

## **WORKING TOGETHER WITH THE MEDIA – EXPERIENCES OF STATISTICS FINLAND**

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*The media is a key partner and customer group for national statistical agencies. The media largely creates the public image of a national statistical organisation. What types of statistics are presented in the media, and how widely and in what way, are the essential questions. It is a challenge to the services of an NSO to answer these questions. The keys to answering them are co-operation, development of electronic services and organisation of training for journalists. Understandability and ease of use are also crucial for widespread use of statistics. The presentation is a summary of how we at Statistics Finland have developed our services to the media and how we continue to study and monitor our public image.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

One of the core tasks of a national statistical organisation is promotion of the use of statistics in society. Statistics must serve decision-making, research and ordinary citizens alike. The mission of Statistics Finland is *to combine collected data with its own expertise to produce statistics and information services for the needs of society, promote the use of statistics and develop the national statistical service.*

Citizens and others in need of information most often encounter statistics through the media. There is hardly a news broadcast where statistical key figures or concepts are not mentioned. Indeed, the media is an important collaboration partner of statistical organisations in their efforts to promote the use of reliable statistical data.

Understanding of statistics requires statistical literacy and user skills. There are several definitions for statistical literacy, see e.g., Gal (2002), Wallman (1993), and Watson (1997). Statistical literacy is understanding of concepts, knowledge of randomness and methodology, and command of presentation. It also means imagination in data combining and prudence in the use of data.

Followers/users of the media need information about basic statistical concepts and key figures, but journalists have to possess more versatile skills. Besides the basic key figures and concepts they must also be familiar with data collection methods and presentation modes, such as tables and statistical graphics. Media reporters work to tight and busy time schedules, which may mean that too little consideration is given to statistical methods and concepts, and the expressiveness and understandability of presentation may suffer. This means that the statistics and statistical figures fail to unfold to the users of the media. According to a survey concerning Statistics Finland's public image (Taloustutkimus, 2005) one in four of the people of working age in Finland think that statistics are difficult to understand.

It is the task of a statistical organisation to produce statistics that are easy to understand and use, provide guidance in the use of statistics and ensure that background data relating to them can be easily accessed by users. It is especially important to develop services and forms of collaboration with the media: as communicators of statistical information the media essentially influences the way ordinary people perceive and understand it. Essential forms of service to the media are information and customer services, development of self-service facilities via the Internet and provision of training.

### **STRATEGIC GOALS OF ELECTRONIC INFORMATION DISSEMINATION**

Statistics Finland has identified as one of its strategic success factors generation of added value for data users. This requires development and production of statistical services that meet the requirements of customers. Work with customers is developed according to the customer relations management concept, which is based on segmentation of the main customer groups and targeting of services in line with the operating environment and needs of each customer group. Another strategic success factor from the customer perspective is making services offered via the web into

the most important supply mode. In accordance with its policy on web-based services, Statistics Finland primarily publishes data on the web and develops easy-to-use self-services. The agency's communication strategy specifies its main communication goals and target groups, of which the media is crucial.

Statistics Finland's statistics on 200 topics can be found on its website listed by topic, key word, data release date and alphabetically. Each set of statistics has its own home page on which the information elements comprise releases of latest data, reviews, tables, figures, maps and descriptive information (quality description, used classifications and central concepts). The descriptive information helps the user to assess which aspects of the data might limit the quality and usability of the statistics. The information contained in the quality and concept descriptions and in the classifications add considerably to the utility value of the statistics. The pages of the individual sets of statistics also contain links to related press releases, products and services.

All new statistical data are made available simultaneously to all users as statistical releases on the Internet, which number around 700 per year. A statistical release contains the main content and basic tables of the completed statistics. The releases also contain links to statistical services and sources where related in-depth information can be found. Data users are informed about made releases with personal email messages containing the caption of the release and a link to the release itself. The email service is free of charge and available to anyone interested. In addition to this, the releases can be found on Statistics Finland's website grouped by both release date and title of statistics.

An annual release calendar contains all statistical releases for the year, while the release calendars of individual sets of statistics give dates for future releases from the statistics concerned. The release calendars are posted on the Internet and any possible changes to them become updated automatically from the planning and monitoring systems. Links to releases already made are also inserted to them. A weekly calendar intended for the media and data users is published on Fridays and contains precise information on next week's releases inclusive of details of contact persons and other topical information about products, services or events. The weekly calendar is published on the Internet and an email message about its publication is sent to those wishing it. Customers are informed separately of any possible changes to the weekly calendar after its publication. With its release and weekly calendars Statistics Finland endeavours to increase the predictability of its activity so that the media and others needing data can allow for the releases of new data in their schedules.

In addition to the statistical releases, Statistics Finland publishes around 100 press releases per year. Apart from statistics these may concern, for example, completed surveys, new products and services, happenings at Statistics Finland or in the field of statistics and other topical matters. Press releases examine backgrounds to statistics, analyse them and may combine data from different statistics to produce new information. Statistics Finland hopes that such analytic approach and provision of background information support the media in the use of statistics and communication of statistical information. Customers are informed about the publishing of press and statistical releases.

The *News* section on Statistics Finland's website serves both the media and others who follow current and news events in the field of statistics. It contains both press and statistical releases, information about events, and selected news and topical items, as well as the weekly calendar and release calendar of statistics.

Besides the pages for individual sets of statistics and topical matters, Statistics Finland's website also contains information about data collections for statistics, products and services based on statistics, and various services and thematic pages targeted at certain groups of customers. The *Organisation* section of the site gives information about the activity of the organisation, backgrounds to international statistical co-operation and history of official statistics, as well as descriptions of ongoing development projects.

## TRAINING AND INTERACTION AS ELEMENTS OF CO-OPERATION

Statistics Finland has been providing fee-based training for its customers for twenty years now. Every year it organises around 30 courses on subjects like statistical methods and sources of statistical information or on topical themes, such as the state of the economy, trends in consump-

tion, or unemployment. Specific courses are targeted for journalists, in which newscasting based on statistics is illustrated with practical examples of press articles to show what should be taken into consideration in news reporting from statistics and highlighting the commonest mistakes in it. Instruction is also given in statistical graphics and central concepts, and journalists are introduced to forms of service that make their work easier.

The Director General of Statistics Finland invites representatives of different media to Statistics Finland every year. During the visit, detailed presentations are made on the statistics that they are interested in and on topical phenomena related to or described with statistics.

The feedback received from the training events and media visits has been very positive. It has helped to intensify co-operation with journalists as well as improved their competence in the use of statistics. The events have also generated valuable suggestions for further development of statistical products and services. One of the most rewarding yields from the events has been the establishment of dynamic interactive relationships between statistical experts and media reporters, which will lower the threshold on keeping in touch in future.

The tasks of statistical experts are not only to produce texts and present results for the statistical community but also for others needing information. Indeed, statistical experts should improve their presentation, training and writing skills. Statistics Finland's human resources development unit organises courses on all these subjects. Special emphasis has been given in recent years to the writing of texts about economic statistics and for the web.

#### WEB SCHOOL HELPS TO UNDERSTAND STATISTICS

Generation of online learning material is one way of developing tools for gaining competence in the use of statistics. The services Statistics Finland offers on the Internet include a free Web School that is open to anybody and contains learning material for self-study. At the moment the school offers modules on nine subjects:

- Statistical literacy and user skills
- Searching for statistical information
- Introduction to statistical thinking
- Introduction to demographics
- Labour market statistics
- National accounts
- Indices
- Thematic maps
- Statistical graphics.

The online courses provide introductions to the backgrounds of statistics, the purposes for which statistics are used, and basic statistical methods. Each course is accompanied by exercises and examples. Anyone thirsting for statistical knowledge can enter the Web School to study an entire module or just check the precise meaning of a specific matter. The languages of the school are Finnish and English. The Web School is one of the most popular services of Statistics Finland and receives continuous positive feedback from the users of the agency's online services. The courses are intended for anyone needing statistical information in their work.

#### PUBLIC IMAGE OF A NATIONAL STATISTICAL ORGANISATION

The public image of a national statistical organisation rests on being known as a reliable data producer and disseminator. Reliability is created by many factors, such as impartiality, independence and high quality. The role of a national statistical office as a service organisation is also receiving more and more prominence. Efficient service comprises punctuality, quick reacting, knowledge of customers' needs and management of costs.

The target profile set for Statistics Finland's communications steers all elements of its communications. In order to achieve the set profile, communication is aimed at influencing the mental images of all target groups. In accordance with its target profile, Statistics Finland

- is reliable,
- capable of continuous renewal, and
- offers efficient service.

Statistics Finland collects customer feedback continuously and studies regularly its public image in order to improve its activity. The surveys of Statistics Finland's customers and stakeholders are listed in Table 1.

Familiarity with Statistics Finland and the mental image the public has of the agency are good. According to the 2005 public image survey, four out of five (81%) people aged 15 to 79 in Finland knew Statistics Finland. Trust in statistics was high, 88% regarded Statistics Finland's data as at least quite reliable and only 7% as unreliable. Correspondingly, 71% cent of the interviewees trusted in Statistics Finland's impartiality. People in Finland also appreciate the work Statistics Finland does: Statistics Finland was viewed as necessary for the whole society by 72% and totally unnecessary by only 2% of the respondents. The same perceptions are also supported by Statistics Finland's latest (2005) customer satisfaction survey. In the VIP survey of decision-makers, in which the target group is formed of decision-makers and influential persons in various fields, Statistics Finland was the second best known service provider in the category of public service organisations.

The regular survey of web services and the measurement of their external use (2005) reflect continuous increase in the use of the Internet. The most used section of the website is *News*, in other words data releases. Valuable direct feedback is received by the personnel engaged in customer service work via the online ANOPPI anonymous feedback channel about the kind of data should be available on the website and how finding desired data could be made easier.

The survey of corporate communications conducted in 2004 studied the views of the press and electronic media on the corporate communications of business enterprises and public organisations. The survey report gave an overall grade for the 20 best enterprises and public service organisations for their communications and separate grades for various aspects of their communications, such as openness, speed, reliability, volume, professionalism of press officers and accessibility. Measured with the Finnish school grades of 4 to 10, the overall grades received by the TOP 20 enterprises ranged from 7.61 to 7.97. The respondents gave the best overall grade of 7.97 to Statistics Finland.

<i>SURVEY</i>	<i>Target group</i>
Public image survey	Ordinary people
VIP survey	Decision-makers
Survey of users of web services	Visitors to Statistics Finland's web pages
Measurement of external use of web pages	Page visitors
Customer satisfaction survey	Paying customers of Statistics Finland
Survey of stakeholders	Stakeholders
Corporate communications survey	Media, editors
ANOPPI	Users of web data and services
Feedback via service personnel	Data users

Table 1: Surveys of Statistics Finland's customers and stakeholder groups

Statistics Finland's mode of acting is to react to feedback and participate in media discussions relating to statistics. The agency's visibility in the media is monitored daily and the results are made available to all staff. The annual number of critical press articles is low, for the values of statistical ethics are not really questioned in Finland. The subjects having received most media coverage in 2004 were the consumer survey, working hours in Finland, the leisure survey, housing prices, rents, population statistics, labour force statistics, road traffic accidents, prices of food, the immigrant survey, retail trade sales, Finland's greenhouse gas emissions and crimes solved by the police.

## DISCUSSION

People receive information about important statistics via the media. National statistical organisations must raise the efficiency of their present services and actively seek new ways of improving their communications and ability to offer to the media statistical data that are immedi-

ately suitable for news reporting and understandable. The Internet gives many possibilities for this as a technical platform. The nature of reporters' work demands quick solutions that are easy to use. Basic information on the backgrounds of statistics, as well as on concepts and product descriptions must also be easily at hand. Personal interaction can be supported and increased by, for example, organisation of training events and visits and by making sure that well-functioning information services are easily accessible. Continuous collecting and analysing of customer feedback and reacting to it, as well as monitoring of news reporting related to statistics support both the effectiveness of statistical information and further development of services. The essential challenge is to uphold the visibility of statistical information in today's ever-growing flood of information, as well as trust in official statistics.

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