

**EDUCATING THE PUBLIC THROUGH HIGHEST ELECTED OFFICIALS:  
EVALUATING *HOW AMERICA KNOWS WHAT AMERICA NEEDS***

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**Introduction<sup>1</sup>**

The concept of opinion leaders plays an important role in research on mass media effects, the general idea being that interpersonal influence affects the connection between mass media and the people whom media messages are trying to persuade. For Census 2000, the Census Bureau sought to educate the U.S. resident population about the importance of the census, using both mass media and interpersonal influence. This paper offers an evaluation of a promotional program designed by the Census Bureau to reach the public through their highest elected officials.

**Census 2000 and Highest Elected Officials**

The communication campaign for Census 2000 had two goals: to encourage public participation in the census and to reduce the undercount of the general population, as well as of specific segments of the population. To accomplish these goals, the Census Bureau designed an integrated communication strategy that used both mass media and interpersonal channels of influence. Mass media strategies included a paid advertising campaign and an earned publicity effort that involved substantial media relations activities. Messages disseminated via mass media then were supported by a partnership program that reached out to respondents via trusted community agents, including religious leaders, civic groups, special interest organizations, and Fortune 500 companies. Finally, promotions and special events sought to bring the census message as close as possible to individuals. These latter efforts included the Census in Schools program that educated households about the census through schoolchildren and the Road Tour, which brought census messages to communities around the country.

Another promotional program, called *How America Knows What America Needs*, encouraged highest elected officials to educate their constituents about the importance of the census (cf. Sha & Collins, forthcoming). These individuals included governors, county commissioners, mayors, and tribal leaders – or what Lesly (1998) called “power leaders” – those with the power to affect society and organizations.

An initial version of the program was announced by Census Bureau Director Kenneth Prewitt in June 1999. The Census Bureau sent highest elected officials formal letters of notification about the program in December 1999, and a January 2000 mailing invited these leaders to sign-up their communities to participate in *How America Knows What America Needs*. Participants were given access to a turnkey kit of materials designed to help elected officials educate their constituents about Census 2000. These materials included promotional flyers, sample letters to the editors and op-ed pieces, matte articles for use in organizational or community publications, sample media announcements about the community’s participation in the program, sample speeches and talking points for use by elected officials or other community leaders, promotional event ideas and suggestions, scripts from Census Bureau public service announcements, and a suggested PowerPoint presentation with graphics.

**Evaluation of the Campaign**

The *How America Knows What America Needs* campaign, in conjunction with the other components of the Census Bureau’s integrated communication strategy, was successful in accomplishing the communication goals of Census 2000. Specifically, the national response rate to Census 2000 was 67%<sup>2</sup>, up two percentage points from the 1990 response rate of 65% and up 12 percentage points from the 55% response rate projected by the National Research Council using a model of outreach efforts that

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<sup>1</sup> This paper reports the results of research and analysis undertaken by Census Bureau staff. It has undergone a Census Bureau review more limited in scope than that given to official Census Bureau publications. This report is released to inform interested parties of ongoing research and to encourage discussion of work in progress.

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<sup>2</sup> For operational purposes, the Census Bureau considers 65% the official response rate to Census 2000 because that figure represents response rates as of April 8, 2000, the cut-off date for the non-response follow-up operation. Nevertheless, the 67% response rate remains valid as a measure of the public’s self-participation in the census, even though the last 2% came in too late to exclude those households from being contacted by door-to-door enumerators.

mirrored those executed in 1990 (cf. Edmonston & Schultze, 1995). Furthermore, after the census takers had completed their door-to-door mission, collecting information from households that had not mailed back their forms, the national net undercount was reduced from 1990's 1.6 % to 1.2 %. The net undercount for all major social groups also was reduced.

Another means of evaluating the *How America Knows What America Needs* campaign is to measure the participants' levels of satisfaction with the program. This paper thus offers an evaluation of the *How America Knows What America Needs* campaign through a survey of campaign participants. This evaluation assesses the value of implementing a similar effort for the 2010 Census, what elements to retain from the Census 2000 program, and what aspects of the campaign would need to be changed to facilitate greater program effectiveness.

### Method<sup>3</sup>

In July 2000, a self-administered questionnaire was sent to the contact person listed for the 3,157 communities that officially signed up for the *How America Knows What America Needs* campaign, using the names and addresses provided by the registrants. A follow-up mailing to non-respondents was sent three weeks later. On January 12, 2001, data collection was terminated with 1,236 questionnaires returned, of which 1137 were deemed useable<sup>4</sup>, for a response rate of 36.0%<sup>5</sup>. Data were tabulated using SPSS for Windows 10.0<sup>6</sup>.

### Findings

This section reports specific findings related to the initialization of the *How America Knows What*

*America Needs* campaign, respondents' satisfaction with components of the campaign, and the usefulness of turnkey kit materials.

### *Initialization of the Campaign*

The first three questions dealt with the initialization of the campaign. Respondents were asked when they had first learned about the campaign, how they had learned of it, and when their community had signed up to participate in *How America Knows What America Needs*.

One third of the respondents (33.5% or 376 of 1121) did not remember when they had first learned of the program, which may be attributable to the time lag between program initialization and receipt of the survey. Another 6.9% of respondents (n=76) claimed that their communities had not signed up to participate in the campaign, even though the sampling frame was individuals who had given their names and addresses as their community's contact for the campaign. These cases remained in the sample because the respondents had answered many of the questions in the survey, despite their claim of having not signed up for the program.

More than half of the respondents (51.1% or 573 of 1121) had learned about the campaign in or prior to December 1999. This suggests the effectiveness of the initial mailing sent by the Census Bureau director to the 39,000 highest elected officials across the country. Indeed, when asked how they had first learned of the program, a plurality of respondents (38.2% or 403 of 1055) indicated that their initial information source had been a December 1999 mailing. Another 17.0% of respondents (n=179) indicated the January 2000 mailing from the director as their initial source of knowledge about the program.

There had been no publicity about *How America Knows What America Needs* prior to these mailings. The main media event related to the beginning of the campaign was a news conference held on January 11, 2000. Only 4.5% of respondents (n=48) indicated having first learned of the program from the news media.

As one indicator of the effectiveness of the Census Bureau's partnership program in reaching communities across the country with the census message, 16.2% of respondents (n=171) noted that they had first learned of the *How America Knows What America Needs* campaign from a member of the Census Bureau's partnership staff. In contrast, only

<sup>3</sup> I would like to thank Elizabeth Martin and Joanne Dickinson for their feedback on the wording of questionnaire items. Thanks also to Joanne Dickinson for supervising the survey administration and data collection processes; to Lauren Werner for initial coding and keying the raw data; and to Elizabeth Rodriguez for preparing an initial report of findings.

<sup>4</sup> Deemed not useable were those questionnaires that had been returned not filled out, often with a note explaining that the individual who knew most about the program was no longer with the government office that had received the form. Also excluded from analysis were those forms on which respondents had indicated that they had not participated in the program and where subsequent questions had not been answered.

<sup>5</sup> Item non-response differed throughout the questionnaire; thus, the reported total Ns for various items usually were lower than 1137.

<sup>6</sup> Data are subject to change in on-going quality assurance process.

4.8% of them (n=51) learned of the program from their state governor's census liaison. This may be due in part to the relatively abundant resources of the well-staffed partnership program, whereas each state had only a single governor's liaison.

The time at which respondents learned of the campaign correlated significantly with when their community officially signed up to participate in *How America Knows What America Needs* ( $r=.448$ ;  $p=.000$ ). A plurality of respondents (47.8% or 528 of 1104) who indicated having signed up for the program did not recall when their community had done so. This finding may reflect, in part, turnover in the positions of highest elected officials. Nevertheless, more than one-third of respondents (34.8% or 385) indicated having signed up for the campaign early on, in either December 1999 or January 2000.

### ***Satisfaction with the Campaign***

Responses to program questions were coded on a Likert-type scale, with 1 being "strongly agree," 2 being "agree," 3 being "disagree," 4 being "strongly disagree," and 5 being "don't know," which was recoded as system missing and effectively dropped from analysis. Items that had been negatively worded were reversed scored. The means for each question dealing with *'90 Plus Five* and *Because You Count* are shown in Tables 1 and 2, respectively.

Items measuring respondents' satisfaction levels with the *'90 Plus Five* component of the campaign were shown to correlate significantly ( $p=.000$ ). Similar results were obtained for items measuring respondents' satisfaction levels with the *Because You Count* component ( $p=.000$ ). Thus, the items for each component of the program were averaged to obtain an overall measure of satisfaction with each part of the campaign. In cases where data for an item was missing, the remaining items were averaged. In cases where data for all items in the construct were missing, the case was dropped from analysis.

Overall, the *'90 Plus Five* program scored 2.14 (SD=.504; n=1042), meaning that respondents tended to agree more than they disagreed that the program was easy to understand, explain, and use. For *Because You Count*, the average was 2.08 (SD=.486; n=947).

### ***On-Line Availability of Response Rates***

One aspect of the *'90 Plus Five* program that generated considerable media and public attention

**Table 1: Means for Satisfaction with *'90 Plus Five***

<u>Item*</u>	<u>Mean</u>	<u>SD</u>	<u>N **</u>
The program's purpose was easy for me to understand.	2.06	.679	997
The program's purpose was easy for me to explain to others.	2.05	.593	970
The program's purpose was easy for me to explain to members of the general public.	2.11	.653	943
The program was helpful in promoting Census 2000 in my community.	2.06	.642	865
The promotional materials offered by the program met my needs in promoting the census in my community.	2.21	.675	922
The program materials, in general, were useful in generating interest in Census 2000 in my community.	2.17	.651	883

\*Items were scored on a Likert-type scale with 1=strongly agree and 4=strongly disagree.

\*\*The total reported here is lower than the 1137 of all returned questionnaires due to item-nonresponse.

**Table 2: Means for Satisfaction with *Because You Count***

<u>Item*</u>	<u>Mean</u>	<u>SD</u>	<u>N **</u>
The program's purpose was easy for me to understand.	1.97	.559	921
The program's purpose was easy for me to explain to other community leaders.	2.00	.533	885
The program's purpose was easy for me to explain to members of the general public.	2.10	.595	874
The program was helpful in promoting Census 2000 in my community.	2.01	.572	830
The promotional materials offered by the program met my needs in promoting the census in my community.	2.20	.639	839
The program materials, in general, were useful in generating interest in Census 2000 in my community.	2.08	.580	802

\*Items were scored on a Likert-type scale with 1=strongly agree and 4=strongly disagree.

\*\*The total reported here is lower than the 1137 of all returned questionnaires due to item-nonresponse.

was the on-line availability of the community response rates. An analysis of census coverage in eight major print media outlets showed that response rates comprised the plurality (29%) of such news coverage during the month of April 2000 (Douglas Gould, 2001). Thus, one disappointing finding in this present study was the relatively high mean (M=2.31) on the item measuring whether respondents believed that the on-line availability of response rates was helpful in increasing their community's awareness of Census 2000, as indicated in Table 3.

Table 3: Means for General Satisfaction

Item*	Mean	SD	N
My community learned about the How America Knows What America Needs campaign in time to really use the materials in our Census 2000 promotional efforts.	2.17	.634	827
I received the turnkey kit elements in time to implement the campaign.	2.19	.625	795
The campaign complemented other Census 2000 promotional activities, such as paid advertising, local partnerships, and the Road Tour.	2.05	.559	719
A similar campaign should be considered for the 2010 Census.	2.01	.713	764
The on-line availability of community and county response rates was helpful in increasing my community's awareness of Census 2000.	2.31	.837	653

\*Items were scored on a Likert-type scale with 1=strongly agree and 4=strongly disagree.

\*\*The total reported here is lower than the 1137 of all returned questionnaires due to item-nonresponse.

Nevertheless, this finding should be viewed with several reservations. First, the number of respondents to this item was the lowest (n=653) among all items measuring satisfaction with the *How America Knows What America Needs* campaign. Furthermore, the standard deviation was the highest (SD=.837), suggesting that the individuals who answered this question held widely varying views on the on-line availability of response rates to the census. Finally, because the question was negatively worded and came at the end of a long survey instrument with similar questionnaire items, respondents simply may not have read the question carefully.

### ***Usefulness of Turnkey Kit Materials***

The survey also asked respondents to rate the usefulness of specific turnkey kit materials. Items assessing respondents' satisfaction with the turnkey kit materials provided to campaign participants were coded on a Likert-type scale, with 1 being "very useful," 2 being "useful," 3 being "of little use," and 4 being "not used." The latter responses were recoded as system missing and dropped from analysis.

In general, respondents who used the elements of the turnkey kits agreed that they had been useful. In most cases, at least 50% of respondents found the items either very useful or useful. The most used items were the Census 2000 Fact Sheet (used by 72.3% or 823 of 1137 of respondents), the Confidentiality Fact Sheet (66.6%; n=757), and the Census 2000 Update (62.8%; n=714). Interestingly, these were elements that dealt with the general operations of the census, rather than specific aspects of the *How America Knows What America Needs* campaign. This finding suggests that general census information was more relevant to the users than information about the campaign itself, although the campaign was important in making such materials available.

The least used item in the turnkey kits was the Foreign Language Assistance Fact Sheet, which had been designed to help users explain how the Census Bureau was reaching out to count those residents whose primary language was not English. Only 36.1% (n=411 of 1137) of respondents indicated having used this turnkey kit material, although 55.5% of those who used it found it either very useful or useful. In the open-end portions of the questionnaire, some respondents suggested that the actual materials be offered in other languages besides English. These findings offer evidence that the issue of foreign-language assistance in the census was specific to certain communities.

The other least used items in the turnkey kits were the speeches intended for use by public officials. For example, the *Because You Count* speech was used by only 36.3% (n=413) of respondents, whereas the speech written for use at commencement activities was used by 35.9% (n=47.5). Similarly, 41.1% (n=467) of respondents reported having used the '90 *Plus Five* speech. One explanation for why the speeches were not used may be found in the open-end sections of the survey instrument. For example, several respondents wrote the materials were not very helpful because their communities were so small. Indeed, a community leader in a town of 80 residents likely would not have many occasions to use the stock speeches provided in the kits.

In short, respondents overall expressed satisfaction with the *How America Knows What America Needs* campaign, in terms of its understandability and usefulness. Evaluations of specific materials offered in the turnkey kits varied greatly. Some respondents also indicated that the campaign was not really useful or necessary in their small community. In addition, several respondents used the survey as an opportunity to express concern or dissatisfaction with the census or the government in general, e.g., census questions too personal or government not in touch with day-to-day concerns of the people.

That more than half of the respondents (55.2% or 582 of 1055) indicated letters from the Census Bureau as their initial sources of information about the *How America Knows What America Needs* campaign highlights the usefulness of direct mailings from Bureau officials to elected leaders for informing the latter of Bureau programs and operations. This, in turn, suggests the importance of maintaining updated lists of elected leaders' names and addresses – a particular challenge in small governmental units where the highest elected official may conduct official duties out of a private residence.

### **Limitations**

This study of the *How America Knows What America Needs* campaign has several limitations. First, there is no means of ensuring that the highest elected official of a participating government entity actually completed the questionnaire. Already, the low response rate may be attributable in large part to turnover in office holders from the time the campaign began and the time the survey instrument was received. This likelihood was illustrated by several notes of individuals who returned the questionnaire without completing it, indicating their lack of knowledge about the program.

Second, even if highest elected officials themselves completed the questionnaires that were returned, there is no way to verify that these respondents were indeed opinion leaders in their communities. This reality was highlighted on March 14, 2001, by a member of the Census Advisory Committee on the African American Population, who reminded Census Bureau officials at a public meeting that African Americans do not necessarily agree with or respect the opinions of their elected officials.

Thus, the major limitation of this evaluation is that it failed to measure, even by self-designation, whether the respondents were opinion leaders in their communities. The *How America Knows What*

*America Needs* campaign had been implemented with the notion that highest elected officials somehow are influential in affecting the attitudes and behaviors of their constituents. Nevertheless, due to various constraints, this evaluation was designed without regard to measuring whether the respondents were indeed opinion leaders in general, were opinion leaders regarding the issue of census participation, self-identified as opinion leaders, or believed others perceived them as opinion leaders. Further evaluation of the program or a future study on opinion leaders in the census could use established instruments from the literature to measure these factors.

In part, this failure stemmed from a desire to implement the survey as soon as possible after the conclusion of the program. Furthermore, this failure reflects the need for communication professionals – with background in communication theory and research – to be more deeply involved with evaluations of census programs and operations. Indeed, the *How America Knows What America Needs* campaign is excluded from on-going, formal Bureau evaluations of the integrated partnership and marketing communications strategy for Census 2000 – a mistake attributable to the after-the-fact nature of its development – but a mistake nevertheless.

### **Implications and Recommendations for the 2010 Census**

One primary suggestion for planners of the 2010 Census is that they determine early on in the census cycle whether a program similar to *How America Knows What America Needs* would be useful in the next census. The advantages to the early planning of a similar outreach program are numerous. For example, if Bureau officials would commit early on to a similar campaign, the effort could be integrated with other communication strategies, not only in its execution, but also in its testing and evaluation. Furthermore, officials would be able to seek appropriate funding for the campaign. In the case of *How America Knows What America Needs*, Census Bureau program funding and staffing were restricted to existing resources, which at times proved insufficient (e.g., in the design of this evaluation and its exclusion from formal evaluations of the Census 2000 communications effort).

Earlier development of the program also would permit more timely execution. As indicated above, many respondents in the present study felt that the turnkey kit materials would have been more useful had they arrived earlier. Some individuals noted that their communities already had spent money

developing their own materials, which made those provided as part of *How America Knows What America Needs* unnecessary. For the 2010 Census, turnkey kit materials for a similar program could be provided at least two years prior to the census, when many communities would be forming Complete Count Committees that could make use of such tools.

A second recommendation for planners of the 2010 Census is that they give serious consideration to again harnessing the power of technology to involve the public in the census. As discussed above, the on-line availability of Census 2000 response rates, updated daily over a period of about two weeks, generated a plurality of print media coverage of the census in April 2000. With technological advances likely to continue in the next decade, Bureau officials may wish to consider offering daily public updates, not only on the response rates for governmental entities, but also on those for census tracts, so that community leaders could target their resources to those areas whose responses might be lagging. In this way, the Census Bureau could efficiently use both technology and public participation to enhance census operations.

Third, responses to open-end questions in the present survey offered numerous suggestions for improvements that could be made in a 2010 program similar to *How America Knows What America Needs*. For example, some respondents commented that requested materials did not arrive at all, suggesting possible delivery problems with the contractor. In addition, some respondents suggested that the content of the materials be simplified. Several suggestions also were made as to making the census more relevant for small towns that may not receive the same kinds of benefits from the census as big cities.

These suggestions, although interesting, should be considered carefully, as some of the other responses to the open-end questions suggested that respondents confused *How America Knows What America Needs* turnkey kit materials with other promotional items affiliated with Census 2000. For example, several respondents commented that the posters, although very nice, were too big. Since the *How America Knows What America Needs* campaign did not offer posters, these references must have been to the American Artists series of posters produced in partnership with the Smithsonian Institution for Census 2000. Similarly, other respondents requested such additional items as pads, pencils and notepads, although these were never part of the *How America Knows What America Needs* campaign – a fact also lost on respondents who complained that the

government was spending too much money on giveaways. The confusion of respondents as to what promotional elements of Census 2000 were related to which campaigns suggests the success of the integrated strategy – communications efforts were so well-meshed that their messages came through strongly, even though individuals could no longer identify the exact source(s) of the message.

Finally, testing and evaluations for the 2010 Census communications strategy could include measures of whether particular groups or types of individuals (e.g., elected officials) indeed are opinion leaders. Rather than assuming that these individuals wield personal influence by virtue of their positions, the Census Bureau may wish to use measures such as the Strength of Personality scale (cf. Weimann, 1991; Scheufele & Shah, 2000) to identify opinion leaders. Such identification would facilitate the more effective channeling of communication resources for maximum return on investment. As Scheufele and Shah (2000) argued, “[t]his research suggests that it may be more important to identify individuals with personality strength and direct resources to them. . . . Such individuals may be much more consequential for the health of American democracy . . .” (p. 125).

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