

Workshop on the Communication of Statistics

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Census of Agriculture – Social Media Data Dissemination Approaches

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1. Overview

The Census of Agriculture is the official source of statistics about American agriculture. The United States Department of Agriculture’s National Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS) conducts the Census only once every five years to provide information about nearly all aspects of farming and ranching. The Census helps tell the story of U.S. agriculture and provides information used for decision-making in private and public sectors.

For the release of results of the 2012 Census of Agriculture, NASS faced a new and ever-changing communications field. Social media and other digital platforms increased segmentation among NASS’ audiences, while also shortening the public’s attention span and making it even more difficult to cut through the clutter of news and information available to them. NASS needed to overcome all of these new obstacles, while also maintaining a high level of consistent, accurate, and official communications from a federal statistical agency.

The data dissemination campaign for the 2012 Census of Agriculture, called the “Census of Agriculture: American Agriculture by the Numbers” was an integrated communications campaign that brought static numbers to life. Ultimately, the campaign goal was to increase interest in and use of the data, and help engage and build NASS’ data provider and user communities.

2. Research

Following data collection for the 2012 Census of Agriculture, the NASS communications team spent several months researching our customer’s opinions and expectations for the 2012 Census results. The team surveyed both internal and external stakeholders on what types of tools and data they would find helpful in using and disseminating once the Census results were released.

Reflective of the changes in modern communications, the enlightening result was that audiences no longer wanted static data, nor did they want one large data dump on release day with no follow up until the next Census. Stakeholders surveyed asked for continuous interaction, including website updates, infographics, and more robust localized information. In addition, social media tools, such as Facebook and Twitter, the increased use of hashtags and outreach events, and instructions on how to access data were all in high demand among NASS’ stakeholders.

3. Planning

As the first step in its communications planning, NASS conducted a full inventory of various tools already available to the agency. Despite challenges during the 2012 Census of Agriculture involving budget cuts and even a U.S. federal government shutdown, NASS' foundation in conventional communications and accessibility to them remained diverse and fairly strong. The agency had: an established Census website¹ that was fresh, up-to-date, and USDA compliant²; access to the USDA Creative Media and Broadcast Center for development and distribution of radio and television packages; a subscription to Vocus for distribution of news releases and access to a media database; an agreement in place for design services to create promotional and marketing products; a team that coordinated tradeshow and exhibits; and of course multiple divisions that prepared and disseminated the actual statistical publications.

With this foundation in place to help reach NASS' traditional audiences, the agency communications team needed to push boundaries and expand beyond these traditional means of communications. The agency needed to look at other tactics to deliver the continuous interaction that data users and stakeholders were hungry for – forms of two-way communication and engagement, not only static data delivery.

The communications team turned to new media. In exploring new media, NASS had a presence on Twitter. NASS first established a Twitter account with the release of the 2007 Census of Agriculture. The NASS Twitter account was now used to occasionally profile NASS data and survey data collection efforts throughout the agency. NASS maintained its own Twitter account at the Headquarters level, and followed the USDA Social Media Best Practices for posting and activities on the account.

The USDA also provided NASS the opportunity to use the USDA Blog, Facebook, and YouTube accounts. Posting to these department platforms required advanced planning and approval with department officials. While other social media channels were available to the USDA, including flickr and Google+, NASS had limited access to these channels due to the legal intricacies of the established Terms of Service agreements between the department and such vendors.

In looking at these social media platforms and how NASS could plan to use them for the 2012 Census of Agriculture data release, NASS saw one major building block that it could use to its advantage. NASS already created a hashtag #AgCensus, which the agency used during its data collection period.

The hashtag was launched when NASS held a Twitter chat during the 2012 Census data collection asking followers to send questions about the Census to @usda_nass with the hashtag #AgCensus. The goal of the hashtag was to encourage users to follow messages related to the Census long term on Twitter. Despite not being frequently used, the hashtag already had a small establish group of followers. If strategically incorporated into all of NASS' social media efforts, the #AgCensus hashtag would strengthen the agency's data release communications and visibility.

¹ www.agcensus.usda.gov

² This was in addition to the NASS website and the overarching USDA website.

If all of this planning fell into place, data users and stakeholders would receive continuous Census data from NASS and become engaged in an online Census community following the 2012 Census data release. What next? In the planning process, NASS also recognized that there is a significant obstacle presented by Quick Stats – the agency’s statistical database. While the database provides a wealth of data in a downloadable format at your fingertips, it’s not always the easiest and quickest platform to navigate for users.

How do we plan to get ahead of the game knowing that if we entice people with Census data, they may have challenges finding more in the Quick Stats database? To solve this problem, NASS turned to YouTube during the planning phase of its campaign. The agency created a video tutorial with the goal of educating its data users on how to access the information, ensuring that everyone was prepared for the 2012 Census of Agriculture results. NASS used its Twitter account, USDA blog, and the Census website to encourage users to view the video in preparation for the data release.

4. Preliminary Release

In October 2013, NASS like the majority of the U.S. federal government experienced a multi-week shutdown due to funding. This shutdown delayed the release of the 2012 Census of Agriculture by several months. NASS would now release a brief preliminary report in February 2014 and follow up with the full, final report in May 2014.

From the communications perspective this posed a whole new series of challenges and deliverables. The NASS communications team was now tasked with implementing a rollout plan not only for the “final” Census data release but also a “preliminary” release. In addition, NASS would need to find ways to keep the momentum going in-between the two releases. New and social media would help NASS overcome many of these obstacles.

For the preliminary release, NASS took advantage of the strong agriculture sector presence at the annual USDA Agricultural Outlook Forum. During the plenary session attended by more than 1,500 officials, Secretary Tom Vilsack provided a preliminary data preview, remarked on the importance of the Census data, and launched a countdown to the final Census release.

The Secretary’s remarks were filmed, posted to the department YouTube channel, and a link was distributed by USDA encouraging the public to watch. In addition, abbreviated comments from the Secretary’s Census remarks were included in “This Week @USDA,” a three-minute weekly video, which is posted on YouTube and distributed to the public as well as more than 300,000 USDA employees to update them on current events at the department.

NASS also provided live coverage of the Agricultural Outlook Forum by tweeting Census-related statements made by the Secretary. This live tweeting at the event officially launched NASS’ 2012 Census of Agriculture data release campaign and immediately built attention for the #AgCensus hashtag. NASS’ tweets surpassed 1.4 million impressions that day with several hundred retweets of the #AgCensus messages.

In addition, the preliminary release also gave NASS an opportunity to launch one of its key new exciting tactics - infographics. The Census infographics were NASS’ first attempt to present data visually without relying on data tables. Designed primarily for social media distribution, the

infographics targeted new audiences, especially those who do not represent heavy data users. The key was to provide the data directly and easily to the users in an interesting way, trying to break through the news and information clutter online.

At the Agricultural Outlook Forum, USDA and NASS incorporated Census infographics into Census-related tweets. The infographics were also posted on the USDA flickr account for sharing. The infographics were also included in the previously mentioned “This Week @USDA” video on YouTube.

While the primary intent of infographics was for online distribution, NASS also created print versions for some select infographics by topic. In remembering the scope of NASS’ target audiences, the communications team wanted to be aware of the diverse needs of its already-existing data users. Providing the ability to print the infographics allowed everyone from educators and community based organizations, to NASS state statisticians, to take advantage of the new data visualizations and analyses. However, the infographics were primarily distributed via Twitter and Facebook.

In addition to new media and tools at the Agricultural Outlook Forum for the preliminary release, the Secretary followed the announcement with a traditional press conference and written statement issued by the department. NASS also provided several other conventional media tactics including media packets and outreach, an exhibit booth/display, and Census release signage/ads.

To maintain the momentum following the preliminary release and build awareness of Census data among farmers, NASS also sponsored the U.S. Farm Report taping at the Commodity Classic, a major agricultural event held shortly after the USDA Agricultural Outlook Forum. The U.S. Farm Report is a weekly syndicated cable television show that reaches 500,000 viewers.

This opportunity provided NASS another chance to increase visibility with the agricultural community. Some 814 people attended the live taping. The sponsorship package included two 30-second public service announcements, featuring Secretary Vilsack, which aired during the national broadcast of the U.S. Farm Report.

5. Final Preparations

The February preliminary launch, while originally not in the 2012 Census of Agriculture data release or communications plans, provided NASS a great opportunity to gauge success of its new tools and further hone them for the final data release several months later in May 2014. The analysis was especially useful for infographics. The Census of Agriculture provides a plethora of data and it is not always easy to determine which statistics to profile.

For the preliminary release, NASS featured various categories of data focused on the What (production/economics), Where (geography), How (practices), and Who (demographics) of U.S. Agriculture. What was evident from tweet performance was that NASS’ audience found demographic pieces most interesting. Tweets discussing women farmers and millennials significantly outperformed tweets discussing top agricultural states and commodities.

This was an interesting discovery for people at NASS, and it was supported by analytics. Why are demographic data outperforming crop data? It's the uniqueness and frequency aspects. The Census of Agriculture provides more than 6 million data points and some of those data points are only provided every five years from the Census. Those data points are what people find intriguing. Relatable data points are what people find interesting.

This analysis allowed NASS' communications team to focus on demographic topics and different, unique angles when it came to the final release. NASS' demographer conducted additional analysis of the data, this time focusing on gender, generations, and other demographic and newsworthy data. In addition, new infographics on new practices, such as organic agriculture and renewable energy production were also created in reflection of the public's interests in those topics.

6. Release of Complete 2012 Census of Agriculture Data

The NASS communications team faced one more major obstacle in preparing for the 2012 Census of Agriculture release. The Agency set the day and time for the final 2012 Census of Agriculture release, the Agency's largest public announcement every five years, for a Friday afternoon.

With the exception of hard breaking news, in the communications world a Friday – in particular a Friday afternoon – is traditionally a quiet day for media coverage. This timing would make it difficult for NASS to create a special event with major media appeal. Furthermore, the public's perception of when and why the government releases information on a Friday afternoon is generally not a positive one. When NASS announced the day and time of the release the Agency experienced this negative perception with feedback from stakeholders. Both internal and external stakeholders asked if the Census results were negative, if NASS was trying to hide or bury the information.

To rectify these issues, the NASS communications team turned to new media options. Rather than hold a traditional rollout and press event, as was done in the past and assumed by NASS leaders, the communications team explored non-traditional alternatives that would broaden the Agency's boundaries and move it into the twenty-first century.

The NASS communications team pitched the idea to rollout the Final 2012 Census of Agriculture Report at the Agency's first-event virtual press conference. While unconventional to NASS, the virtual press conference would solve many of the challenges posed by the Friday afternoon release time. After providing other case studies as samples and thoroughly explaining the vision, the Agency ultimately approved this new communications tactic.

The virtual press conference took the shape of a live webcast, free and open to the public, including members of the press, academia, government, farmers and ranchers, etc. This format helped resolve the issue of transparency, or perception of lacking transparency on a Friday afternoon, by being as open and visible as possible, to as many people as possible. The virtual press conference even allowed NASS to cut across time zones and reach media from coast-to-coast with the data release.

Another benefit of holding a virtual press conference was the ability to record, save, and upload to YouTube. Continuing to take advantage of the USDA YouTube channel, NASS was able to upload the webcast and promote it following the event, even into the next week(s). So for media and stakeholders who missed the initial webcast on a Friday afternoon, they were able to go online and watch the video of the webcast as well as download the presentation and all the materials.

To make all of this happen, the NASS communications team partnered³ with the USDA Creative Media and Broadcast Center to plan, organize, and execute the webcast event. During the one-hour webcast, the first half was reserved for several of NASS' leaders to present the Census results on-camera and offer comments.

The second portion of the webcast provided the public an opportunity to engage with NASS. Questions were accepted via Twitter before and during the live webcast. The conversation and questions were moderated by a popular and well-respected USDA Radio Reporter. Answers to the questions were also posted online, which ensured that questions not answered due to time constraints would still be addressed.

In advance of the webcast, NASS promoted the event using the USDA blog, Facebook and Twitter channels. The public was encouraged to watch as well as submit their questions to NASS via Twitter @usda_nass. The NASS communications team and data experts were on hand monitoring questions, researching answers, and assisting the moderator and panel as needed.

To build additional anticipation for the event, NASS also used traditional communications. NASS subject matter experts interviewed with farm broadcasters and recorded audio news releases for the National Association of Farm Broadcasters (NAFB) members to download and air. A series of news releases promoting the virtual media event were distributed generating more than 318 news stories resulting in more than 3.5 million impressions. And emails, letters, and invitations were sent to NASS stakeholders alerting them of the webcast and Final 2012 Census of Agriculture release.

While the overall focus of the webcast was on national data for the United States, there was also a growing interest in local data from the Census. Publics both internally, and outside of NASS, wanted to see more profiling of state- and county-level data. The NASS communications team went to social media to tackle this area too. In coordination with the USDA Office of Communications, NASS received approval to launch the "Census Thursday" Blog Series.

Every Thursday NASS would post a blog on the USDA Blog highlighting information about the Census of Agriculture. The primary goal of launching this weekly blog series was to highlight unique Census data at the local level from a different state every week for an entire year.

Working with its state statisticians, NASS' communications team created a weekly post schedule for all state offices. Each state had a blog post, accompanied by at least one infographic posted on USDA Blog, Facebook, flickr, and Twitter. Profiling all 50 states, allowed NASS to maintain

³ Partnership with the USDA Creative Media and Broadcast Center also involves a financial commitment.

a Census of Agriculture campaign for at least a year, ensuring continuous top-of-mind awareness of the Census among its stakeholders.

Posting the blogs with an accompanying infographic resonated strongly with USDA's Facebook community. Each post reached tens of thousands of Facebook users, receiving thousands of "Likes" and "Shares." In addition to increasing data dissemination on social media channels, the blog posts increased media pickup of the local Census data.

The state Census blogs were also cross-posted on the Census of Agriculture website to increase visibility and help keep the continuous flow of new data and information that stakeholders originally requested. The state infographics were highlighted on the Census homepage, linking to the blogs. Each week, readers were encouraged to "Check back next week as we spotlight another state and look at more information from the 2012 Census of Agriculture."

7. Evaluation and Impacts

Diversifying NASS' communications efforts to include both traditional media channels and social media led to great success for the 2012 Census of Agriculture data release. NASS was able to overcome multiple communications challenges along the way by pushing boundaries and exploring, growing, and implementing new tactics.

The 2012 Census of Agriculture campaign, "Census of Agriculture: American Agriculture by the Numbers" brought static numbers to life by increasing interest in and use of the data, and engaging and building the NASS' data provider and user communities. The results of this were all evident on Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, flickr, the Census website, and more.

For example, the Census of Agriculture website traffic increased more than 70 percent during the month of data release. On the mass media front, during the first week alone, 318 mass media stories came out, for a total of 3.5 million impressions. By the end of the year, more than 5,000 media stories cited NASS or Census data.

Social media channels showed the largest impact of the new communications approaches. On Twitter, Census-related messages posted within the first week of the data release resulted in 5.8 million impressions. This was a result of the Census of Agriculture hashtag, #AgCensus, being used 1,700+ times in one week. NASS' tweets alone were retweeted 250+ times during that time. NASS' Twitter following grew by more than 6,000 people during the year following Census release.

The success of the Census social media efforts also inspired NASS leadership to become more open-minded when it comes to new communications methods. Since the 2012 Census of Agriculture release, NASS' communications team has trained more than a third of all state representatives on Twitter best practices, resulting in a stronger ongoing communications campaign. NASS leaders have also participated in new efforts, such as the Google+ Hangout discussing Census women farmers' results.

NASS' infographics strategy has also experienced great success on social media. Infographic images profiling state-specific data have been viewed more than 50,000 times and continue to

generate a lot of interest on both Facebook and Twitter. In addition, the maps from a Census poster, “Where Does the Food on MyPlate Come From,” have been viewed more than 24,000 times on flickr.

8. Future Thinking

Where do we go from here? While the Final 2012 Census of Agriculture data were released in May 2014, the NASS communications team continues to push out data and explore new options and channels. NASS is currently evaluating options to bring more awareness and access to the gallery of Census images and graphics, such as through Pinterest. The communications team is also pursuing NASS’ own YouTube channel for increased ease and frequency of uploading videos.

And NASS continues to explore ways to keep continuous interaction and engagement with stakeholders by tapping into unique news or networking opportunities, such as family farms, women farmers, organic agriculture, and more. NASS is also beginning to research and shape its’ communications efforts for the 2017 Census of Agriculture. The communications team will look to learn from its’ experiences with the 2012 Census of Agriculture and also hopes to glean insights and share idea with other statistical agencies.