Developing, delivering, and evaluating key messages:

A case study from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics

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What are key messages?

- A tool to shape and reinforce our brand
- A narrative framework to communicate
  - What we do
  - What principles define our work
  - How we differ from other sources of data
  - What value we bring to our stakeholders
Characteristics of key messages

Effective messages are

- Relevant to the audience
- Concise
- Compelling
- Memorable
Case study: BLS

- 2016: Implementing comprehensive strategic communications plan for agency
- Messaging goals
  - Nurture positive reputation
  - Increase positive media coverage
  - Engage network of ambassadors
  - Promote data products and services
Initial resistance to the concept

- Needed to convince staff -- at all levels -- that messages are not simply ‘spin’
  - Opportunistic attempt to manipulate public perception

- But rather
  - Appropriate method for agency to speak with one voice and communicate to stakeholders
Approach taken

- Showed examples from similar, respected organizations
- Educated staff that
  - ‘Spin’ is answering a question with only a (potentially misleading) key message
  - Effective communications is answering a question with facts and incorporating a supporting key message into that conversation
Developing the messages

- Enlisted BLS Customer Relations Board (CRB) in effort to craft messages

- Rationale
  - Obtain input
  - Obtain buy-in
Failure

- Multiple rounds of edits, adding
  - Detailed explanations
  - Careful caveats
- Messages got longer and denser
  - 8 pages by end
- Focus on audience(s) was lost
Example edit

BLS is the go-to agency for people ... trying to make decisions

“Standalone this statement seems to say that we are the only Federal statistical agency with information that helps people make decisions or at the least ‘best’. Maybe add at the beginning, ‘Within BLS areas of responsibility, we are the go-to agency....’ Or maybe ‘BLS is one of the US premier statistical agencies for people...’”
Recovery

- Subgroup takes all input and starts over
  - Communications staff
- Re-focus on fundamentals
  - Intended audience
  - Intended take-aways
Multiple audiences

- Final target audiences
  - Journalists/skeptics
  - Respondents/policymakers
  - Students/teachers/jobseekers
  - General public/new data users
Unexpected coupling

■ Respondents/policymakers

BLS data affect lives

• BLS data on workplace safety, pay, hours and benefits provide essential information for and about America’s workers
• BLS data are used regularly to allocate hundreds of billions of dollars
• Want to learn more? Follow us on Twitter @BLS_gov
Message delivery

Good messages

+ Good delivery

= Good communication
Messaging training

- Half day
- What is messaging
- What makes a message effective
- How to use messaging successfully
“Money Answer”

■ ATM

■ Your response =

Answer + Transition + Message

■ So:

▶ “Did BLS change how it operates when the administration changed?”

▶ “No, and let me emphasize that BLS is strictly nonpartisan and apolitical”
Implementation

- Tested with 2 offices for 6 months
- Evaluated
- Improved
- Recognize this as an ongoing process
  - Re-evaluate
  - Revise
- We have a model that works for us
Final product

FOR INTERNAL USE

All Employee Key Messages

Good Data ⇒ Smart Decisions

AUDIENCE

MESSAGE

BLS produces gold-standard data.
- Our data are reliable and our methods are transparent.
- BLS uses innovative methods to measure the ever-changing economy.
- Want to learn more? Follow us on Twitter @BLS.gov.

BLS data affect lives.
- BLS data on workplace safety, pay, hours and benefits provide essential information for and about America’s workers.
- BLS data are used regularly to allocate hundreds of billions of dollars:
  - Social Security benefits
  - Investment in job training
- Want to learn more? Follow us on Twitter @BLS.gov.

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- From accountants to zookeepers: explore careers with the Occupational Outlook Handbook.
- Thinking about your future? Learn which jobs are in demand.
- For more info visit the Occupational Outlook Handbook bls.gov/och.

BLS helps everyone make smart decisions.
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BLS data are accurate, objective, relevant, timely, and accessible.

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