the trust people have in them, and how they were accessed.³ The report has been conducted by Research New Zealand to ensure independence of the results.

B. DENMARK

1. Sales and marketing at Statistics Denmark

25. In recent years, Statistics Denmark has moved toward a more specialized division of labour, including the creation of a new Sales and Marketing department. This department aims to create optimal conditions for data suppliers and increase income by professionalising its interactions with data consumers. It is comprised of four divisions – Interview Services, Research and Methods, Customer Centre and International Consulting. Its marketing and promotional activities include:

- (a) Free introductions to Statistics Denmark that outline its service offering – what is available at no charge, and what kind of data might incur a charge.
- (b) Free courses in how to find great stories in all the published statistics for students at Denmark’s Media and Journalism College and other universities where journalists are educated.
- (c) Direct mail to potential customers
- (d) Direct e-mails to people who have agreed to receive material from Statistics Denmark
- (e) Analysis days where potential customers of data can outline their data needs. Statistics Denmark can then show them what data can be purchased from their registers to meet their needs, and the customers are charged a fee for the day
- (f) Direct phone calls to potential customers
- (g) A promotional magazine “Statistisk Perspektiv” (Statistical Perspective) is sent to former customers and other interested people three to four times a year. The articles are about customized tasks that customers have paid for, providing an appetizer of what they can get from Statistics Denmark.

C. THE NETHERLANDS

1. Supplying customised statistics

26. The Centre for Policy Related Statistics compiles tailor-made statistics based on research questions from paying customers. It draws on a wide range of available

³ Available on the Statistics New Zealand website, www.stats.govt.nz/about_us/our-publications/2011-use-trust-in-oss.aspx

statistical (micro)data sources and the expertise of Statistics Netherlands staff. If necessary, external datasets supplied by customers are linked to the existing datasets. The work is carried out for a fixed rate per hour and leads to a research report with the stamp of Statistics Netherlands, without exclusive rights, however. The results of the study are published on the Statistics Netherlands website, meaning they're available to the wider public. This service is very successful: It started some ten years ago with a handful of researchers, and has now grown into two teams (with a third being established) of altogether 30 researchers whose expenses are fully covered by payments for the research they carry out. This service helps to increase (re)use of previously collected data and adds flexibility and responsiveness to customer demands.

2. Advisory boards

27. Statistics Netherlands maintains closer ties to its stakeholders through the use of a number of advisory boards for subject matter areas and methodological research. Members are external stakeholders, and the chairs of the advisory boards together form an overall board. All boards meet several times per year and discuss topics of interest to their areas.

D. IRELAND

1. Improving statistical literacy

28. In May 2007 the Irish Central Statistics Office embarked on an Education Outreach Programme, a long-term investment driven by the desire to **increase** the awareness and effective use of statistics in Ireland⁴. Educating CSO data customers is seen as a key driver toward this goal. To develop and implement a number of key projects, the CSO has fostered key partnerships at a national and international level. The three broad target areas that were highlighted include:

2. Primary and post-primary education

29. Census At School is an international non-profit project funded by organisations interested in promoting good use of statistics and data handling. It involves collecting and disseminating real data for use by teachers and pupils. CSO Ireland worked with the UK Royal Statistical Society Centre for Statistical Education to develop the program in 2009. Census at Schools Ireland was promoted by the CSO with the Irish education authorities and has been used in trialling a new maths curriculum.

- (a) On World Statistics Day 2010, the CSO launched a statistics competition for post-primary students. It is now run annually and is combined with the International Literacy Project Poster Competition.
- (b) Online educational tools have been developed to guide pupils and teachers about how to collect, process and discuss data surrounding the national cycling race 'An Post Ras'. Lessons related to the school curriculum across a range of subjects (e.g. history, geography) have been developed around the Census of Population. 'Census Charlie', a cartoon character, was created to promote the 2011 Census of Population to younger primary students.

⁴ MacFeely, S. & E. McCuirc (2013), Another Brick in the Wall – Improving statistical literacy in Ireland. Available from: [http://iase-web.org/documents/papers/sat2013/IASE IAOS 2013 Paper 2.4.1 MacFeely McCuirc.pdf](http://iase-web.org/documents/papers/sat2013/IASE_IAOS_2013_Paper_2.4.1_MacFeely_McCuirc.pdf)

3. Third level and continued professional development

30. A Professional Diploma in Official Statistics for Policy Evaluation was launched in 2012 by the CSO in cooperation with the Institute of Public Administration. It is a one-year diploma targeted at existing and future policy makers to help them appreciate the importance of Irish and international official statistics.

31. The CSO runs a seminar series across a range of topics (e.g. transport, enterprise statistics) to promote the use and availability of data to relevant users.

4. Media and wider society

32. The CSO engages with the media via press releases, press conferences, statistical releases and thematic reports.

33. The CSO has established statistical liaison groups (e.g. in areas such as agriculture, enterprises, transport, energy, tourism) that bring data providers together with the users and producers of these statistics. These groups improve communication, cooperation and play an important role in agreeing common objectives and priorities as well as highlighting the value of official statistics.

34. CSO launched a series of formal briefings to the national parliament to improve the flow of information to this key group of policy makers.

E. ITALY

1. Statistical storytelling.

35. To improve the value of Official Statistics, Istat has been adopting storytelling since 2010. Storytelling is “a programme to make the results of official statistics accessible and understandable to people and – in fulfilment of an information mandate – to make evidence-based decision making possible”⁵. In particular, Istat used statistical storytelling in three different ways, with increasing levels of interaction and involvement of final users, namely:

2. Presentation of statistical outputs as stories

36. Storytelling is used yearly in the NoiItalia project⁶ as a means to present indicators involving a broad range of statistical subjects at different territorial levels.

37. In particular, more than 200 *text* stories are presented at regional and national levels in order to permit comparisons among different territorial levels. Moreover, each story is integrated by a set of graphic facilities with the purpose of complementing the textual information with a visual representation providing basic interaction mechanisms.

3. Visual analysis of statistical outputs through stories

38. For the results of the 2010 Agricultural Census, Istat used storytelling to integrate the “traditional” dissemination strategy⁷. A selection of specific stories is proposed by default, starting from which the final user can perform an in-depth analysis by selecting different indicators and personalizing the resulting visualization. In particular, a set of advanced graphic representations is available (including

⁵ A.n Grossenbacher: Storytelling revisited, International Marketing and Output Database Conference (IMAODBC)Vilnius, 6-10 September 2010

⁶ <http://noi-italia.istat.it/index.php?id=3&L=0>

⁷ <http://censimentoagricoltura.istat.it/explorer/>

scatterplots, choropleths, table lenses, parallel coordinates) fully integrated with the text stories, and highly interactive.

4. Laboratory for free storytelling

39. Istat provides a laboratory to create stories on data⁸. The laboratory is targeted to students, teachers and to all those users that want to improve their familiarity with statistical concepts. The users of the laboratory can approach the creation of a story by discovery, curiosity and exploration mechanisms. They can use authoring tools for analyze data and create their own text and visual stories. The created stories can be saved and shared with other users.

40. All the initiatives described above are individually worthwhile but collectively they help to market and strengthen the brand of Irish official statistics. The CSO does not have the resources of skills to take on these initiatives singlehandedly. Collaboration with other agencies is the key to success.

41. In this short paper, the enumeration obviously cannot be exhaustive: we could equally well have included the [Run That Town](#) app developed by the Australian Bureau of Statistics, a strategy game which lets the player run their town using Census 2011 data to inform decisions; or the [Homo Statisticus](#) website developed by the Korean Statistical Information Service, where users can explore their current status easily by obtaining customized statistical information. And probably there are many more examples that could be included for inspiration and sharing.

VI. Conclusion

42. As a community of NSOs, we must do better to communicate our value proposition and to make sure that official statistics is a well-recognized brand. To build on our considerable strength as an international statistical community, we believe now is the time for shared activity to improve how we communicate the value of official statistics. It is important to address our weaknesses, build on our best practices and deliver outputs that demonstrate our ability to improve in terms of responsiveness, timeliness and innovation. Through the UNECE Modernisation Committee on Products and Sources a collective work is being done to define our value proposition as NSOs. The first step is to identify and share good practice. This should include developing shared strategies for ways to measure and communicate the value of official statistics.

43. We are preparing a survey of NSOs to gather information about their strategies or campaigns underway or planned to communicate the value of official statistics, and to gather information about any research NSOs have done to explore attitudes towards their statistics or to measure the effectiveness of their efforts. This includes a stocktake of marketing and communication activities at the UNECE level. We propose that the information gathered through this work could then be used to create a shared resource for best practice examples so that others can benefit from the work being done elsewhere and progress across the statistical community could be made more quickly. For example, sharing knowledge about the development of apps for statistical releases is an especially ripe area for potential collaboration, as the development language is standard worldwide.

⁸ <http://scuoladistatistica-lab.istat.it/index.php>

44. As shown here, ample opportunities exist for collaboration with partners outside an NSO that can increase an NSO's value proposition – this includes reaching out to the research community to add value to our data, collaborating with external developers of data apps and engaging more broadly with our stakeholders, users and respondents to better understand their needs so that our products and services, and interactions with them, can be better tailored to their requirements.

45. While the current environment presents us with many challenges, there is also no better time to seize the moment as an international community of statistical organisations and show the value we offer and the very real difference good data can make to informing decision making at all levels – from a family's choice about their mortgage to where to build hospitals, roads and schools. Our expertise, our quality focus and our commitment to long-term, enduring and independent statistics places us in a uniquely strong position to lead the next wave of data production to inform critical decisions around the world.