

How does the brand of a statistical organization communicate quality?

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Abstract

The paper discusses the role of branding in communicating quality of a statistical organisation. It emphasizes the importance of highlighting quality in statistics to combat perceptions of unreliability. Using the example of Statistics Finland, the text illustrates how a statistical agency's brand represents its purpose and role in the society.

Statistics Finland has three roles in the data value chain. It has role in the initial phase, middle phase, and end phase. In the initial phase, focus of the communication lies on expertise and collection and utilization of society's data sources. Statistics Finland acts as an expert in data sources and contributes to register development in society. In the middle phase, attention is on data processing and ensuring quality. Statistics Finland transparently communicates its statistical production processes, data sources, and methods. In the end phase, transparency and comparability of statistical publications are highlighted. Statistics Finland openly communicates about the quality of statistics and reasons for changes.

The brand conveys the values, objectives, and quality principles of the statistical agency. It aims to create a clear and recognizable image of the organization in society, fostering trust and confidence in its statistical products and services. Communication occurs through various channels, including websites, social media, and events.

In summary, the statistical agency's brand plays a crucial role in quality communication. It helps build trust in statistical products and services effectively and consistently. Emphasizing quality through the brand ensures the reliability and significance of statistics in society.

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1. Why is it important to communicate quality?

Before delving into the communication of a statistical agency and its intersections with quality, it's important to understand why highlighting quality is crucial when communicating statistics.

How many times have you heard the phrase "lies, damned lies, and statistics"? As part of that litany, statistics are not portrayed as high-quality but rather as unreliable and even fabricated data products.

At least in Finland, this phrase still lives on, but fortunately statistical agencies have a solid foundation on which to build a more accurate picture of statistical production. And currently high-quality and reliable information has become especially valuable.

For statistical agencies, quality is closely linked to their core mission: the production of statistics for societal needs. Official statistics carry a promise of quality. Understanding quality and how it impacts the use of statistics is essential when building trust in statistics and the organisation producing them. Aspects of quality also distinguish statistics from other information richly available in society.

The brand of a statistical agency concretizes what quality means at various points in the data value chain for us.

In Finland, the brand of Statistics Finland encapsulates what the organization stands for in society. The brand forms the basis and core of the organisation's communication and operational solutions. The foundation of the brand lies in internationally established good practices of statistical agencies (ES Code of Practice and ESS Quality Assurance Framework).

The encapsulation of Statistics Finland's brand reflects the agency's relationship with society. In its strategy formulated spring 2024, Statistics Finland integrated the description of its brand into a broader depiction of the data value chain. With the help of that, it is possible to see the activities and products of the Statistics Finland more broadly as part of the data value chain.



2. The brand leans on the ES Code of Practice

The ES Code of Practice and ESS Quality Assurance Framework provide a good and flexible framework for communicating about the activities of statistical agencies and the products and services they produce.

The activities of statistical agencies are extensive and vary slightly from country to country. By examining at the guidelines mentioned above, national statistical institutes can identify points where strategic communication is naturally relevant in their case. These points form the basis for the agency's brand, describing what the statistical agency stands for in society.

The image of the quality of statistics and organisation is created as a result of many factors in all phases of the statistical office's operations. We often discuss communication mainly through the final products we produce. But when we are talking about the strategic communication related to statistical office, it is important to note, however, that we separately examine communication related to both the organization and its products and services. The same idea is also behind the ES Quality Assurance Framework.

The products and services produced by statistical agencies are, in practice, the purpose of the agencies' existence. However, behind them is expertise and a broad understanding of society's

data sources, as well as internationally agreed operating methods, on the basis of which the statistics are created, and which can be highlighted in communication.

Statistics Finland outlines its role at three points in the data value chain. In addition, Statistics Finland acts as a defender of reliable information in society in all its tasks. I will now outline how practically these three roles in the data value chain guide choices in the communication of Statistics Finland.

2.1 At the beginning of the value chain: The best expert in society's information sources

The foundation of statistics and other data products is laid in the early stages of the data value chain and in collaboration with data producers, citizens, and businesses. Statistics Finland is the best expert in the collection of data and information created in society. Understanding this role widely enough in society ensures that data production can be efficient and that new data sets can also be comprehensively and acceptably incorporated into data production.

Opening up the work done in the early stages of the data value chain in society has been one of the key messages in stakeholder communication and lobbying of Statistics Finland in recent years. In lobbying Statistics Finland has also highlighted the possibilities of the register data as the information source for the future decision making.

In Finland, a need has been identified to increase understanding of this role and the opportunities it brings. The need is related to the change of the roles of statistical agencies and the need of society's decision makers to have more up-to-date reliable information as a basis for their decisions.

Statistics Finland has also worked as a developer of the quality of public data sources and coordinated a joint project whose goal is to produce a common quality framework for Finnish public administration registers. This role and the goals of the joint project has been communicated during the project by emphasizing the importance of the quality of data and the possibilities to enhance the usability of public data resources.

2.2 The quality of statistics and services are established in the middle stages of the data value chain

The processing and combining of data take place inside the walls of a statistical office. At this point, the work done in data production and the practices followed are the foundation of the quality of the statistics produced. Processing and combining data according to certain methods and process stages are prerequisites for the quality of the statistics and therefore important. Many steps related to the quality and processing of statistics relate to this stage.

The processing and combining of data are the special expertise of statistical agencies and therefore also one of the cornerstones of the brand. Transparency in data production methods is the basis of trust in statistical production and the factor that distinguishes statistical agencies and statistical products from other data producers and information, which is why it is worth bringing this up in communication as well.

Unique expertise in accordance with the principles of the Code of Practice is communicated openly by opening the data sources and methods used, as well as the possible changes to be made to them. A strategically important choice is to participate in public discussions about the quality of statistics and highlight the solid foundation and principles of statistical production whenever it is possible.

Sometimes changes in data sources or production processes result in significant changes to statistics and cause confusion among users. In these cases, maintaining trust is influenced by proactive communication. The changes made can be justified, for example, in blog posts or social media posts. Even in these cases, it is important to link the arguments brought up in the discussions to the Code of Practices found on the website of the Statistical Office, and to make their visible and known.

Statistics Finland has also emphasized data science expertise and knowledge of societal data resources in its employer branding communication. As well as the communication based on the Statistics Finland's Researcher Service, which provides register-based data sets to researchers. Both these actions have helped us to highlight the statistical and data processing expertise our experts have.

2.3 At the end of the data value chain, we ensure the availability and use of statistics

The products of statistical offices are often seen in the media and are included in the basis of decisions, i.e., in the final stages of the data value chain. The prerequisite for using the information is that the statistics meet the user's needs and that they are perceived to be of high quality. Therefore, the Statistics Finland's communication aims to strengthen the understanding of how it works to produce up-to-date and useful information in society.

At this stage of the data value chain, the foundation of trust and quality is as open and unbiased communication as possible, which is also based on activities in previous stages of the data value chain. It is supported by targeting communication about statistics to different stakeholder groups in a way that suits the channels they use, and by choosing from a wide flood of information to the content of communication particularly current and relevant topics.

Transparency is supported in Finland, like many other statistical agencies, by publishing the statistics publication schedule to users in advance and reporting on the development of statistical production in the annual statistical program.

Statistical publications published on website are the final product of the statistical production process. They aim for as neutral expression as possible, and they do not contain opinions or quotes from the statistical experts. Attention is paid to the formulation and language used in them, and experts who write statistical publications are trained to write clear and understandable content, so that the information is accessible to the readers.

However, in the current flood of information, we cannot expect users to visit daily or weekly on the website of the statistical office. Therefore, we can help them by providing them statistics and information on the channels where they spend their time anyway. In Finland, the availability and further use of statistics is helped by publishing information supporting the publication of statistics in a form that can be used by the media through media releases and by citizens on social media, considering the special needs of media and other target groups.

Statistics Finland publishes weekly media releases on selected statistical publications. The topics of media releases are selected in the communication team of SF by using internal news criteria. The media releases contain experts' quotes about the statistics, which are important and useful for the media. Often the used quotes end up as direct quotes in media news as well.

In the current fragmented media environment, information is often also consumed directly through social media by wider public. For this reason, information on statistics is also produced in a style suitable for selected target groups and social media channels.

According to Statistics Finland's experiences, the most interesting and praised content is the content that supports the basic mission of the Statistical Office and talks about timely statistics data in an interesting and comprehensible way. The content produced for social media channels often differs significantly in style from the style of statistical publications, but the information produced in this way supports the use of statistics and the development of statistical literacy in society.

Succeeding in social media and supporting the accessibility of data requires the Statistical Office to take an experimental approach and take over new channels and observe the operational environment. Sufficient resources must be reserved for both experiments and learning from experiments, and it is important to emphasize the quality of the content produced rather than a huge amount of content.

2.4 Defending reliable information at all stages of the data value chain

Many of the operating methods presented above are connected to the Statistical Office's task of acting as one of the basic pillars of democracy and as a producer of reliable information. In Finland, the Statistics Finland has almost 160 years of history, and we want to highlight the history and role as a defender of reliable information as part of our brand.

Trust in statistics and statistical agencies is based on the expertise of our experts. Competence is based on open and clear procedures that everyone knows and follows. For experts working with statistics, producing reliable information is often also important and a great source of motivation.

Since statistics are produced by people, errors sometimes occur. The basis of reliable information is not the absence of errors, but the fact that errors are identified and communicated openly as quickly as possible. This is possible when the importance of openness and trust is widely understood in the organisation and the culture of the organisation encourages experts to point out the observed errors.

It is also important to be proactive when communicating about errors, and to communicate on the channels where statistics are also communicated and used. In error situations, the clarity and timeliness of communication is emphasized. With the help of communication, the aim is to help the users of the information to understand the meaning of the error, the reasons and the corrections to be made.

For the user of statistics, one of the most important cornerstones of statistics is the reliability. It is built by operating in accordance with the Code of Practice and by consistent and open communication based on it in all stages of the data value chain.

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