

2. Why tell a story?

A statistical agency should want to tell a story about its data for at least two reasons. First, the mandate of most agencies is to inform the general public about the population, society, economy and culture of the nation. This information will guide citizens in doing their jobs, raising their families, making purchases and in making many other decisions.

Secondly, an agency should want to demonstrate the relevance of its data to government and the public. In such a way, it can anticipate greater public support for its programs, as well as improved respondent relations and greater visibility of its products.

Most agencies rely mainly on two means of communicating information on the economic and social conditions of a country and its citizens: the Internet and the media.

The Internet has become an important tool for making access easier to the agency's information. More and more members of the public access an agency's data directly on its website. Still, most citizens get their statistical information from the media, and, in fact, the media remain the primary channel of communication between statistical offices and the general public.

An effective way for a statistical office to communicate through both means is to tell a statistical story that is written as clearly, concisely and simply as possible. The goal for the Internet is to better inform the public through direct access. When writing for the media, the aim is to obtain positive, accurate and informative coverage.

Statistics can tell people something about the world they live in. But not everyone is adept at understanding statistics by themselves. Consequently, statistical stories can, and must, provide a helping hand.

Last, but certainly not least, the availability of statistics in the first place depends on the willing cooperation of survey respondents. Statistical agencies cannot just rely on their legal authority to ensure a suitable response rate.

The availability of statistics also depends on the extent to which survey respondents understand that data serve an important purpose by providing a mirror on the world in which we live. The more a statistical agency can show the relevance of its data, the more respondents will be encouraged to provide the data.