

Customer and Respondent Outreach Initiatives of the Bureau of Labor Statistics

William J. Wiatrowski¹

¹Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2 Massachusetts Ave, NE, Room 4130, Washington, DC 20212-0001

Abstract

The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) provides key economic statistics such as payroll employment, the unemployment rate, and the Consumer Price Index, as well as statistics on compensation, productivity, workplace safety and health, and other topics. The BLS has undertaken a number of customer relations initiatives in recent years designed both to inform data users and to encourage respondents to provide data. Among the topics to be discussed are new publications, Internet sites geared toward respondents, improvements in electronic data collection, and a test to determine what effect targeted changes to materials provided to respondents has on survey response rates.

Key Words: customers, respondents, outreach

1. Introduction

The Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) is the principal fact-finding agency for the Federal Government in the broad field of labor economics and statistics. BLS is responsible for some of the major statistics regarding the U.S. economy, including nonfarm payroll employment, the unemployment rate, and the Consumer Price Index. In all, BLS has over 20 statistical programs covering such topics as wages and benefits, employment, productivity, prices, and workplace safety and health. The majority of BLS data are collected from businesses, and most of the data are collected on a voluntary basis. While BLS is fortunate to have good cooperation from many businesses, maintaining high response rates for our data collection efforts is a constant concern. This paper looks at some recent BLS outreach initiatives, including those targeted at respondents as well as those targeted at current and potential customers.

“Outreach” is the general term used for the variety of BLS activities aimed at customers and respondents. Historically, BLS and other government statistical agencies did little in the way of outreach, assuming that those interested in the available information would find it. “Marketing” was a term that was never used; such a concept was linked with the idea of private enterprises selling their wares. Instead, the BLS used the “stump” approach to getting its data out – leave it on the stump and those who want it will find it. This was certainly true in the pre-Internet days, when data were issued in paper form. For the less well known data, it was not at all unusual for there to be no press coverage of a data release. The Internet and certainly the advent of Internet search tools have made all data more accessible, including BLS statistical data. But once again, BLS chose a largely passive approach to its release of data – “put it on the Internet and they will come.” Perhaps it became an electronic stump, but the basic theory of marketing at BLS remained the same.

There have been small pockets of outreach activity in some BLS programs, but until recently those have been limited. Some programs began to learn more about the interests of their respondents and customers, and sought to establish a marketing presence akin to those interests. For example, the BLS compensation program began attending national and local compensation conferences, with the goal of letting conference attendees know what data are available, how to access the data, and how to use the data in their work. Such activities proved successful in attracting new data users and in convincing reluctant respondents to cooperate with future requests to provide survey data. Targeted outreach efforts were also used to publicize major program changes, such as the introduction of a new sample of geographic areas for a price index or changes to key definitions or concepts.

Another example of an early adopter of the idea of marketing statistical data comes from the BLS occupational safety and health statistics program, which provides considerable detail on injuries, illnesses, and fatalities that occur in the workplace. Such detail can easily result in hundreds of statistical tables, as data are available on the

demographics of injured workers as well as the circumstances surrounding the injury event. To make such data more accessible, the program developed a CD-based query system that allowed users to request data for specific variables, such as details on injuries in the construction industry, fatalities among women workers, or the ages of those afflicted with carpal tunnel syndrome. This activity helped to transform the emphasis of BLS safety and health data from tabulations provided by BLS, regardless of what the users wanted, to tabulations specified by the user. Again, this activity was used to attract more data users and encourage employers to respond to future data requests.

Under the leadership of former Commissioner Kathleen Utgoff and current Commissioner Keith Hall, BLS is expanding its outreach efforts and becoming marketers of its products. In 2003, Commissioner Utgoff instituted a series of management initiatives, one of which was to “Better Inform the Public.” The goal of this initiative was to develop a BLS-wide marketing strategy with 4 objectives:

- Position BLS as the trusted source of information on labor economics and statistics;
- Develop new and refined products and services that are driven by customer preferences;
- Increase customer awareness of BLS products and services; and
- Increase respondents’ understanding of the value of participating in BLS surveys.

Commissioner Hall has expressed his interest in having BLS reach out to a wide variety of stakeholders to understand their data needs and to develop products and services to meet those needs.

This paper is organized into 2 sections – focus on customers and focus on respondents – and concludes with a brief look at future steps. The customer and respondent sections will identify activities that BLS has undertaken in the past few years to build a brand, build an image of excellence, modernize our products and services, have customers influence decisions, and work with our respondents to deliver the best possible product.

2. Focus on Customers

As noted, BLS has often had the “leave it on the stump” attitude toward data dissemination, even as we developed an extensive Internet site. And, in fact, our initial foray onto the Web was very inward focused, as we organized the Internet in the same way that our offices were organized. The first BLS Internet was a grid of 9 boxes, and as you navigated beyond those boxes you found the formal name of the Office that developed certain statistics (see Exhibit 1). If you were looking for data on workplace fatalities, you had to know that such data were produced in the Office of Compensation and Working Conditions. Select that box and you might find the data you want; select another box and you were lost.

As the amount of data available on the BLS website grew, so did the interest in providing a better interface to help serve our customers. That interface, which debuted in October 2001, attempted to organize data by topic, rather than by office (see Exhibit 2). As use of the Internet evolved, the new design presented some challenges for users. First, the theory behind the design was to provide users with a link to anything they might want from the homepage, so the page contained over 100 links – and could be a little overwhelming to the uninitiated. Second, the titles for the links often related to internal BLS program names or other jargon, so getting where the user wanted to go still wasn’t intuitive.

But in some sense, any problems with the interface no longer mattered, because users were not getting to BLS data via www.bls.gov. Rather, the advent of the Internet search engine meant users were searching for their topic of interest; with luck, the search results provided a link to the appropriate BLS Internet page. For example, if you were to type “workplace fatality statistics” in Google, BLS would appear as the 3rd choice, although the first two choices take you to the same BLS statistics on the Occupational Safety and Health Administration website.

BLS has recently changed its Internet homepage again, this time reducing the number of links on the homepage, adding fresh content up front each business day, and identifying resources that users might need (see Exhibit 3). The goal of the homepage of the website has changed from providing a link to everything available from BLS to providing highlights of the latest data available. The goal of the new website is to get users accustomed to

coming to the BLS homepage again and again for BLS information, rather than coming upon such information through a search engine or from a secondary source.

As the BLS Internet site has evolved, Web activity has expanded greatly. In 1995, its first year of operation, the BLS Internet averaged 70,000 page views per month; in June 2008, there were 30 million page views. The pattern of use also varies throughout the year, and has remained consistent for many years. Heaviest usage is generally in the fall and spring, corresponding with the academic year. Usage typically declines during the summer. In addition, spikes in usage often coincide with the release of new data, such as the bi-annual release of employment projection data every other November.

The rapid development of electronic data on the Internet had another effect on traditional BLS products – the paper publication became less important. After 100 plus years of producing paper publications, including large volumes of data tables, these data are now available on the Internet and often can be queried from databases and downloaded by individual data users. While there was (and continues to be) much debate about the need for a “publication of record” and the need to serve our remaining clientele for paper products, such as libraries, the fact that traditional volumes of data were less in demand provided opportunities to develop new products.

More recent BLS publications have focused less on providing a repository of data for users and more on letting users know what data are available, how to access the most recent data, and how data might be useful to them. Newer publications are no longer staid “bulletins” but take on new sizes, shapes, and colors as they are transformed into promotional materials. A few examples will help to illustrate this trend.

Data on workplace injuries and illnesses were packaged once a year into a nearly 500 page bulletin, the vast majority of which was tables. No sooner was it released than new data were available, making the volume obsolete. What’s more, the same 500 pages of tabulations were available – much more quickly – on the Internet and on CD, with query tools that might be faster than thumbing through the pages. But there was still an interest in developing paper products for customers at trade shows and for survey respondents. To address these customers, the program developed a colorful chart book that highlights survey results, explains how to obtain complete data on the Internet, and includes a CD with all 500 pages of tables and a built-in query system (see Exhibit 4).

Another example is coming soon, with the introduction of a new BLS series that will highlight statistics on employee benefits. These 4-page summaries are Web-only products, with an attractive layout suitable for print. They will be graphics heavy and serve to highlight small chunks of information. By releasing these publications periodically throughout the year, BLS hopes to keep its data on employee benefits fresh in the minds of data users.

Together with the move away from static books of tabulations, BLS is attempting to establish a brand – a consistent visual image that will identify BLS products and services. This effort began a few years ago with the development of the BLS emblem – a red, white, and blue star whose top turns into a graph (see Exhibit 5). This symbol of the BLS mission to disseminate economic data is now prominently placed on the Internet site, on publications, business cards, and presentations. Future plans are to expand the consistent BLS identity with the introduction of standard font types and sizes and other standard visual effects.

Finally, BLS has attempted to move away from the program focus that has dominated its Internet site and publications throughout its history. The new Internet site includes a Spotlight on a timely topic, such as older workers, with data from a number of BLS programs (see exhibit 6). Publications also focus more on BLS as a whole, including a new overview pamphlet designed to show how BLS can serve various constituents, such as jobseekers, investors, policymakers, journalists, and students. Newly developed Web pages for these and other audiences provide complementary information. The BLS focus has changed in recent years, shifting from an internal view (our programs) to an external view (our customers).

3. Focus on Respondents

Just as changes in technology have affected the way the BLS provides data to its customers, so, too, has technology changed the way data are obtained. Most BLS programs involve voluntary collection of economic

data from employers, be it wages, prices, employment, or other information. Traditionally, BLS gathered such data by paper and pencil, either through a personal interview with the employer or by mailing a form for an employer to complete and return. In nearly all cases, respondent data had to be entered into a computer system for tabulation, typically through key entry. These were slow processes for both the respondent and BLS, and sometimes resulted in transcription error. As technology evolved, alternative data collection modes were sought.

While BLS has used a variety of more “modern” data collection techniques, including touch-tone data entry and optical scanning, considerable effort has gone into the development of Internet, email, and file transfer collection protocols. Each of these methods involves data entry by the respondent at the source of the data, eliminating the need to transcribe data from one place to another. In the ideal situation, data are extracted directly from the respondent’s systems and imported to BLS systems, with no middle-man and no intervention. Several current BLS protocols get close to this ideal.

The BLS Internet Data Collection Facility (IDCF) is a centralized resource available to all BLS programs for electronic data collection. It uses a standard interface and security protocol for users to enter the facility, so that respondents to multiple surveys will not need different logon IDs or passwords. Once in the system, respondents may see different collection methods or different entry screens, depending upon which survey they are completing; however, applications adhere to design standards that result in the same “look and feel.”

The IDCF contains two approaches to Internet collection – standard and “IDCF-lite.” Using the standard format, the respondents may be able to see data from their establishment from a prior period and can then enter current period data. Respondents can save incomplete information and return to complete their entry at a later date. Alternatively, the “lite” version, typically used for small amounts of data capture, has a simpler login procedure and does not show prior period data. Respondents must enter all data during one session, as data cannot be saved. The two versions were designed to meet different needs – greater security, prior period data, and multiple logins for more complex requests versus simple login and entry for simpler requests. Both versions of Internet collection have been extremely successful.

For example, the Survey of Occupational Injuries and Illnesses collects annual data from about 200,000 establishments. Depending upon the establishment’s injury and illness experience, data entry can be quite extensive. In 2003, the survey began offering the Internet as an optional data collection mode; included with the lengthy paper survey form was a flyer describing how respondents could enter their data via the Internet. That year, about 10,000 establishments provided data via the Internet. For the next 3 years, Internet collection grew, despite limited marketing, to 53,000 establishments in 2006. In an attempt to further encourage Internet collection, the survey began some tests in 2007. The most important part of the test involved eliminating mailing of the survey form to certain respondents, including those who had entered data by the Internet in the past. Variations on the test included flyers with various instructions, some of which indicated that paper forms were available upon request. During the test years, Internet collection ballooned; in 2008, just shy of 100,000 establishments used the Internet to enter data. Beginning in 2009, nearly all establishments will receive a short mailing requesting that data be entered by Internet.

One activity that has helped to test and improve the IDCF is the use of “eye-tracking” technology through the BLS cognitive laboratory. The technology can follow a subject’s eyes as they look at a computer screen, and specifically at a website. This technology was used at BLS to test new versions of the public Internet; several features were accepted or rejected based on eye-tracking results. The technology was also used to review the IDCF screens (see Exhibit 7).

The Internet collection experience of the Survey of Occupational Injuries and Illnesses resulted in considerable savings in printing, mailing, and data entry. Further, data entered via the Internet tend to come in faster than data on paper forms, be more complete, and have fewer errors. And the potential for transcription error by BLS disappears, as data are entered once by the respondent and are transferred directly to the BLS database without manual intervention. Similar savings in printing and mailing took place in the BLS Occupational Employment Statistics Survey, which traditionally mails a long questionnaire that asks employers to record employment and wages by detailed occupation. When employers fail to respond, the standard approach has been to mail another

complete form as a reminder. In 2007, the survey tested mailing a postcard reminder to nonrespondents, in lieu of the complete form. This test saved printing and mailing costs with no adverse effect on response.

BLS has also attempted to expand the information available for respondents – to make it clear how important the continued cooperation of respondents is to all BLS programs. Over the past few years, several individual BLS programs have added Internet pages specifically targeted at respondents. These pages typically provide questions and answers about the survey, including how establishments are selected and BLS procedures for maintaining the confidentiality of respondent data; definitions and concepts of data items being collected; and how respondents (and all employers) can use the results of data collection. BLS expanded upon these pages in 2006, testing a new respondent page with detailed instructions for completing survey forms. Finally, as part of the 2008 Internet redesign, BLS introduced a set of pages with targeted information for selected audiences, including a “Survey Respondents” page (see Exhibit 8). This attractive page explains the importance of individual establishment responses and highlights the confidentiality precautions that BLS takes. The page has links to respondent information for many surveys, some of which have been updated to expand upon the earlier test pages for respondents.

To assess the effect of certain marketing activities on survey response, BLS conducted a pilot study with Occupational Employment Statistics (OES) survey respondents. The OES survey is typically collected by mail, with respondents receiving large forms to be completed and returned. As part of the test, employers in certain States received special mailings highlighting both the data available from the survey and instructions for completing the survey. Special materials included a revised cover letter, designed to be shorter, less technical, and with more of an emphasis on how survey results are used than in the past. Also developed for this test was a visually appealing flyer highlighting data results; this flyer included a reference and URL for the respondent Internet site that provided assistance to respondents. The test protocol had 3 groups – those that received the traditional mailing; those that received the traditional mailing but with the new cover letter replacing an older version; and those that received the new cover letter and new flyer. Results are still being evaluated, but initial indications are that the new materials may have had a small positive impact on response.

4. Future Steps

The most important future step for BLS outreach activities – both to customers and respondents – is to build loyalty to BLS and the BLS brand. The new Internet site is one way to do this. While the data on the BLS Internet site have been updated twice daily for many years, such updating will now be a much more visible part of the site. Fresh content will now be available on the homepage each business day. New features such as audio, video, RSS, and podcasts will add to the way users can access BLS data.

Building on this new image, BLS is developing plans to be more proactive in reaching out to customers and stakeholders, such as the media, policymakers, and user groups. Recent activities have included focus groups of those who use the Occupational Outlook Handbook and a customer survey of those who use benefits data. Future activities will include additional focus groups and surveys to gather input on BLS products and services, as well as presentations and panel discussions to make users more aware of BLS.



Exhibit 1 – Original BLS Internet homepage, 1995



Exhibit 2 – BLS Internet homepage, 2001



Exhibit 3 – BLS Internet homepage, 2008

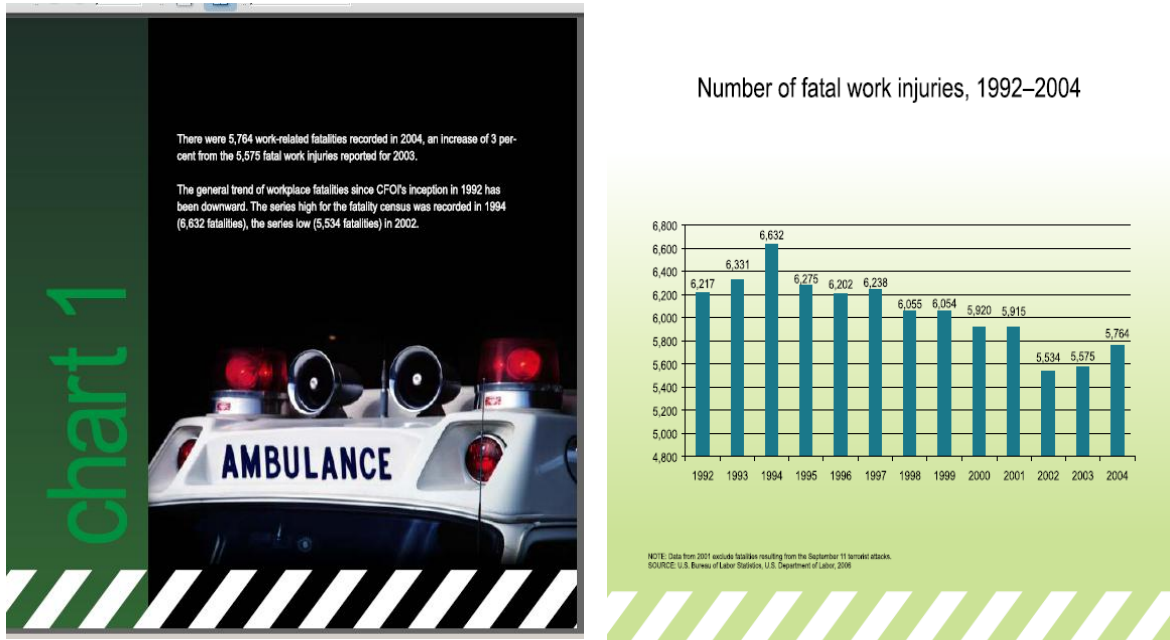


Exhibit 4 – Pages from BLS Occupational Safety and Health Statistics Chartbook



Exhibit 5 – BLS Emblem

Spotlight on Statistics

Older Workers

Workers age 65 and over are changing the face of the American workplace. This Spotlight on Statistics tells you how, using charts and audio.

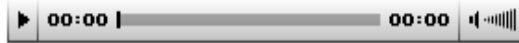


Exhibit 6 – Cross-program highlights from BLS Internet

Survey of Occupational Injuries and Illnesses

Contact Information | Help | Logout

1 Equipment Information (Section 1) 2 Injury & Illness (Section 2) 3 Case (Section 3) 4 Case Review

Section 3. Reporting Cases with Days Away from Work

Establishment ID: 00000001-2

Please Note

In this section you are asked to enter information about cases that are listed in "days away from work." See Column (4) on OSHA Form 300A.

You have reported 15 cases with days away from work in column (4).

Data

- We have designed this survey so that you should not have to report more than 15 cases. If you have significantly more than 15 days away from work cases to report, please call the number on the front of your survey materials for further assistance.
- If the number of cases you reported in column (4) is incorrect, click the "Back" button to correct your entry.
- If you enter a number of cases you reported to correct, click the "Enter Case Data" button to enter data for each case.
- If you are no longer able to add a later time, click the "Continue" arrow.
- If you have finished entering all of your case data, click the "Continue" arrow.

If you have questions or comments please send e-mail to: osh_helpdesk@bls.gov

Version: 6.0
URL: https://iddtosh.bls.gov/OSH/content/cases_summary.jsp

STUDY: SOII Hill STIMULUS: SOII page RECORDING: Rens 2 FRAME: <https://iddtosh.bls.gov/OSH/viewPart1b.do> TRACKING BY: Tobii
TIME SEGMENT: Only include fixations inside interval [0,487366] ms

Exhibit 7 – Gaze path showing how individual's eye reviews page from the BLS Internet Data Collection Facility



Exhibit 8 – BLS Internet page for survey respondents