Company-Centric Communication Approaches for Business Survey Response Management

by Robert Marske and Deborah M. Stempowski

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Abstract

The US Census Bureau conducts monthly, quarterly, and annual surveys of the American economy and a census every 5 years. These programs require significant business effort. New technologies, new forms of organization, and scarce resources affect the ability of businesses to respond. Changes also affect what businesses expect from the Census Bureau, the Census Bureau's internal systems, and the way businesses interact with the Census Bureau.

For several years, the Census Bureau has provided a special relationship to help large companies prepare for the census. We also have worked toward company-centric communication across all programs. A relationship model has emerged that focuses on infrastructure and business practices, and allows the Census Bureau to be more responsive.

This paper focuses on the Census Bureau's company-centric communications and systems. We describe important initiatives and challenges, and we review their impact on Census Bureau practices and respondent behavior.

Key Words: Collection and questionnaires, Response and nonresponse.

1. Introduction

1.1 Background

The goal of Census Bureau economic survey programs is to provide complete, accurate, and timely measures of the American economy. This depends on accurate and timely responses to survey requests. Effective communication between respondents and the Census Bureau is critical.

Since technology now allows for nearly instantaneous communication and access to information, businesses expect more from the Census Bureau. Businesses expect help in negotiating their way through the maze of survey requests, and analysts need to understand the array of “touchpoints” with, and demands on, the companies.

We are in competition for businesses’ attention and their resources. While technology has made many tasks easier, it also has allowed data providers to take on more tasks, and the respondent we face in 2007 is busier than ever before. Moreover, businesses often do not distinguish between surveys from the Census Bureau, other Commerce Department agencies, and other Federal or local agencies. Consequently they may be confused when they try to contact someone about a survey. Anything other than a straightforward entry point into a complex organization and set of survey programs complicates a company’s ability to navigate through the response process. The Census Bureau's internal systems and organizational relationships must be able to respond to these challenges.

Census Bureau survey analysts face many challenges. They must understand the industries and commodities they measure, and at the same time understand government reporting from the respondent’s perspective. They need to know why we conduct our surveys and how they all fit together. If can make sense of these programs for businesses, it will be easier to obtain business cooperation. Our staff also need to understand the advantages to both the Census Bureau and businesses of sharing information across surveys. We lose the full benefit of the information we obtain about company organization, contacts, address changes, and response patterns, if we cannot share it easily across surveys.

1 Robert Marske and Deborah M. Stempowski, U.S. Census Bureau
1.2 Structure of Census Bureau business statistics programs

To understand some of the internal communication issues facing the Census Bureau, one should understand our organizational and survey program structure.

The Census Bureau conducts an Economic Census every 5 years. The census provides the foundation for other, more frequent periodic surveys to monitor the current economic situation. For example, the Report of Organization is sent annually to most companies with more than one location. This survey updates our list of business locations for multi-establishment companies, obtains measures of payroll and employment, and verifies industry classification. Combined with administrative data for single-location businesses, it allows us to provide annual data by industry and geographic levels to update Economic Census measures.

Census Bureau survey programs have evolved over many years, as user needs and industry characteristics have changed, into a structure of separate major statistical programs. Separate operating divisions manage these programs: (Manufacturing and Construction Division (MCD), Governments Division (GOVS), Service Sector Statistics Division (SSSD), and (Company Statistics Division (CSD)). Within MCD, the same staffs are responsible, by industry group, for both the 5-year Economic Census, and periodic (annual, quarterly, monthly) surveys. SSSD has separate staffs for the Economic Census (by industry groups), and for annual, quarterly, and monthly surveys. This organizational difference is significant because has an impact on the types of interactions these staffs have with regard to business respondents. Each major survey program maintains its own survey register.

While most periodic survey programs now use the Standard Economic Processing System they are processed independently. As a result, surveys are not in a position to easily share information outside of periodic reconciliation reviews.

Business respondents assume a much different organization. Businesses often do not distinguish whether the surveys showing up in their mail are from the Census Bureau or another agency. But they assume that information provided to the Census Bureau on one survey, such as the closing of a facility, will be shared widely with the other Census Bureau surveys that need it.

2. Company centricity

2.1 The advance of company-centricity

By their nature, business surveys require significant effort of business respondents. They must extract information from records that are maintained for other purposes and some may not exist in the detail requested. Efforts to motivate business response to these programs are inherently linked to understanding business organization and record keeping. We also must be mindful of challenges and opportunities presented by changes in the business environment.

Most communications with businesses occur when a company receives a survey questionnaire. One-on-one communication occurs when a company has a question about a questionnaire, when an analyst has a question about reported data, when a company is overdue in reporting, and when we conduct research or evaluations. We recognize that there is a need for more proactive dialogue, which can improve our knowledge of the companies, and their understanding of what we were asking of them.

The Census Bureau has conducted several major studies of large-company response and record-keeping practices to assess how companies react and respond to our surveys. We conduct cognitive studies on new and revised questionnaires that sometimes yield insights into communication. We also have anecdotal information from ongoing survey programs about issues that affect company response.
Major findings of the Sudman study (2000) also influence how we are developing our communications. The findings include:

1. It is difficult for the Census Bureau to keep track of frequent company reorganizations and contact changes across multiple survey programs.
2. Businesses place Census Bureau surveys after internal and stockholder financial reports, and tax and regulatory agency reports in their reporting priorities.
3. Company respondents would like more information about the survey, including advance notice of survey requests, previous contacts and changes to surveys.
4. Many companies said a single point of contact would streamline communication.
5. Data providers were generally unaware of how survey results are used, even within their own company.

The Census Bureau organized a new Customer Relationship Management staff in 1970. This is part of an initiative to re-engineer how we communicate with large companies that are included in one or more business surveys and the Economic Census. Large companies are very important: a relatively small number of large companies account for a considerable segment of private U.S. business activity. Consequently, much of our attention is focused on their accurate and timely response. We also need to address the needs of smaller companies, we leverage our limited resources focusing our individual attention on larger companies because of greater impact.

Customer Relationship Management was envisioned as a formal structured relationship: a Customer Relationship Managers (CRM) would manage the Census Bureau’s reporting relationship with the key contact(s) at selected large companies. The CRM would be an advocate for the company in its relationship with the Census Bureau, and help the company understand our programs and their importance. Initial rollout of the model focused on a portfolio of about 30 companies divided among the four full-time CRM analysts. For these companies, we created reporting calendars, conducted introductory visits (or phone calls), placed annual calls to update status, and addressed ad hoc issues as they arose. We also conducted briefings with all program areas on the role of CRM and available resources. The program was met with enthusiasm among program managers, and early successes. Several companies call CRM often with questions and to provide updates. Reporting behavior improved, and we were able to clear up confusion about survey reporting for several companies.

The initial CRM model involved several components:
1. Select a company (referred by a survey staff, or self-nominated)
2. Profile the company – annual report, organization profile from Business Register\(^2\), reporting profile from all Census Bureau surveys.
3. Convene a “team meeting” of survey representatives to identify reporting issues, communication patterns, and compare contacts.
4. Identify a likely CRM contact at the company.
5. Approach the company to introduce the CRM program and request a meeting.

The role of the CRM was limited. The CRM did not have a mandate to negotiate reporting arrangements on behalf of surveys, and there were no processes to merge information about individual companies from the various survey programs. Because each individual survey maintains its own record-keeping systems, a central repository for documenting contacts, issues, and reporting arrangements has not been possible.

Nevertheless, feedback from businesses and improved response behavior help to demonstrate that we can satisfy both company concerns about limited resources and survey analysts’ need for business information. The company-centric view has been institutionalization across the Economic Directorate.

a. One of our Directorate strategic goals is to facilitate reporting by the largest companies by adopting a company-centric approach to data collection.

b. Performance objectives for many survey analysts and their managers include a specific performance measure relating to responsiveness to business concerns.

c. Increased demand for company information. More company-originated calls are referred by analysts. Demand for reporting calendars is increasing from companies and from analysts. And

\(^2\) Business Register – The Census Bureau’s comprehensive database of U.S. business establishments and companies, maintained for statistical purposes; comprises the universe frame for the Economic Census and periodic business surveys.
there are more requests for company information from program area staff doing company research.

We have organized a new Customer AND Respondent Outreach Branch The new organization recognizes the link between data collection and data users. Businesses want to know what they get in return for their effort to complete our surveys. Increasingly, survey staff refer companies with questions they cannot answer. “CROB will know”.

2.2 Improved company centric tools and processes

We developed several major tools to facilitate company centricity.

**Reporting Calendars.** One of the first CRM tools developed, company reporting calendars pull together the entire Census Bureau reporting profile for a company. Calendars include metadata about each survey (form number, purpose, mail and due dates, contact information) and information about each survey reporting unit (name, address, contacts, reporting history). (Attachment A).

Companies often are surprised that the total burden is less than they imagined. Survey analysts often are astonished to find that many other Census Bureau analysts speak with the same company contact. Calendars are a resource for analysts preparing for company visits and other interactions, and show how often our various survey registers were out of sync. Reporting calendars was a laborious process for several years that depended on custom programming and hand matching. The process was finally automated in 2006.

**Contact Management Software** – This customized, off-the-shelf software allows us to document and track communication with companies and company visits. The software organizes documentation of interactions and visits, stores records of historic contacts, and has nearly “real-time” updates from the Business Register. The software will provide reports for Census Bureau managers to track company performance and the effectiveness of the Account Managers’ working on the 2007 Economic Census. (Attachment B)

**Education and Resources** – We maintain an On-line Business Help Site, primarily for respondents, to access electronic reporting, sample report forms, and on-line services like filing extensions, filing status, and secure e-mail which will be the distribution channel for the automated reporting calendars. (Attachment C)

We developed an Intranet site with links to many information resources –both about companies and about surveys. (Attachment D) We produce a weekly newsletter during census data collection phase to keep account manager abreast of latest news and progress. We are always working to get management buy-in by visiting management meetings and advertising and offering services whenever possible.

We developed an integrated approach to publicizing response to the 2007 Economic Census. At its core is a web site - <business.census.gov> - that links response and benefit by answering the question: "What’s In It For Me?" (Attachment E)

2.3 Account Manager Program – CRM for the Economic Census

The Census Bureau has provided “Account Managers” (AM) every 5 years since 1991, to foster a special one-on-one relationship with the largest companies and assist with their Economic Census reporting. The census is a large and complex program and requires substantial effort on the part of companies. The AM program involves nearly all analysts working on the Economic Census (about 150 in 2007) and provides for approximately 1,200 of the largest companies. The AM Program is a naturally company-centric activity. It has allowed us to develop documentation software, cross-program training, and regular e-communication of program issues across survey staffs.

In the 2007 Economic Census, Account Managers helped achieve a 96 percent response rate for these companies by October of the census year, compared to an overall response rate of 86 percent. By comparison, the large company

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3 Economic Census contacts responsible for assisting the 1,500 largest companies in reporting data for the Economic Census.
response rate in the 1992 Economic Census was 92 percent – but achieving that level of response required extending
data collection into the following year.

The success of the Account Manager program arose from effective training, improved tools, and a more consistent
message from managers throughout the organization. The challenge will be to give the program longevity. The AM program has a life cycle of only two years out of five; once data collection is complete, the analysts who function as AMs return to regular tasks of managing current census and survey programs.

Lessons learned from the 2002 Account Manager Program:

From companies:

1. Interviews with companies revealed that some educational issues persist. Even very large companies do
not understand the Economic Census cycle and its relation to other surveys they receive to better understand how the programs fit together. Many would appreciate a reporting calendar. The formal Advance Information program, which precedes the economic census, contains useful information, particularly as it provides expert contacts and highlights changes from the previous census.

2. Companies are unanimously positive about their account managers. AMs provided needed help. They never felt harassed, and appreciated having a single contact. The personal relationship was reassuring. AMs explained concepts, and helped with filing extensions and electronic reporting, and provided an opportunity to vent their frustration.

3. Businesses reacted favorably to our on-line Business Help Site, although not all were of its range of features including a built-in email capability.

4. Methods: The Establishment Survey Methods staff interviewed 15 large companies to get feedback on their impression of the Advance Information they received in preparation for the Economic Census, the personal relationships with their Account Managers, and their communication with us.

From Account Managers:

1. About 89 percent of respondent AMs felt they were effective. About 46 percent felt they convinced at least one company to report that would not otherwise have reported.

2. They felt some companies were confused by the switch from the annual Report of Organization analyst to the AM for the census year, and had trouble reconciling the phone call schedules of the Economic Census with other concurrent surveys.

3. We also saw conflict between the desire for training in some areas, and complaints about more work to do.

4. They reported that they would have liked more go-to specialists for some specifics like Electronic Reporting, and would have like the telephone call training to give more strategies for real-life situations.

5. AMs also reported that their major obstacles were getting through to the right contact (nearly half), using the electronic reporting software (more than one-third), and finding the time to make the calls, and actually making them (more than one-fourth). They were also not clear on the bounds of their authority for those who resisted reporting.

6. Methods: We conducted an on-line feedback survey of all 140 AMs. Following the survey, we conducted focus groups with selected AMs and managers to refine the responses.

Note: Lessons Learned from the 2007 Economic Census are being compiled
2.4 A new charter

After several years of the pilot CRM effort, including additional experience from the 2002 AM Program, we re-chartered the CRM effort. As part of the new charter, we took a fresh look at program goals, including company expectations and the extent to which they are being met. We found that companies value Directorate-wide company-centric behavior over focussed attention by a single CRM analyst.

We instituted a “Visit Documentation” policy to ensure that information about companies is shared throughout the Economic Directorate, as a means of providing improved customer service for companies reporting on economic programs. It is intended to leverage existing company feedback before engaging in new visits, and maximizing opportunities for internal collaboration. It is not intended to inhibit company visits but to ensure that we respect and place minimum burden on company resources in our activities and practices.

Much of what companies told us confirmed what we knew:

1. We are inconsistent in acting on company information updates sharing it across surveys.
2. We do not always keep contact and address information up to date, which can allow forms to wander internally for weeks or months, delaying business response.
4. Reporting calendars give the companies a better picture of their reporting responsibility. They can quickly spot errors, and plan resource needs. Businesses would like to review and their reporting calendars online.
5. Companies would like several months advance notice of new surveys, and to be advised of important changes from previous surveys.
6. Businesses are happy with the response they get from individual survey analysts when they have questions, but it would be useful to have the name of a central contact at the Census Bureau.

The Business Process Improvement Team (BPIT) lent its support to this effort and sponsored development of the automated company reporting calendar integrated with the Business Register. We now can produce an up-to-date list of surveys for any company, in seconds, at the push of a button. This function is now an integral part of the Business Register. While the periodic surveys are not fully integrated into the Business register, this is an important first step in that direction.

3. Challenges and next steps

3.1 Challenges

Customer Relationship Management as initially configured faces an uphill battle: with no on-going survey administered by the CRM staff, most businesses are content to rely on the experts administering the individual surveys they receive. At the same time, businesses expect Census Bureau staff to take ownership of problems, including those outside of one's comfort zone, and either respond to issues or identify an expert who can.

We are operating within an essentially unchanged structural organization of Census Bureau economic programs and staffs. We have identified and implemented practices that can exist within current organizational and survey program structures. We are relying on education, improved resources for analysts, and changes in internal business practices.

Security is a challenge. Companies and analysts alike want to use email for communication. Its speed and convenience have revolutionized the workplace. Yet the Census Bureau’s responsibility as steward of the public’s data is of paramount importance. We have developed a new Secure Messaging Center that allows companies and analysts to communicate and exchange files in a secure environment. The system was used for the first time in the 2007 Economic Census. And while it proved to be highly effective, many businesses were reluctant to adopt a new software tool and would prefer to use regular e-mail despite the associated risks.
3.2 Next steps

Our success in integrating the automated reporting calendar with the Business Register is a signpost for further advancement. As a next step we will explore integrating contact management with the Business Register to move closer toward comprehensive, cross-survey information sharing.

The increased attention to company centric approaches presents an opportunity to continue relationships developed in the Account Manager program beyond the 2007 Economic Census. It also will provide the impetus for new and better tools to integrate and leverage information and resources. We need to develop a communication system that allows timely sharing of company information, and to add value to the individual bits of information we are collecting about company interactions.

CROB will continue to develop resources and be a laboratory for processes and tools to facilitate communication, and to be a bully pulpit for customer-centric activities.

The challenge of the government survey statistician is not unknown: collecting data to be used by economists, from businesses that keep records for accounting or tax purposes – if at all. How we get the information from them depends on how well we respond to their information needs and their increasingly taxed resources.

References


## Attachment A – Company reporting calendar

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Form No.</th>
<th>Survey Title</th>
<th>Survey Source</th>
<th>Media Type</th>
<th>No. of Reporting Units</th>
<th>Reporting No. of Last Type of Newspaper per Day</th>
<th>Due Date</th>
<th>Census Bureau Contact (Name of Census Bureau employee for more information)</th>
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<td>A0C-35B</td>
<td>Current Capital Expenditures Survey</td>
<td>ACET</td>
<td>Paper</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Company 1</td>
<td>30 days</td>
<td>Chris Pflug 960-755-5535 <a href="mailto:Chris.Pflug@censtats.gov">Chris.Pflug@censtats.gov</a></td>
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<tr>
<td>IFT-140</td>
<td>Information &amp; Communication Technology Survey</td>
<td>ACET</td>
<td>Paper</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Company 1</td>
<td>30 days</td>
<td>Chris Pflug 960-755-5535 <a href="mailto:Chris.Pflug@censtats.gov">Chris.Pflug@censtats.gov</a></td>
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<td>RS-G5A</td>
<td>Manufacturing Measures, Inventories, and Orders Survey</td>
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<td>Paper, Email</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Company 4</td>
<td>30 days</td>
<td>John C. Sanger 960-755-4924 <a href="mailto:John.C.Sanger@censtats.gov">John.C.Sanger@censtats.gov</a></td>
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<tr>
<td>L2-9000</td>
<td>Annual Survey of Institutions with Paid Full-Time Employees in the United States</td>
<td>ACET</td>
<td>Paper, Email</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Part 1</td>
<td>30 days</td>
<td>Brian Black 960-755-9708 <a href="mailto:Brian.Black@censtats.gov">Brian.Black@censtats.gov</a></td>
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<tr>
<td>L2-9500</td>
<td>Nonemployer, Paid-Crew, and Other Workplace Compensations Survey</td>
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<td>Part 1</td>
<td>30 days</td>
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<td>ACET</td>
<td>Paper, Email</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Part 1</td>
<td>30 days</td>
<td>Alissa J. Johnson 960-755-2941 <a href="mailto:Alissa.J.Johnson@censtats.gov">Alissa.J.Johnson@censtats.gov</a></td>
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<td>CTP-9000</td>
<td>Statistical Abstract of the United States</td>
<td>ACET</td>
<td>Paper, Email</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Part 4</td>
<td>30 days</td>
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<td>ACET</td>
<td>Paper, Email</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Part 1</td>
<td>30 days</td>
<td>Alissa J. Johnson 960-755-2941 <a href="mailto:Alissa.J.Johnson@censtats.gov">Alissa.J.Johnson@censtats.gov</a></td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>Company 1</td>
<td>30 days</td>
<td>John Pflug 960-755-1622 <a href="mailto:John.Pflug@censtats.gov">John.Pflug@censtats.gov</a></td>
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<td>C-42A</td>
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<tr>
<td>C-42B</td>
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<td>Company 1</td>
<td>30 days</td>
<td>John Pflug 960-755-1622 <a href="mailto:John.Pflug@censtats.gov">John.Pflug@censtats.gov</a></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Attachment B – CRM software

Contact management MIS - “You Manage What You Measure”
On-Line services

Login

Have your username (UID) and password (PW) ready. These can be found in the label of your report form.

They are also shown in the mailing label of letters sent to multi-establishment companies.

Enter username (UID) and the password (PW).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Username (UID):</th>
<th>Password (PW):</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The following services are offered online. You will need your username (UID) and password (PW) to access our secure server.

- **Filing Status**: Check which report forms we have received/not received from your company.
- **Remail Forms**: Order replacements for lost or misplaced report forms.
- **Additional Forms**: Order additional report forms for locations not originally included in your company.
- **List Forms**: Display Forms Mailed To Your Company
- **Decryption Key**: View decryption / passphrase key if you received an encrypted CD-ROM
- **Company Calendar**: Check your company calendar of surveys.
- **Secure Messaging Center (SMC)**: Securely exchange messages and data files with Census Bureau.

Last Revised: 2006-08-20 12:56:51
2007 Economic Census Account Manager Homepage

Welcome to Your 2007 Economic Census Account Managers' Homepage! If you identify a page you think will be useful to other AMs, please send suggestions to crmi@census.gov. Thanks!

Important Dates to Remember:
Keep Calling your Companies
Call 4 - "Thanks for Reporting"

What's New on the AM Web -

- Economic Census Reminder & Overdue Letters [DATE]
- AM Bulletin 15 Now Available

AM News -

Business.Census.Gov
This is a great web site for those who want to know more about the 2007 Economic Census - Give it a Test Drive!

Econ Form to Analyst List Now Available
Thanks to Jennifer Lee's request, we've developed a list of Analysts and Branches to contact should you have questions about the Economic Census forms. The list is available on the Census Contacts page

Call 2 Training Materials Now On-line
Need a refresher? Call 2 training materials are available on the AM Training page
How do I find the average salaries for jobs in my industry? Select your industry from the list below.

The Economic Census helps organizations make informed business decisions. Take a moment now to see just a sample of the information available to you.

“Economic Census is indispensable to understanding America’s economy.” — Ben Bernanke

85% of the country’s gas stations, cell phone service, and other food items.