

## **Developing, delivering, and evaluating key messages: A case study from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics**

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### *Abstract and Paper*

Key messages are the backbone of statistical organizations' communication narratives. With a few well-chosen words we need to articulate what we do, what we stand for, what makes us different, and what value we bring to our stakeholders. We may need to tailor specific messages for different audiences. And, finally, we need to integrate messaging into our overall communications strategy.

Making an effective pitch for data products, however, is not the same as selling toothpaste or promoting a political platform. This paper will draw on the experience of the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics to address how statistical organizations can develop succinct and compelling corporate key messages, train staff how and when to use these messages, evaluate the effectiveness of the process, and use the results to inform ongoing improvements.

# Developing, delivering, and evaluating key messages: A case study from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics

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*Topic (iii): Tailoring communication to the audiences*

## Background

Though elements of a communications program had been in place earlier, it was not until 2016 that the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) began implementing the agency's first comprehensive strategic communications plan. The plan established a coordinated strategy with measurable objectives designed to maintain and improve the credibility, relevance, and favorability of BLS.

A clear, concise, and effective message platform is the cornerstone of any successful communications program. Therefore, one of the pillars of the strategic plan was message support and validation.

Key messages are the most explicit tool an organization has to shape and reinforce its brand. In the context of a statistical organization, key messages must provide a narrative framework that expresses what the organization does, what principles lie underneath that work, how the organization differs from other sources of data, and what value the organization brings to its stakeholders. Effective messages must be concise, relevant to the audience, compelling, and memorable.

In addition to key messages, statistical organizations must develop a consistent approach to conveying those messages. Together, the messages and their delivery comprise a message platform.

Thus developing corporate messages to help promote BLS among key stakeholders was a key component of several core strategies in the BLS communications plan, including:

- Accentuating BLS' reputation as *the* trusted source of factual information about the condition of the American economy.
- Promoting the numerous ways that BLS data products and services benefit households and businesses.
- Garnering positive media coverage for BLS and its products in national, local, and trade media, as well as with bloggers and other influencers.
- Identifying and engaging a network of ambassadors and "validators" to amplify BLS key messages.

## Corporate Buy-in

After senior management approved the BLS strategic communications plan, the communications team took up the task of developing key messages.

In the communications plan, the initial vision for corporate messages included these concepts:

- Promote a broader understanding of and appreciation for BLS and its many important data contributions.
- Educate the target audiences about the vital role BLS plays in providing essential data about the nation's economic health.

- Address sensitive issue areas, such as accusations of manipulating data for political ends (“cooking the books”) in a timely manner with standardized, accurate, and appropriate responses.

The initial vision also included the following topic areas:

- Today’s data user – The growing number of Americans who want current, relevant data about their area of interest.
- BLS as the “gold standard” producer of data on our nation’s economy – BLS is a premier producer of scientifically credible and transparent data and plays a leading role in the American economy by helping the nation, individuals and families make informed decisions.
- Data in daily life – The breadth of data available from BLS and the many ways in which people use our data.

The first step for the communications team was to convince staff at all levels of the agency that approved messages were not simply an opportunistic attempt to manipulate public perception (i.e., ‘spin’), but rather an appropriate way for the agency to speak with one voice and communicate our value to stakeholders.

To demonstrate the benefit of corporate messages, communications staff presented examples of core messaging documents from other statistical agencies and provided examples of high-quality media stories that picked up those messages. The team also met with work groups throughout the agency and spoke to the BLS Data Users Advisory Committee to ask “What message themes would be most effective for BLS to use when communicating with external audiences?”

Illustrating the success of key messages with concrete examples drawn from similar and respected organizations was an important factor in turning BLS employees from skepticism to acceptance. Another factor was educating staff that ‘spin’ is answering a question with *only* a (potentially misleading) key message, while effective communications is answering a question with facts *and* incorporating a supporting key message into that conversation.

Responding to customer inquiries is widely distributed in BLS. Though common points of entry (central help desks) are advertised as the best way to contact us, telephone calls or e-mails requiring substantive subject matter knowledge are routinely forwarded to program office experts. Thus a significant percent of BLS employees spend at least some of their time interacting with data users. The communications team decided to launch the messaging initiative by training two offices and engaging them in messaging for a 6-month time period, assessing the results, and then making any indicated improvements to the messaging platform before enrolling the entire staff.

### **Message Development**

With the goal of obtaining input and buy-in from a broad cross-section of BLS offices, the communications team enlisted the BLS Customer Relations Board (CRB) in the effort to craft the new messages. The CRB is a group of senior employees from across the Bureau tasked with making BLS-wide decisions on items such as data dissemination, customer service, and marketing and outreach. It includes agency communications specialists.

An initial draft of the core messages, based on the broad themes discussed in the communications plan, was distributed to the CRB. This first draft was one page long and included both key messages and supporting proof points.

**1. BLS HAS STATISTICS YOU CAN TRUST TO MAKE INFORMED DECISIONS.**

- BLS operates surveys and programs that measure employment and unemployment, compensation, worker safety, productivity, price trends, consumer spending patterns, and Americans’ use of time.
- BLS is the go-to agency for people, from workers to policymakers, trying to make decisions based on today’s ever-changing economy.
- BLS data are a key part of the decision-making landscape for American’s workers, jobseekers, students, employers, investors, and policymakers.
- BLS data are accurate, objective, relevant, timely, and accessible (AORTA). At BLS, our mission is for all our data to meet this AORTA criteria. These are our building blocks for quality, trustworthy data.

The communications team went through multiple rounds of edits with the CRB. The Board’s changes added detailed explanations and careful caveats on data accuracy and suitability for different purposes. Through the process, the messages got longer rather than shorter. The communications team realized it had to take a new approach. A smaller group of three communications-oriented CRB members took a comprehensive look at all of the comments and began whittling down the document. What had grown to eight pages gradually shrank back down to the desired one page. The smaller trio concentrated on short, memorable phrasing and actionable takeaways. By taking a step back and concentrating on fundamentals (who the target audiences were, what we wanted them to know, and what we wanted them to do), the team was able to distill the essentials of an appropriate set of messages for BLS.

**BLS IS THE AGENCY FOR PEOPLE WHO MUST MAKE WISE DECISIONS.**

General  
Public/New  
Data Users

- BLS data are accurate, objective, relevant, timely, and accessible.
- From your very first job to retirement and everything in between, BLS has a stat for that!
- Want to learn more? Follow us on Twitter @BLS\_gov.

The initiative went from long sentences with little thought for target audience groups to short, succinct phrasing aimed at particular stakeholders and including specific desired actions. Our final target audiences for the messaging were:

- Journalists/skeptics;
- Respondents/policymakers;
- Students/teachers/jobseekers;
- General public/new data users.

Though some of these grouping may appear counter-intuitive (after all, what do respondents and policy-makers have in common?), the communications team concluded that it was not the similarity of the

groups that mattered, but rather which messages which would resonate with which groups even though their ostensible subject-matter interests might differ.

After the full CRB reached agreement on the new text, the team took the document to BLS graphic designers for the right look and feel. Note that the final “All Employee Key Messages” document was – and still is – intended for internal use rather than to be distributed to the public. The purpose of the graphic design was to excite and encourage BLS staff through an appealing and easy-to-use format (see attachment.)



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- *Want to learn more?* Follow us on **Twitter** @BLS\_gov.

### Message Training and Implementation

This is when the next phase kicked in. The communications team selected two offices with high rates of direct interaction with data users to receive messaging training and use the messages for six months before providing feedback.

The team set out to convince employees that using messaging would not only make their job of talking to external customers easier, but it would also allow the Bureau to speak with one voice.

First, the team had to describe what a message was. The 3-hour long messaging training consisted of a 40-slide deck that explained what messaging is, what makes a message effective, and how to successfully use messaging. The trainer focused on the “money answer” as an easy way to remember how to incorporate messages into employees’ answers. The “money answer” is **ATM** (or ‘Your response = **A**nswer + **T**ransition + **M**essage.’)

## Example

- *ATM with a bridge*
- Question: Does BLS “cook the books”?
- Response = Answer + Transition + Message
- So...
- Response = No, and let me emphasize that BLS is strictly nonpartisan and apolitical.

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Other messaging options that were suggested as appropriate responses to this question were:

- BLS provides the facts, and only the facts, to the American public about the U.S. labor market and economy.
- BLS employees, 2,500 across the country, are a highly-trained and professional group of career economists and statisticians who are only concerned with producing accurate, objective and reliable data.
- We are a professional statistical bureau driven by one overarching goal – accurate data.
- We must be nonpartisan because the data BLS produces is so vital. It is critical that BLS data – truly the basis for economic decision-making – are understood to be credible and accurate.

After delving into how to use the messages, trainees were able to role play with real-life questions and answers that incorporated the key messages. After the training, employees filled out an evaluation form and their feedback was used to improve subsequent training sessions.

As an example of the traditional culture, one comment on the evaluation form said, “Seems gimmicky. It's sad to ‘sell’ BLS data like it’s dandruff shampoo or some time-share scheme.” Such comments were few and far between, however, and thankfully many more echoed another employee’s feedback: “Initially, I had misgivings about messaging, but the training really helped me understand how valuable these messages are.”

Messaging trainees were encouraged to continue to role play scenarios with colleagues to gain more familiarity and ease with using the messaging. Once people were comfortable with the messaging and the “money answer,” they began using the messaging during their daily interactions with customers.

After 6 months, we began our evaluation process.

## **Message Evaluation and Findings**

Specialists in the BLS Office of Survey Methods Research developed and administered the evaluation through a brief survey of pilot participants. Some of the most important findings from the evaluation included:

- 79 percent of respondents said that the classroom training prepared them either well or very well to use the “All Employee Key Messages” document. For the future, 29 percent suggested keeping the classroom training while 29 percent suggested a combination of classroom, online, and self-study. 8 percent said no training was necessary.
- The key messages were used the most when communicating with three customer groups: journalists (by 81 percent of respondents), general public (by 75 percent of respondents) and students/teachers/jobseekers (by 50 percent of respondents).
- 67 percent of respondents said that the messages were a worthwhile tool.
- 39 percent said the messages should be refined further before being used more broadly.
- 22 percent said the messages should be used as they were.

The 6-month testing period and subsequent evaluation gave the communications team data to bolster their argument that the messages needed to be concise, and also gave the team experience-based feedback for how to make concrete improvements. After the evaluation, two of the four main messages were condensed further and many of the supporting proof points were also refined. The final core messaging document was rolled out BLS-wide in late 2017.

## **Moving Forward**

Key messages are the backbone of communication narratives. With a few well-chosen words, statistical organizations need to articulate what we do, what we stand for, what makes us different, and what value we bring to our stakeholders. We need to tailor specific messages for different audiences. And, finally, we need to integrate messaging into our overall communications strategy.

Making an effective pitch for data products, however, is not the same as selling toothpaste or promoting a political platform. This paper has drawn on the experience of the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics to address how statistical organizations can develop succinct and compelling corporate key messages, train staff how and when to use these messages, evaluate the effectiveness of the process, and use the results to inform ongoing improvements.

BLS has now validated and used our message architecture to create a consistent experience for key user audiences, such as the media, policy makers and the public, to further our overall communications objectives. We expect this to be an ongoing process. Messaging will need to be re-evaluated and revised as time goes on. We believe we have a model that will work for us in the future, as it has in the recent past.

**Attachment**

[FOR INTERNAL USE]

## All Employee Key Messages

*Good Data → Smart Decisions*

A U D I E N C E

M E S S A G E



### **BLS produces gold-standard data.**

- Our data are reliable and our methods are transparent.
- BLS uses innovative methods to measure the ever-changing economy.
- *Want to learn more?* Follow us on **Twitter** [@BLS\\_gov](https://twitter.com/BLS_gov).



### **BLS data affect lives.**

- BLS data on workplace safety, pay, hours and benefits provide essential information for and about America's workers.
- BLS data are used regularly to allocate hundreds of billions of dollars:
  - Social Security benefits
  - Investment in job training
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