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Can a public relations firm help a statistical agency?

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Abstract

Both the U. S. Census Bureau and Israel's Central Bureau of Statistics have grappled with the issue of outsourcing some of the public relations activities of their agencies. In mid-1999, the U.S. Census Bureau entered into a contract with a public relations firm to help with consistent messaging for Census 2000. This was the first time the Census Bureau had used a public relations firm for a decennial census. Israel's Central Bureau of Statistics has taken a more cautionary approach. Using a public relations company can be beneficial to a statistical office. However, when deciding to use private sector resources certain precautions should be taken. This paper will summarize some of the experiences of the U.S. Census Bureau and the Israel Central Bureau of Statistics and provide suggestions for those considering such a move.

A. The U.S. Experience

Background

1. The Constitution of the United States calls for a national census to count all people living in the United States, Puerto Rico, the U.S. Virgin Islands, and the Pacific island areas. It is the largest peacetime mobilization of the country and has two primary purposes:

- a) To reapportion the 435 seats in the House of Representatives amongst the 50 states, and
- b) To distribute more than \$185 billion dollars each year to local governments.

2. Two challenges for Census 2000 were external and internal communications. Despite the importance of the census, the percentage of residents participating in the mailback phase had been declining. In 1970, when self-enumeration was first introduced, the response rate was 78%; in 1990 the response rate was 65%. The budget and plans for Census 2000 anticipated a 61% response rate. Motivated by a desire to conduct the most accurate count possible and to reverse the trend of declining mailback

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response rates, the Census Bureau set out to conduct a comprehensive promotional and educational campaign to increase public awareness of and participation in Census 2000.

3. The internal communications challenge stemmed from trying to make sure that the more than 500,000 temporary workers hired to work on the census in the 12 Regional Census Centers and 520 Local Census Offices were consistent in their messaging.²

4. To help address these challenges, the Census Bureau contracted with a public relations firm for the first time for a decennial census. (The Economic Directorate used a public relations firm for the 1997 Economic Census.) The firm was a subsidiary of the advertising agency responsible for our first-ever paid advertising campaign. The public relations firm was enlisted to augment current census activities and provide additional outreach capabilities through a unifying strategy. The unifying strategy was intended to be both a strategic and management-driven force leading overall Census 2000 communications efforts. It provided a foundation of messaging support, issues/crisis management and strategic planning in the way of media outreach. By monitoring the messaging and coordinating agency and census activities through one central clearinghouse, the Census Bureau expected that targeted projects would remain consistent with the broader goals of the Census 2000 campaign and that all messaging would be consistent with the core messaging of Census 2000.

Scope of work

5. Unifying Strategy encompassed all elements of promotional and educational outreach: messaging, issues management, crisis communications, media relations, the census road tour, a grassroots outreach campaign (*How America Knows What America Needs*), and a promotional agreement with Major League Baseball. Following are some of the tasks performed by the contractor:

- a) Planned and coordinated special events involving high-level Commerce Department, Congressional, White House and Census Bureau officials. Examples were the launch of the advertising campaign; launch of the *How America Knows What America Needs* campaign; and a “heroes” media event (featuring the Fairfax County, Virginia, Fire and Rescue Team – an example of one of the many benefits of a census).
- b) Helped the Census Bureau’s Public Information Office develop a communications guide on key subjects relating to Census 2000. The guide was for internal use in handling public or media inquiries and preparing speeches and presentations. The contractor also was responsible for reproducing the guide for distribution to Headquarters and regional staff.
- c) Revised the crisis communications manual for the regions and developed one for headquarters. Conducted crisis communications training with headquarters principals and refresher training for regional directors.
- d) Produced and placed radio public service announcements (PSAs) and radio actualities featuring Major League Baseball stars Barry Bonds and Ivan Rodriguez.
- e) Coordinated the Census 2000 Road Tour that, using 12 colorfully wrapped vehicles traveling to key markets in each region, provided additional and complementary support to existing regional/local census initiatives. For approximately two months, the Road Tour helped educate the public about the importance and benefits of participating in Census 2000. It helped raise awareness of the census questionnaire, reinforced advertising, disseminated educational and promotional messages and “put a face on the census,” creating effective awareness with the public and media. The contractor was

² To conduct Census 2000, the Census Bureau established 12 Regional Census Centers (RCCs) in each of the cities where our Regional Offices are located. The RCCs oversaw operations at 520 Local Census Offices with a temporary staff of over 500,000. Approximately 600 Partnership Specialists (including 60 Media Specialists) worked from the RCCs or LCOs to get the census message out to the media, local organizations and governmental entities.

responsible for all logistics and route planning; design and wrapping of the vehicles; staffing the vehicles; production of exhibits and videos; news releases and media pitches; tracking the vans; and daily reports on activities.

f) Coordinated the *How America Knows What America Needs* campaign that was designed to increase participation in the census by involving 39,000 highest elected officials at the state, local and tribal government levels. The campaign had three components ‘90 plus 5, *Because You Count*, and *Quality Counts*. The contractor:

- Prepared communications (print and electronic) for the 39,000 state, local and tribal governments. This included an advance letter notifying government officials about the program, a letter of invitation to participate and periodic updates.
- Developed and distributed turnkey kits of materials that elected officials could use to encourage their residents to participate in each phase of the census. The materials were available on the Internet, by CD-ROM and hard copy.
- Established and maintained a special *How America Knows What America Needs* Internet site that included turnkey kit materials, an updated list of participants and other information of interest to government entities.
- Set-up a toll-free number that could be used to sign up to participate in the campaign and request materials;
- Distributed turnkey kits in the requested format; updated materials as appropriate; and provided support to the national advisor and nine national governmental organizations partnering with the Census Bureau on the campaign.

g) Provided logistical support for regular operational news briefings with the Census Bureau’s director;

h) Pitched media for various significant census events; evaluated media coverage and, if negative, assisted in getting out a different viewpoint. For example, worked to have a popular afternoon soap opera with a script damaging to Census 2000 issue a statement of support for the census. The statement also clarified that the series of events portrayed on the television show could not happen in real life due to the census’s confidentiality statute.

i) Produced video news feeds (VNFs) and video news releases (VNRs) to support newsworthy census happenings when the Public Information Office’s video staff had too many other projects to provide support.

B. The Israeli experience

Background

6. The decision to outsource technical activities, such as translation services and printing is rather recent for the Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS). Outsourcing was considered a bit risky and a revolutionary step within the CBS. Of particular concern was the fact that moving work to the private sector would involve closing down a department and having to dismiss a number of staff. Finally, the decision (although painful for a few) was made after considering costs and benefits. Management took advantage of the move to new premises -- an extremely significant change for the entire staff of 500 people to reorganize several departments, and included this change. Now, after eight months of printing publications outside of the office, the CBS is at a point of evaluating this experience. Preliminary indications are that the CBS generally has benefited from the decision to outsource—at least financially.

7. This positive experience with outsourcing should help CBS to introduce such a change in different areas in the future:

- Marketing and sales of statistical products and services:
The Information Center at the CBS was established just three years ago. It was created to respond to the sizeable increase in requests for statistical information from the public. CBS realized then that it was the right time for a change in its orientation towards the user. Meaning not only a change in approach but also a change in the products. The Center's objective is to tailor products and services to the needs of different users and audiences. CBS realizes that a thorough and well-organized data dissemination plan would lead to more correct and sophisticated uses of its data. However, while using a contractor for these purposes is probably out of the question at the moment, upper management recently consented to engage the use of consultants for special tasks or projects in this area.

- Press releases
CBS releases a communiqué almost daily that outlines changes that occurred within a defined time period regarding a particular subject. This press release often contains tables and diagrams in addition to text. In general, there are a great number of figures mentioned in the text that overshadow the essence of the statistical news. This happens because the subject matter experts often go into too much detail in the press releases turning it into a boring document. Although the release precedes a more detailed publication, the subject matter experts are unwilling to skip some of the more trivial details and focus on the most interesting facts. Even with editing, it is less stimulating and often overlooked by journalists for stories.

The staff at the Information Center (charged with all contacts with the public including media relations) is aware of the advantages and disadvantages of having press releases professionally edited and designed. As 'house experts' staff will recommend to management that a team of communications experts, journalists and publicists conduct a series of seminars or workshops for all subject matter experts. The seminars/workshops would provide hands-on experience with writing more effective and interesting press releases and identifying newsworthy topics. This is a kind of compromise on outsourcing, bringing inside the organization a team of experts to consult with and provide advice on and practical tips for improving the most popular product — the press release. Once the subject matter experts are taught the principles of good writing and realize the benefit gained from it, Center staff believe the process for producing press releases will be shortened and CBS releases will experience increased coverage by the news media.

- Brochures
For many years CBS has been producing its publications primarily on paper. They were (and some still are) thick and heavy books full of complicated tables and a detailed methodological supplement. A lot of reliable statistics but extremely unfriendly to the user. Statistical figures, which are at the base of every issue and debate should be clear, accessible, unequivocal and timely.

With this in mind, CBS gradually came to the conclusion that it needed a new line of publications with these qualities. This was particularly important with today's competition from the private sector. The new brochures are topical and condensed. To meet the goal of transmitting information in an interesting way, their composition typically includes diagrams or charts, simple tables, clear text and relevant photographs. Each brochure conveys a different story and uses a different, challenging way of presenting the data.

They are distributed free of charge at fairs, exhibits, conferences, etc. They decorate desks, appear on the CBS Internet site and staff get a supply to distribute when invited to demonstrate, present or participate in a formal meeting, seminar or conference. Some of the brochures are translated into English making them useful to non-Hebrew speakers as well.

The brochures are dedicated to a particular subject: "children," "men and women," "Jerusalem," etc. It can be a challenge to get the subject matter experts to gather the information to produce the brochures. However, once they start composing, the subject matter experts get full support, assistance and guidance from a Center staff person who is leader of the project.

The brochures have proven to be excellent promoters of our data series. Some of the brochures are produced in cooperation with other organizations and institutions. Some of the institutions are willing to pay for reprint of particular topics. Since establishing this new line of "light analysis," CBS is flooded by suggestions and requests for brochures covering additional topics. Unlike some brochures produced by statistical agencies in other countries, the CBS brochures do not contain any commercial ads.

These brochures are produced entirely outside of CBS and their production is rather costly. Top professionals in the private sector, who gradually became familiar with CBS requirements, design them. Based on their popularity, however, the expense appears justified both in the short and long run. This kind of product has a great impact on recipients and serves as a teaser, arousing curiosity and a desire for more information.

This is definitely the outcome of clever decision makers who realized that such a task should be carried out only by professional designers even for a higher price than having it done in house.

C. Advantages of Outsourcing

8. Using a public relations firm clearly assisted the Census Bureau in getting a lot of work done in a timely fashion that it did not have staff to do. Due to the volume of media calls coming in, trips by the Director and other media events, staff in the Public Information Office was spread very thin. The public relations firm enabled Census to pass on certain activities to free up staff for other priorities. This was particularly helpful, as bringing on additional staff could have taken almost 6 months due to the lengthy civil service hiring process.

9. For CBS, using design experts resulted in an attractive popular data product that has broadened the data-user audience.

10. The Census Bureau contractor provided an external perspective on messaging and events that was less subjective and perhaps more in tune with the potential views of the Bureau's external publics. Also, the contractor identified Census Bureau statistical jargon and helped develop messaging that the general public could understand. CBS has had a similar experience with its use of contractors and wants to use outsiders to spread this knowledge to others in the agency.

11. The Census Bureau's contractor made efforts to communicate with national media that were more concerted, intense and rapid-response than Census Bureau staff could have managed to execute given the time and procedural constraints.

12. The contractor's knowledge of staging events: getting space, graphics and design, logistics, etc. resulted in Census Bureau events looking more professional and polished. Getting information out to 39,000 recipients and handling their responses, updating the Internet site for *How America Knows What America Needs* and overseeing the road tour were feats that would not have come off as well without their help.

13. The contractor's ability to sub-contract out work allowed quick turn around on the production of collateral materials such as banners, graphics, and novelty items. They also were able to press into service quickly fulfillment houses for mass reproduction and dissemination of materials. Census could get from the contractor items with a 3-day turn around that would take 3 - 4 weeks using normal government contract procedures.

D. Disadvantages of Outsourcing

14. Even though the Census contractor has staff that has worked previously in government, they were unfamiliar with Census Bureau policies, politics, history, terminology and writing styles. This led to frustration at times on the part of both parties in trying to get work done. Because our contract began with a big event in fewer than six weeks (the launch of the paid advertising), we were not able to spend the time to “get them up to speed” that might have helped improve their writing and understanding of how things worked. Our firm sometimes became frustrated when news releases and other media products could not be disseminated in a timely manner because of internal policies and procedures that necessitated a lengthy review period.

15. Making sure that the contractor is in the communications loop also can be problematic and requires special consideration. Census had twice-weekly meetings with our contractor and invited them to attend various other meetings held at the Census Bureau on topics that might be important for them to complete successfully their tasks. At times, Census provided office space to the contractor’s staff to help them keep on top of rapidly evolving work and to be of assistance to us.

16. In preparing for trips by the Census Bureau director and other regional/ local events, the presence of the contractor resulted in another layer of communication, which did not facilitate always the efficient execution of the project and that resulted in some feelings of competition from Bureau staff.

17. As mentioned earlier, the Census contractor was good with pitching national media. However, Census found that with local or regional media, despite their having offices across the country, the contractor’s number of local media contacts often was more limited than expected. In most cases, the regional media specialists proved to be better at working the media at the local level.

18. While the Census Bureau’s contractor proved helpful in reducing our use of statistical jargon, they did not fully understand the statistical aspects of our work and our census operations. That at times hindered their ability to produce accurate messaging. CBS found that using outside writers does require a long learning curve to get the quality document that you can stand behind.

E. Recommendations

- 1. Do a reference check.** If time and the contract process permit, talk with another client, particularly another government client if available, to assess the firm’s ability to produce the type of work you would like and in your agency’s environment.
- 2. Allow for a learning curve.** Try to find a firm familiar with government and statistical work. If this is not possible, plan to spend several weeks introducing them to what you do and how. The time spent up front will prove valuable later. Our contractor spent several weeks at the beginning of the contract meeting and talking with Census 2000 staff from various divisions working to better understand the work and gather background documents to assist in drafting materials.
- 3. Learn the contractor’s capabilities.** Do not expect that the contractor will be expert in every aspect of public relations. Let the contractor do what it does best, but make certain that what the contractor does best is what you need to have done.
- 4. Plan ahead.** If you think you will need to outsource activities to a contractor, get buy-in beforehand as to the necessity of taking this route from those up the chain of command, as well as staff that might interface with them.
- 5. Monitor.** No matter what their credentials, you will need to be in constant contact with the firm to assure things are proceeding as planned or hoped. Depending on the work to be done, this may require a staff person’s full-time attention.

- 6. Be prepared to think outside the box.** As statistical agencies, we often view things in a more staid, conservative fashion. However, getting the word out to the public using today's media calls for creativity and pizzazz. Contracting with a public relations firm can help you see how to bridge both worlds.
- 7. Provide on-going feedback.** As with any employee, let the contractor know what went well and what didn't. Remember you are paying for their services and they want to please their client.
- 8. Plan ahead (definitely worth repeating.)** Know clearly what tasks you want done and articulate these tasks clearly to the contractor. Before the contract is awarded, have informal discussions on various approaches and preferences to help the contractor develop a realistic budget for the work to be done.
- 9. Provide a monetary cushion.** Unless your project is defined very narrowly and very specifically, allow for a monetary cushion for your internal budgeting purposes. Invariably there will be things you wish to change or new ideas that surface as the project evolves. Every modification to the original agreement costs money. Repeated adjustments to the original contract are time-consuming, paperwork intensive and frustrating.
- 10. Try a compromise.** If your management is not comfortable with completely turning over products to outsiders, propose bringing in contractors to help train existing staff to do a better job. Investment in this sort of skill building at the subject matter level and in the public relations office can prove valuable over time.