Key Message Guides for Communicating the Value of Statistics Internally and among External Partners
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Abstract and Paper

While conducting research to develop its multi-year agency communications plan, the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s National Agricultural Statistics Service found it needed to be able to more consistently and clearly convey the value of its surveys and data to different audiences. To address the need, NASS created and launched two versions of a key messaging guide called “Talking About NASS.” The first version helps NASS employees and enumerators communicate more effectively about its mission and the value of its work to unique audiences. The second version is similar but designed to help NASS external partners and stakeholders talk more confidently about the value of NASS data products and surveys.

This presentation will discuss how USDA NASS developed, launched and is beginning to evaluate the guide and related key message products.
Title: Key Message Guides for Communicating the Value of Statistics Internally and among External Partners

Overview
While conducting research to develop its multi-year agency communications plan, the U.S. Department of Agriculture's National Agricultural Statistics Service (USDA NASS) found it needed to more consistently and clearly convey the value of its surveys and data to a variety of audiences. To address the need, NASS created and launched two versions of a key messaging guide called Talking About NASS. The internal version helps NASS employees and enumerators communicate more effectively about the agency’s mission and the value of its work to particular audiences. The external version is similar but designed to help NASS partners and stakeholders talk more confidently to their members and participants about the value of NASS data products and surveys.

Research and results that determined need for key messaging guide
NASS began research to update its agency communications plan to address a variety of challenges, chief among them declining survey response rates and insufficient awareness and understanding among key target audiences of NASS and its mission. Research included reviewing the two previous communications plans (dated 2011 and 2014), implementation schedules, and products; analyzing the
NASS and Census of Agriculture websites; and reviewing a sampling of reports and collateral materials to promote response to surveys.

Following the literature review, the outside communications firm advising NASS conducted three working sessions to solicit input and opinions from various NASS team members, including participants from all parts of the agency. During the first two sessions, the group discussed where NASS stands today in relation to where it stood prior to the 2011 and 2014 communication plans; discussed census communications efforts and support needs; reviewed plans for the NASS website; explored NASS brand awareness; and captured details and anecdotal information about target audiences. The third session focused on brand strategy. A facilitated discussion with a broader NASS team dove deeper into the challenges, audiences, attitudes, benefits, attributes, perceptions, and branding structures associated with the NASS and the USDA identities. An additional exercise captured the assumptions NASS staff and partners sometimes make about the attitudes and attributes of various target audience segments, including farmers and ranchers, those linked to corporate entities, large family owned and operated farms, and smaller niche farms.

In a parallel exercise, the research team also spoke with media outlet representatives and consulted Mediamark Research and Intelligence data and Google Analytics to gather additional insights. Media representatives included individuals working for specific agriculture-based publications as well as individuals from media outlets, channels and publications with a broader view of the industry. The team also interviewed a variety of stakeholders, including state agriculture representatives, association leaders, and former enumerators.

**Development of key messages**

The research results highlighted the need for clear, consistent brand identity and messaging documents to help NASS staff and its partners and allies convey the value of NASS and our data products and services. This would be accomplished using an Endorser Brand Model and an Ingredient Brand strategy. An Endorser Brand Model reinforces the strength of common attributes of USDA and NASS. NASS is part of USDA. We are service-oriented; people-oriented; agriculture focused and dedicated; an agency with a long history of service to the farm industry; experts with deep knowledge and access to data; stable government entities; and an official (credible) voice for the agriculture industry.

The Ingredient Brand Strategy demonstrates that NASS data are “ingredients” that add value and a competitive edge for a host of products, services, decisions, and outcomes. For example: farmers use NASS data to make informed business decisions; legislators use the data to develop policy; journalists use the data to tell stories; students use the data for research; insurance adjusters use the data for policies and claims; and commodity traders use the data to make market moves.

Building on the NASS mission to provide timely, accurate and useful statistics to U.S. agriculture and on the Core Values of policy relevance, objectivity, credibility, trust and commitment, a core brand message was developed. The brand message communicates big concepts in simple terms. It should be aspirational and evocative. It is the foundation for addressing the brand strategy, audiences, and goals.

The USDA NASS core brand message is clear. . . **As the statistical agency for USDA, NASS provides useful agricultural data to help you work smarter.**
Core Brand Message Communications

Once the research was conducted and the key messages were developed, they needed to be communicated across the agency and to external allies and partners in clear and practical ways. The Talking About NASS key message guide is the cornerstone from which other products are developed and launched such as the “All about NASS” customizable PowerPoint presentation, exhibit graphics, print and web advertisements to encourage survey response, and video testimonials (under development). The focus of this discussion is the Talking About NASS guide.

The guide was intended initially as a practical way to help NASS staff and enumerators understand how to apply and communicate a rock-solid image of NASS in their everyday interactions with various audiences. Given the complexities and nuances of NASS messaging, it intentionally presents content nuggets – or messaging building blocks – for a variety of scenarios, audiences and uses. Using the guide as a hands-on tool, staff and enumerators can identify different ways NASS data help a particular audience work smarter. Not unlike the elevator pitch, a guide with content nuggets and examples is a form of job aid to support intentional branding efforts. Similar to graphic templates, the guide helps NASS staff be consistent in describing the agency’s work and in explaining and promoting its value.

The guide includes background information on the updated NASS brand strategy and a library of key statements and talking points for both internal and external communications. Staff can refer to this guide before speaking with local producers, drafting a technical report, or giving a presentation to community leaders. Though it is not a media training guide, it can also help describe NASS and its value in conversations with the news media. The content is designed to be flexible, to be mixed and matched, and to help tell the NASS story.

The guide provides direction on how to use each section:

- “Understanding the Revamped NASS Brand Identity” explains the updated brand strategy as well as our target audiences, communications objectives, and core messaging.
- “Describing the Value of NASS Data to its Users in 30 Seconds” provides points to quickly and easily illustrate – as in an elevator pitch – the value of NASS data to various target audiences.
- “Talking to Data Providers” provides talking points to use with producers to help them understand not only what NASS does, but why its work matters to them.
- “Sharing the Facts About NASS” has clear and direct fact-based statements about what we do and how our data are used. You’ll find messages organized in tables by specific questions and topics. It is set up similarly to a work book with examples and blank areas to develop one’s own localized or personal examples.
- Sources for additional research on how audiences use the data are at the end of the document.

The NASS Public Affairs Office launched the guide in July 2018 as an internal job aid and foundation for the new brand strategy. The four-month launch began with a video message from the agency head, Administrator Hubert Hamer, embedded in an e-mail introducing the guide. A series of bright, positive, branded e-mails followed over a number of weeks to explain the guide’s intent, how to use it, where to find it, and that all staff and enumerators would receive a print copy. Over the latter part of the rollout, e-mails began to include testimonials in which staff talked about how they used the guide. It is now given to every new employee and enumerator, and is available on the agency intranet.
Shortly after the launch and positive feedback, it became obvious that the guide could be adapted easily for use by external stakeholders, partners, and allies. By September – timed to coincide with an important national meeting with a group of close allies – the external guide was adapted and printed. It is virtually the same as the employee version, minus the internal information on brand identity. The intent of creating the external version was two-fold: to educate stakeholders about the uses and value of NASS data and services and to provide them, as influencers, with the information and tools to speak confidently to others about NASS. NASS staff in state field offices either mail the guide with a personal cover letter or present it in person. It is also available on the NASS website at www.nass.usda.gov/About_NASS/pdf/Talking-About-NASS-Guide.pdf.

After nearly a year since the launch of the guide, 4,070 of the internal version and 6,150 of the external version have been printed and distributed, and requests for copies continue. Now, the Public Affairs Office is encouraging continued use of the guide, collecting testimonials both about the guide and the use of NASS data, and evaluating the effectiveness of the guide and related products and activities. During the summer of 2019, a fun collegial contest approach to promote adoption of the guide and use of NASS brand messaging by NASS headquarters and field office staff and enumerators will begin. The “Well Said!” game will be conducted by a weekly e-mail with a Survey Monkey link asking two questions about information in the guide. The office with the most participation during the multi-week game will win a small prize. The objectives are to promote alignment and consistency of brand messaging; increase awareness and usage of the guide; reinforce messaging so that it become less rote and more second-nature; demonstrate creative use of the guide and its content; tie messaging and census promotion to the support of other surveys; provide practical and useful advice; share fundamental marketing concepts and tips; promote collection of additional example about how people are using NASS data to work smarter; and spark some fun competition.

**Evaluation**
The ultimate objective is for 100 percent of NASS staff and enumerators to be aware of and have comprehensive and accurate recall of NASS messaging and materials. Toward that end, the Public Affairs Office will conduct an initial evaluation in the summer of 2019 to measure the awareness, adoption rates, and usage of NASS key messaging and communications tools by NASS staff and enumerators and to identify areas for improvements and additional promotions. The purpose is not to evaluate job performance but rather solely to support the dissemination of key messaging, amplification, and understanding of the NASS brand. The evaluation will focus on awareness of the Talking About NASS guide, the NASS core brand message from the guide, the About NASS PowerPoint tool, the effort to gather testimonials on data use and the adoption of them as a communication tool, and the “Well Said!” game.

**Summary**
Research to update the NASS Communications Plan identified the sometimes inadequate ability of NASS staff and enumerators to consistently, effectively and confidently convey the importance of NASS work and the value of the results to various audiences. This showed a need for a clear brand identity and an easy, hands-on tool for NASS staff and enumerators to understand and convey it. The Talking About NASS key message guide is proving to be a popular and useful tool among staff. Recognition that a slightly altered guide could be effective for an additional audience has been a boon for public relations and for further spreading and solidifying the core brand message and understanding about the value of NASS products and services. A growing number of stakeholders and allies now have a tool to better understand NASS and to speak confidently about it with others. Upcoming continued promotion and first-time evaluation will provide insights for the future of the guide.