

Outreach to Reporters and Journalists: What Do They Need?

Kenneth C. Meyer

Census Advisory Committee of Professional Associations
American Marketing Association

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Abstract

During the past several years, more and more media representatives have begun citing Census Bureau data in their broadcasts and articles. The American Community Survey has greatly increased this demand because it provides the most current detailed demographic information for target audiences. In addition, the Internet makes it possible for reporters to search and prepare stories 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

To assist journalists in using our data, the Public Information Office prepares news releases and disseminates them through news wire, e-mail, and fax databases. The Public Information Office also has an extensive program to reach out to reporters and editors through media conference information booths and workshops, 'Brown Bag' working lunches, individual reporter orientations, and personal visits to the newsrooms of media organizations.

The challenge for the Public Information Office is to determine from the vast array of media—print and broadcast; general and minority media outlets; large, medium and small markets—what types of statistical information reporters need, and what are the most cost effective ways to reach them with information and training.

Questions

We currently assess the data needs of the media by reaching out to groups of reporters and editors through conference workshops and information booths, working lunches, orientations, and personal visits to media newsrooms.

- Are these the most cost effective ways to reach out to journalists?
- Should we expand on these activities? How?
- Is there an optimum mix of these activities?
- Do we need a survey vehicle to help determine the information needs of the media?

<p>This paper is released to inform interested parties of ongoing research, and to encourage discussion of work in progress. The views expressed are those of the author and not necessarily those of the U.S. Census Bureau.</p>

- Is our segmentation of media into print and broadcast, by size of market (large, medium and small), and audience focus (general and minority) reasonable?
- Have we missed any important audience dimensions?
- How can we improve our segmentation paradigm?
- What types of training do journalists need to use the Census website tools to meet their information needs?

OVERVIEW

During the past several years, more and more journalists have begun citing Census Bureau data in their broadcasts and articles. The American Community Survey has greatly increased this demand because this survey provides the most current detailed demographic information for target audiences. In addition, the Internet makes it possible for the media to search and prepare stories 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

To assist journalists in using our data, the Public Information Office prepares news releases and disseminates them through news wire, e-mail, and fax databases. The Public Information Office also has an extensive program to reach out to reporters and editors through media conference information booths and workshops, ‘Brown Bag’ working lunches, individual orientations for beat reporters, and personal visits to the newsrooms of media organizations.

In general, the challenge for the Public Information Office is to determine from a large and diverse media—print and broadcast; general and minority media outlets; large, medium and small markets—what types of statistical information reporters need, and what are the most cost effective ways to reach out to them with information and training.

- What types of statistical information do reporters most often seek?
- What formats are preferred for data delivery?
- Do the Census website tools meet their information needs?
- What types of training do they prefer?
- What are the most cost effective ways to reach out to the media?

BACKGROUND

To assist journalists in using our data, the Census Bureau prepares news releases, and disseminates them to the media through news wire and e-mail databases, and the Newsroom section of the Census homepage at www.census.gov.

Approximately two months prior to the estimated completion of a statistical product destined for public release, the subject matter division notifies the Public Information

Office. A public affairs specialist is assigned to work with the product author(s) to identify key elements of the release: major findings; subjects and geographic areas covered; related data; etc. If the data set is voluminous or very detailed, the tables most likely to be the source of media interest, questions and answers are identified.

To effectively reach out to the media, it is important to have key highlights in the news release, with detailed information readily available through live Internet links. These links connect to a variety of supporting material, including complete data tables, metadata, graphs, maps, pod casts, B-roll footage, stock photographs, and even contact names of available stakeholder experts.

Based on our experience with media and news cycles, and in consultation with the Census subject matter specialists, the Public Information Office sets a final release date and determines whether the release will be available on embargo¹. The news release is then channeled through the Communications Directorate, appropriate Census Bureau subject matter and statistical specialists, and the Department of Commerce, with final clearance by the Deputy Director of the Census Bureau.

Before a release becomes public, the Public Information Office designates a point person responsible for media calls, determines key subject matter experts, and identifies spokespersons for potential media interviews. The report author(s) and other knowledgeable subject matter experts brief Public Information Office staff. Just-in-time media training is provided to designated spokespersons and selected experts. Interview requests are cleared through appropriate Census Bureau and Department of Commerce senior management. Spokespersons are instructed to limit their comments to the actual numbers in the census or survey. They are permitted to point out significant statistics, such as large increases and decreases and percentage changes from one period to the next, but are cautioned not to discuss reasons for the changes. Above all, spokespersons are cautioned to not speculate—our business is information, not opinion. In dealing with smaller media outlets, spokespersons and subject matter experts are advised to be alert for and to promote local news angles.

All contacts with news media are reported to the Public Information Office, and a summary report is sent to Census and Commerce principles at the end of each day.

As noted, the Public Information Office reaches out to reporters and editors through a variety of venues, including media conferences, working lunches, orientations, and personal visits to newsrooms. A recently formed PIO Strategic Media Outreach team is responsible for reaching out to media with a training program that focuses on how to use Census Bureau data to create interesting and newsworthy stories.

¹ The Census Bureau maintains an embargo area on its Internet site for the posting of news releases and data sets prior to public release. Because of the size and complexity of some of our data sets, the Public Information Office has found that providing members of the media early access to the data allows them adequate time to write stories that more accurately reflect the underlying data.

ISSUES FOR DISCUSSION

- a) Minority media are growing rapidly, and often focus on hard to enumerate communities. News releases and talking points are not always translated into Spanish, or are translated after the information is already on the Internet in English. Having Census data products in Spanish simultaneously with English will give the Spanish media access to the information and result in improved coverage.
- b) Subject matter experts need media training to effectively deal with media questions. Given finite resources, many subject matter experts have never had media training. Others, who deal with the media infrequently, need refresher training.
- c) With the huge growth of Spanish media over the past few years, there is an increasing need for subject matter experts to conduct media interviews and respond to media questions in Spanish. In a period when experienced and knowledgeable staff continue to retire, this need gets more critical.
- d) Small, local and minority media generally lack the budget, time or other resources needed to develop beat reporters— experts in reporting about specific subject matter areas. As these non-beat reporters often work in the numerous, growing and sometimes fragile minority media markets that nonetheless successfully penetrate local communities, it is imperative that we train them to understand census data so they can become familiar with our products. To improve our strategic outreach initiative, we are working with the Marketing Services Office for help with the training and are beginning to experiment with electronic training modes.

SUMMARY

The broad challenge for the Public Information Office is two-fold. First we must better determine the information needs of the complex world of print and broadcast journalists working in general and minority media outlets serving large, medium and small markets. The second is to better determine how to use our limited resources to address these needs.

We are seeking informed suggestions about these issues from the American Marketing Association advisory committee, and look forward to a productive exchange of ideas.