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A STRATEGIC APPROACH TO COMMUNICATION WITH DATA USERS

1 Communication and more desirably engagement by statistical offices with users has improved significantly over the years in many countries. Official statistics are being used more extensively to inform public policy, especially economic policy, and for administrative purposes such as distribution of funds for government programs. They are also being used more extensively for research and analysis purposes, not just in academic and research institutions but also in government agencies, NGOs and the private sector. There is also much greater community interest in statistics which has gone hand in hand with increased media reporting.

2 The focus of this paper is on engagement, not just communication which is basically a one-way process. Effective engagement of users in various aspects of operation of a statistics office is a critical success factor for the agency to be seen as being relevant and effective in its service provision. Users can provide important input into the development of work programs and decisions on priorities; the design of collections, standards and outputs; and methods of access to statistics. Users can also provide feedback on the effectiveness of services provided. Note that users are interested in a wide range of quality attributes beyond accuracy and reliability (eg relevance, accessibility, coherence and timeliness) as is reflected in many quality management models adopted by NSOs.

3 A challenge for statistical agencies is the wide range of users and of uses made of official statistics. To obtain the desired input from users, an NSO needs to recognise the different types of users and engage with them appropriately.

Engagement with stakeholders is also important, and similar principles for engagement with them apply.

4 A little warning at this stage. From a user perspective, engagement with them by a statistics office can be haphazard, uncoordinated and duplicated. This may reflect enthusiasm on the part of staff of the NSO keen to consult users about their specific collection or outputs. This is not a bad thing in itself and certainly better than no communication, but it can be annoying for users particularly those not focused on particular collections and more on cross cutting outputs. Also, statistical issues are often of lesser priority to users (particularly those in busy government policy departments) than other issues. This must be taken into account by and NSO when developing plans for engagement.

5 Primarily as a result of changes to funding arrangements and a general introduction of users pays within government, many statistical agencies such as those in Australia, New Zealand, Canada, and in Europe were required to charge for some services and to meet revenue targets in lieu of full funding. This provided a necessity for the agencies to engage more effectively with users so that the right products and services were being provided in the ways required by users. There are many lessons to be learnt from the experiences of these countries. This paper outlines how the Australian Bureau of Statistics improved its engagement with users and how it has refined its approach over the recent years.

6 The ABS realised at the time of introduction of revenue targets that it did not know enough about the views of users on the services being provided, nor did the ABS have the experience to undertake market research to find out. A

marketing expert was employed and some significant surveys of users were commissioned in the late 1980s. The information collected and the resulting analysis led to the development of a market segmentation approach for engagement with users and the development of strategic marketing plans.

7 Initially four broad user segments were identified and strategies developed for engaging with users in each of the segments and for marketing and service provision. A few years ago these segments were revised based on experience with the initial segments, developments in methods for communicating and providing access to statistics, further extensive market research and analysis and importantly some key changes in the environment in which the ABS operates. These environment changes were a much greater emphasis on a National Statistical Service and a much greater range of free data available on the website.

8 The segments have been refined into the following ones currently in use:-

1. Clients – lifeline clients* and key clients
2. Partners – academics, industry associations,
3. Customers – usually those with transactional dealings
4. Target groups – media, libraries, schools
5. Self-servers

* lifeline clients are those who have a significant influence over support provided to the an NSO, and are mainly major policy departments eg Treasury

9 Various methods of engagement with the different types of users have been developed by the ABS, the main methods being:-

- membership of the Statistics Advisory Council

- participation in Advisory groups (eg CPI revision) and User Groups
- regular high level meetings at the senior executive level
- participation in program evaluations
- Outposting of staff
- Appointment of client managers for personal engagement with nominated key clients
- Joint ventures & strategic alliances
- Market research
- Membership & participation in professional associations
- Special website sections
- Newsletters, information papers

10 In addition, consideration is being given to holding User Conferences along the lines of those held by Statistics New Zealand every five years as required by its statistics legislation.

11 For lifeline clients the ABS engages with them as organizations, not individuals, with regular high level meetings at senior executive and CEO level. Lifeline clients have a direct input into the ABS work program and survey content, are often represented on ABS advisory committees, often have an outposted ABS officer on site, and could be candidates for collaboration with the ABS. This compares with Customers where the ABS engagement is on a transactional basis through service channels tailored to specific niche markets (eg information consultancy, microdata access), with promotional and communication activities centred around newsletters and information papers.

12 Of particular note are some of the target groups, the media and schools. Engagement with these groups is considered by the ABS to be strategically important. The media in its many forms is an intermediary for communicating statistical results to large numbers of users, in particular the public and politicians. The media also helps create an image of an NSO in the minds of

respondents, users, stakeholders and future employees. This can impact on funding support, respondent cooperation and recruitment. And the media, particularly its analysts and reporters, are key users of statistics in their own right. In recognition of its importance, and the risks of poor engagement, the ABS has established a Public Relations Unit to manage its relationship with the media. The main forms of communication with the media are news releases, summaries in publications ready for the press to use, liaison and briefings, promotional events, public awareness campaigns (eg for population census) and lock-ups for release of key economic indicators. There is also a special section on the ABS website for the media.

13 Similar arrangements exist for engagement with schools and libraries, with dedicated work groups responsible for engaging with them, similar communication vehicles but specially targeted, and special products and services provided which are often an adaptation of mainstream products. Special sections also exist on the ABS website for these groups.

14 Segmentation of users to improve engagement is not to be seen as requiring strict application of rules for classifying users, rather it provides a guide to conveniently grouping users for the purpose of developing communication, marketing and dissemination plans so that they are better targeted than simply treating all users the same. Also, segmentation used by one NSO may not be appropriate for direct application by another NSO because of differences in the client base, the stage of development of marketing and dissemination and past performance in servicing users. Nevertheless, the broad groupings used by the ABS are likely to be a good basis for developing segments for other NSOs.

15 The experience of the ABS and of similar statistical offices has shown that there are some critical success factors for effective engagement with users.

These are

- Recognizing the diversity of users and their importance, engagement with users should be done strategically and with a clear purpose in mind
- the culture of the organization and its staff needs to change to be client focused
- there needs to be constant focus by senior management on improving engagement eg through the development and monitoring of strategic plans, setting appropriate objectives for staff
- senior management also need to commit time to show leadership through regular engagement with important users
- the organization needs to be responsive to feedback obtained
- organisational changes can often be needed and investments made in infrastructure to support staff
- staff movements out of a statistics agency can often be an opportunity rather than a loss as they can be well informed users.

16 User engagement works in two directions. NSOs should listen to the needs and interests of their key users, and they should try to respond to these needs, particularly the most important needs. But there is also an obligation on NSOs to promote awareness of plans for statistical development and the outputs of statistical work to stimulate user interest and input. As a consequence NSOs have to ensure they have good communication capabilities. Not all statisticians have expertise in communications, however, so it may be necessary to bring in that expertise.

Impact of technology

17 Developments in information technology over the past couple of decades have provided many new ways for NSOs to communicate with users and improve access to statistical products and services. Without doubt the most profound development has been the internet and the world wide web which virtually all statistical offices have exploited through the maintenance of websites providing access to statistics and information about statistics and services. In doing so there has been a shift away from providing statistics in printed form to electronic forms.

18 Increasing sophistication and user-friendliness of software tools for databases, tabulation, graphical presentation and statistical analysis have led to new products, but more importantly they have facilitated a move to more and more self-help by users. While providing benefits to both NSOs and users, self-help can only be effective if there is sound engagement with users about their requirements. Self-help also requires an NSO to invest in hardware and software and ensure its data management including metadata can support the services provided.

19 Tools like email, podcasts, RSS and twitter are being increasingly used to either disseminate statistics or provide timely alerts to users about the availability of new statistics. These methods of communication however are basically one-way from a statistics office to users. New internet tools commonly referred to as Web 2.0 technologies are being investigated by some NSOs to see if they facilitate two-way communication with users. Opportunities to use such tools in their early days of development are likely, however, to be limited for most NSOs and be confined to engagement with target groups such as schools and libraries building on existing arrangements.

20 Issues NSOs need to keep an eye on when considering using new technology to improve engagement with users and dissemination include the following:-

- Costs and benefits, particularly if the number of users likely to use any new service is small
- Demands on capability from keeping up to date and maintaining additional systems
- Security and confidentiality
- Getting data and metadata management right
- Understanding and applying presentation standards appropriate to the medium used
- Moderating costs if using new technologies seeking input from users
- ensuring face to face engagement continues with important users such as lifeline clients

John Cornish
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