Abstract
This paper focuses on the journey undertaken by the American Community Survey Office (ACSO) as it seeks to establish an ever more vigorous communications enterprise using research and communications performance management practices. Strategic communications is central to the Census Bureau’s mission. The American Community Survey Office (ACSO), a key component of the Census Bureau, generates 11 billion estimates each year that illustrate how this country is changing based on social, demographic, housing, and economic characteristics. These estimates contain information about small geographies and populations vital to a broad range of Americans from businesses to government agencies to academics and more to support entrepreneurship, planning, budgeting and other functions crucial to the well-being of the American public. As steward to highly visible programs, ACSO’s seasoned communicators approach communications there as an expected journey, charting a course based on evolving business goals as well as academic and industry research. In the past year it focused intently on building customer awareness, building and maintaining customer trust, and providing a positive customer experience. As it matures its communications program, ACSO looks to strengthening message content, prioritizing stakeholders, and deepening analysis.
A Not So Unexpected Journey: Communicating for Results
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Introduction
As any government communicator will attest, the challenges of running an effective communications program are many. Despite the importance of the communications function to the mission success of federal agencies, in a budget-constricted environment, communications capacity is often under resourced from the start, and over time one of the first things to be cut. Not so with the U.S. Census Bureau (the Bureau), an organization that engages in substantial customer engagement, and stewards the two most impactful programs in the federal government: the decennial census and the American Community Survey (ACS). This paper focuses on the journey undertaken by the American Community Survey Office (ACSO) as it seeks to establish an ever more vigorous communications enterprise using research and communications performance management practices.

As a responsible steward of federal tax dollars, ACSO is very serious about successfully executing its mission which is: The American Community Survey is trusted and valued by the nation as the source for demographic, social, economic, and housing information on small areas and small populations. Ten years ago, it would have been very difficult to predict that mistrust would threaten a vital American institution like the ACS, which provides data to inform over $400 billion in government spending each year. We could not have known that multiple data breaches across several businesses and federal government agencies would erode public trust, nor could we have foreseen that social media would develop such a wide variety of platforms and compete heavily with print and broadcast media. While it is encouraging to know that social media extends a voice to many who previously went unheard, unlike their print and broadcast media predecessors, social media posts are not reviewed for veracity prior to publication. As a result, it can be a forum for people to express opinions and pose issues as “facts” to vast audiences who may accept them without question while sharing them with their own networks of followers. It is within the context of these emergent issues and budget constraints that ACSO began a journey to ensure alignment of communications investments with impact.

In fiscal years (FY) 2013 and 2014, ACSO worked with the MITRE Corporation to develop and implement a Performance Management Framework, which decomposes the mission into strategic objectives and a comprehensive set of performance measures that can guide ACSO decisions about program execution in a dynamic environment. The framework makes the attributes of mission success explicit, therein providing a view of mission performance over time and enabling the program to define short-term priorities given a changing environment with evolving demands. Communications work is very much a vital part of the ACS program, which must engage customers (data users, respondents, and potential respondents) and stakeholders (Congress and advisory groups) on many aspects of the ACS itself.
The First Steps in the Journey- An ACS Communications History Overview

The ACS is an important part of the decennial census, annually serving as a test bed for wording of questions and data quality, and providing interim data to the American public. In 2005, the Bureau introduced the ACS to replace the “long form”, which it had distributed in tandem with the decennial census to a select sample of households. Because the Census Bureau distributes the ACS to a sample of 3.5 million households each year, it is able to provide the American public with over 11 billion estimates each year that illustrate how this country is changing based on social, demographic, housing, and economic characteristics, or 110 billion between the decennial censuses. The increased frequency and sample size means that these estimates contain critical information about small geographies and small populations which play a pivotal role in ensuring that those small geographies and populations are not left out of planning, budgeting, innovating, and other key business and government functions that rely on Census Bureau data. The “long form” was not administered frequently enough to accomplish these critical tasks that make noticeable impacts on small geographies and populations. For example, Walgreens in Chicago learned through review of ACS data that it had a store in a neighborhood where a high proportion of people speak Polish. With this knowledge, it placed a Polish-speaking pharmacist in the store. Presumably this improved customer service and built a loyal customer base that helps to ensure revenue stability at that Walgreens location. Not to mention, it cut the risk of customers experiencing prescription-related medical problems due to a communications problems with the pharmacist. In this case, the Polish-speaking community is one small population that benefitted from Walgreens’ use of ACS data, and clearly the company benefits from better knowledge of its customer base. (Censky)

When it was first introduced, the ACS had strong communications support designed to garner awareness and backing for the launch. Over time as awareness of the ACS grew, and tremendous response rates were documented (currently at 97 percent), the Bureau prioritized other communications needs over ACS. With such a high response rate, it seemed that customers and stakeholders understood its value and trusted the Bureau in administering the survey. In fact, support for ACS decreased, and survey recipients annually registered complaints with members of Congress that range from the survey being too intrusive, to not trusting the government to keep their data secure. In 2011, 2012, and 2013, various members of Congress unsuccessfully introduced bills to make the ACS voluntary. Making the survey voluntary is a strategy that the Canadian government implemented in 2011 with its ACS equivalent, the National Household Survey, in order to allay citizen concerns similar to those of their American counterparts. It produced disastrous results. Statistics Canada saw a 31 percent drop in responses, a rate so dramatic that the agency could not publish data for some small geographies and populations, which could impact planning and investment efforts in Canada. Once more time has passed, the Canadian government will be able to assess the impact. With the knowledge that some people think that the ACS should be voluntary, the Bureau makes every effort to provide evidence of the value and uses of the survey to its customers and stakeholders, so that their opinions and actions can be informed by the facts. However, simply disseminating facts is not
Plotting the Course of the Journey-Strategic Communications Lifecycle

With these challenges in mind, the journey began with the Bureau looking at the ACS program as an enterprise and carefully examining the role of communications in supporting the mission. Over the past year, ACSO Assistant Division Chief Tasha Boone and the Census Communications Directorate (COM) worked together to explore the planning, operations and data resulting from impact measures for FY14. By considering each element of the ACSO Strategic Communications Lifecycle (Figure 1) employed in FY14, the communicators looked at ongoing communications activities and evidence of their impact, reviewed relevant communications research, and identified operational changes to improve outcomes for FY15 and FY16.

As illustrated below, the lifecycle itself consists of an Integrated Communications Plan that details ACS-related communications activities across the Census communications enterprise, the execution of the communications activities, data gathering and analysis about the impact of the activities, then finally operational adjustments to improve program outcomes.

Figure 1. The Strategic Communications Management Life Cycle

All of the activities in the Strategic Communications Management Lifecycle support ACSO’s communications program objectives developed in FY 13 for the ACSO enterprise-level Performance Management Framework. Those objectives are:
1. Building Customer Awareness- The success of the ACS is dependent on customers and stakeholders awareness of the purpose and value of the survey, how to access its data, and how its data is used to improve the quality of life for the American public.
   - ACSO measures the impact of media coverage, in-person engagements, and communications internal to the Census Bureau in order to determine the level of progress they are making in building awareness.

2. Building and Maintaining Customer Trust- Few government programs can function adequately without the public trust, and ACS is more dependent on public trust than most.
   - By looking at self-response rates and the number of distrust mentions of the ACS exhibited in calls, emails, and letters to the Census Bureau, ACSO is monitoring its progress in building and maintaining customer trust.

3. Providing Positive Customer Service Experience- Solid customer awareness and trust both yields and springs from a positive customer experience.
   - In order to measure its progress in this realm, ACSO monitors its customer satisfaction rate, perception indicators, number of ongoing users, net promoter scores, and number of new users retained.

In addition to data analysis, communications leaders at ACSO reviewed recent industry and academic research for guidance on communications activities that could spawn further progress in achieving ACSO program objectives. Research they found particularly relevant included the following topics:

- The psychology of influence
- Consumer response to ACS packaging
- Respondent barriers, attitudes, and motivators regarding Census
- Trends in social media usage
- Effective social media engagement measurement

Below is a summary of some of the research that points to opportunities to adjust communications activities at ACSO and COM.

*Exploring Possible Communications Pathways-A Research Overview*

Gaining a deeper understanding of what motivates Census Bureau customers to complete the survey (or not) provides the Bureau with insight into how they experience the survey, and how that interactions may or may not result in behavioral changes. Over the past several years, the Census Bureau sponsored two Census “Barriers, Attitudes and Motivators” Surveys (CBAMS), which addressed how customers experience the decennial survey. Communications leaders are reviewing CBAMS results to consider how stakeholder barriers, attitudes, and motivators towards the ACS may differ from those of the decennial census. CBAMS data could provide vital information on how to change the mental models of ACS stakeholders. Census is also looking at how it cognitively engages customers.
Presently the Census Bureau uses three approaches to cognitively engage customers. Relying on its research about customer needs and wants, the Bureau designed these approaches to resonate with them, employing a variety of communications channels and information products. The first approach is cognitively engaging through downloadable applications or apps. One such app, PoP Quiz, motivates the user’s cognitive efforts via state-based quizzes using Census data. Despite 7,200 downloads of the application, as of this writing there are only five reviews in the Apple App Store about it; users report having fun with it, but seem to hunger for more types of questions and more of a challenge. More reviews would seem to suggest a higher user engagement with the application and could help bring more attention to its existence. A second means of cognitive engagement is Census’ YouTube Channel, which features a number of educational videos that explain how to use ACS data sets and showcase survey data uses in a series called “Stats in Action.” The relatively low number of views of these videos (in the low thousands as of this writing) seem to point to a need to enhance publicity regarding the channel. Finally, Census creates a number of data products and tools, most notably the American Fact Finder as well as the one and five year data releases to mention only a few. Census designed all of these products and tools in hopes of extending the reach of the ACS Program to new customers, as well as engaging existing customers to build awareness, trust, and generate a positive experience with the ACS.

With an eye to reducing burden to respondents overall, the Bureau takes strides to minimize cognitive burden including creating user-friendly interfaces with both customers and stakeholders in mind. It’s interactive infographics help bring the Bureau, the surveys, and Census data alive for many users, and it’s webpage is chock full of information about how to take the survey, why the Bureau asks specific questions, and how to get help. It also continually tests the wording of questions in search of ways to make them easier to answer while still garnering the needed information. Considering the data collected by ACSO and COM in conjunction with the research outlined above, the communications leaders identified three areas for further maturation in FY15 and FY16, which include message content, prioritization of stakeholders, and depth of analysis.

Navigating Roadblocks-Improving Outcomes for FYs 15 and 16

Message Content- Many complaints about the ACS point to limited awareness, trust and understanding on the part of respondents and potential respondents. A cursory review of messaging regarding the ACS through the website, listserv notices, and social media posts suggest that a more comprehensive focus on the nature of message content could increase awareness and trust as well as improve the customer experience. For example, one group of ACS stakeholders that receives much attention is the data users. These individuals are a diverse group including academics, businesses, Congressional staffs, government planners, and entrepreneurs among others. The level of attention they receive most likely emanates from the high level of engagement between them and Census staff who strive to answer their questions, train them on using data, and listen to their suggestions for new data products, as well as concerns about proposed changes to the ACS. Given limited resources, message content about the ACS is often designed for data users, then simply reused for other customer groups with different needs, concerns, and interests -respondents or potential respondents. Communications managers will
ensure that that ACSO tailors message content to better reach these two groups over the next two fiscal years.

Prioritizing Stakeholders- By looking at the origin of expressions of distrust as well as examining how customer and stakeholder satisfaction outcomes are different for unique ACS customer groups, ACSO will prioritize key customer and stakeholder groups for more tailored and intensive outreach. For example, local law enforcement agencies often get complaint calls regarding the ACS field staff or even the survey itself. Because these complaints are most often based on lack of awareness and trust, a comprehensive outreach campaign from ACSO to local law enforcement agencies will help them to decrease the amount of resources that those agencies spend resolving ACS complaints while increasing the breadth of awareness and trust of the ACS. Similarly, ACSO is conducting a robust outreach campaign to the business community to gain a better understanding of their data needs and uses of ACS. While some evidence of this exists online, ACSO is engaging in dialogues with members of the business community to gather more information. Finally, ACSO will use the newly created Customer Experience Management dashboard, which consolidates customer interaction data from 20 sources across the Census Bureau into an interactive data visualization and analysis tool. The dashboard will allow ACSO to further monitor the impact of messaging on ACSO program objectives in support of all components of the Strategic Communications Management Lifecycle.

Deepening Analysis- ACSO recognizes social media as a powerful tool that can support its programmatic goals. Social media and social media impact measurement are still newcomers to the communications landscape, and social media analysis by federal government agencies including the Census Bureau is still a work in progress. The Bureau itself experienced a number of delays in implementing social media policies needed to govern the use of this platform. Presently there appears to be no social media benchmarking literature available about federal agencies, which presents a great challenge to federal communicators. A group of federal communicators had the foresight to establish the Federal Social Media Community of Practice (CoP) to help fill the information gap and establish a peer group to help members navigate social media analysis. This group meets on a regular basis and not only has a social media analysis toolkit, but also hosts a forum for members to share their impact measurement efforts. (www.digitalgove.gov) By participating in this CoP, ACSO communicators will hone their abilities to further mature communications at the Bureau, share and learn best practices as well as see how their social media impact compares with that of other federal agencies.

Some of the academic and industry literature available on the impact of social media in general has real implications for the Census Bureau regarding who can be reached through social media and how best to do it. For example:

- People tend to remember Facebook posts more than human faces or sentences from books (Mickels et al)
- Americans spend more time on Facebook each day (about 40 minutes) than they do tending to their pets (39 minutes), reading personal and household email (33 minutes), and personal and household traditional mail (17 minutes) (Brunstein)
• 54 percent of older Americans (over 55) use television as their main news source (Newman, Levy)
• 74 percent of online adults in the U.S. use social networking sites (Duggan, Smith)
• 77 percent of women who are active in social media get their information from blogs (Aarons-Mele)

In 2013, Pew Research published the report *News Use Across Social Media Platforms*, which details percentages of users getting news from a variety of social media platforms. Table 1 shows their findings (Holcomb, Gottfried, Mitchell).

Table 1. Use of Social Networking Sites for News

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Social Networking Site</th>
<th>% of Users Who Ever Get News on the Site</th>
<th>% of U.S. Adults Who Use the Site</th>
<th>% of U.S. Adults Who Get News from Each Site</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reddit</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Twitter</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facebook</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Google Plus</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tumblr</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>YouTube</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Myspace</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LinkedIn</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instagram</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>12</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vine</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>3</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pinterest</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>15</td>
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These trends in social media will inform COM’s decisions about which platforms it uses to reach their various customers, as well as point to potential platforms it can use to expand its communications activities in support of the ACS.

Some of the newer social media platforms are expected to grow rapidly. For example, the production and use of micro videos like Vine are expected to outpace longer videos such as those found in YouTube. (Kaushal) The ACS Program and COM have data available to show communications reach, such as number of impressions, and number of messages opened. These are known as *vanity* measures and should be combined with three other types of measures for a more complete picture. The first of those types is *engagement* measures which focus on *retention* and *results*. Currently, ACSO and COM measure engagement to a limited degree through counting retweets and numbers of followers. This could be augmented with post click-through actions and conversions, for example. A second type of measure is based on *audience* and focuses on who is following, who is taking action, and who is exhibiting conversions. Finally, there are *content* analytics that look at the impact of content on the audience such as what content fostered a growth in followers, or what social networkers are sharing. (Yu) This harkens back to ACSO’s desire to focus more closely on message content in FY15 and 16. It will also
inform communications for the 2020 decennial census, as ACS is viewed as a test bed for the decennial.

ACSO will further increase the depth of audience and content analytics by realigning staff resources to make greater use of vendor-supplied tools. Presently, the vanity measures drive social media analysis for ACSO. However, it hopes to further explore and increase stakeholder engagement by using analytical tools that provide information about the influence of followers, follower demographics, who shows interest in certain topic areas, the geography of social media engagement relative to ACS, analysis of sentiment on social media posts, and more. Recognizing the broad range of social networking sites audiences use to get news, analysis could expand from the current focus on Twitter and Facebook to include other key sources such as Reddit, Google Plus, and Tumblr. Like most federal communicators, mainly due to limited resources, ACSO and COM are forced to spend more time reacting to communications rather than analyzing trends and being proactive with communications. In FY15 and FY16, ACSO hopes to experiment with assigning some staff to spend more of their time on these types of activities.

Conclusion-Continuing the Journey
Communicating for results is inevitably a journey that includes victories and roadblocks, lessons learned and unknown pathways along the way. It’s not an unexpected journey; the Bureau is doing a great job of navigating. Staying abreast of industry and academic research can further inform Census communicators about needed communications skill sets, as well as useful practices and measures that can help them to continually improve communications. ACSO and COM have learned the lesson that communications support is, in fact, an expected journey that must demonstrate agility in responding to emergent feedback, trends, needs, and events. Using such research in conjunction with placing a greater emphasis on message content, prioritization of stakeholders, and depth of communications impact analysis as described above will help ACSO make increasingly greater strides in building awareness, trust, and increasing customer satisfaction. The diligence of ACSO and COM in planning and executing coupled with their vigilance in analysis and adjustment are strengthening ACS communications one day at a time.
References


