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(iii) Internal Communication

Writing together for the website
Submitted by National Statistics Institute (Spain)¹

Introduction

This paper presents the strategies that INE-Spain is carrying out to engage our staff in collaborating on a new project of writing for the website.

Background

For many years, as happens in other National Statistical Offices (NSO), the Dissemination Unit of INE-Spain has been in charge of preparing different kinds of publications. Before 1990 this was done only in paper. However, with the arrival of the Internet in the 1990s PDF is now also used, with the purpose of loading them onto the website. For each publication we collaborate with the subject matter units. We all try our best, but sometimes in the past the results were not as good as we would have liked.

Occasionally our books were neither attractive nor engaging and were difficult to understand for the general public. In short, they were not very interesting for the lay public. However the subject matter units were not happy when we tried to change the text to make it more understandable. But neither were we content as we thought the writing was still too technical. So, obviously we needed a cultural change.

On discovering the ***Making Data Meaningful guides*** we liked them so much that we translated them into Spanish. We thought the guides would be good for all the Spanish-speaking NSO, but moreover they were great for us too. Therefore we tried to make them known amongst our colleagues from the subject matter units.

Last year the Board of Direction of INE decided to have an **e-zine on the INE website** named **Magaz-INE** to improve the dissemination of statistical information and its basic interpretation. We decided that the moment for the cultural change had arrived.

The Project: Magaz-ine

The project is simple: launching an e-zine on our website with the objective of promoting greater use and interest in statistical information. It is a different way of showing the statistical information to make it more attractive and engaging to the general public.

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We want to have almost a daily publication of statistical information like others NSO already have, for example the Daily of Statistics Canada, the Statistics Netherlands Web Magazine or STATmagazin of the Federal Statistical Office of Germany (DESTATIS).

Content:

Mainly *Magaz-ine* aims to draw attention to other data to what the press releases do. It will focus on parts of the information that has not appeared in the press releases, attempting to highlight the particularly detailed points that wouldn't make sense to be included in press releases.

It is written in a direct style, using plain language. Every article has a link to the statistical publication it is based upon. Of course the principle of "one fact one figure" is followed and every item of data is backed up by INE publications.

On other occasions, articles may briefly present a new project, relevant institutional information...

Templates:

The format must be strict: 250-300 words, 2-3 graphs, and no methodology, only links to it and to the database. The data must be the most up to date in our database or from the most recent publication. With regards to the style, we are educating our subject matter units with seminars about Making Data Meaningful guides and other kind of information about how to write for the website.

Presentation:

- Exclusively on the INE website.
- Articles between 250-350 words accompanied by tables, graphs or maps.
- Unique heading: short and easy to understand.
- Articles are ordered chronologically and thematically.
- Articles are signed by the author or authors. May include a maximum of three authors.

Organization:

Planning:

Every year, in November, we will prepare a schedule with the articles for the next year. This will be done according with the calendar of press releases that INE publishes annually. The idea is that if, for example, in May a press release about Spanish population issues is published, so in the next weeks there will be some magazine articles about population, giving details not dealt with in the press release. The planning prepared in November will account for at least 75% of the total number of articles.

For the schedule, we take into account some events, like international days (World Water Day, World Health Day, International Women's Day, etc.)

We would like to publish about 200 articles per year so it is a near-daily publication.

Example of calendar:

Name Statistical operation	Press release publication date	Magazine delivery date	Magazine publication date	Name responsible	Subject matter unit	Theme
Labour Force Survey	28-Jan	15-Feb	28-Feb	Person 1	SMU 1	Labour Market
Vital Statistics	15- Jan	1-Feb	15-feb	Person2	SMU2	Demography
Waste Statistics	20-Feb	5-March	20-March	Person 3	SMU3	Environment

Responsibilities:

a. Director of Magazine: This person is the editor in chief and belongs to the Dissemination Unit. She/he handles the coordination of work (articles, review and publication on the website) and is responsible for the good internal cooperation and further development of the magazine as part of the website. It is proposed that the Deputy Head of the Dissemination Unit assumes this role.

b. Theme Editors: Each subject matter unit shall designate an in charge person (Magazine editor) responsible for ensuring the receipt of planned articles and coordinating with the Director to publish the information.

Both the director of the magazine and the theme editor are responsible to decide if an article is good enough to publish on the website or not.

Authors:

They can be both staff of INE or from other public statistical organizations of Spain. The head of a subject matter unit of INE must always introduce the articles, so in the case that the article is written outside INE, depending on the subject, the concerned head of the subject matter (thematic) unit presents it.

Delivery date:

The articles must be received at least one week before its publication to allow having enough time for possible revision and preparation of the publication on the website. Both the Director and the head of the subject matter unit have to agree on the final content of the article and its publication.

Board of directors:

Twice a year they review the planning and the degree of fulfilment of publishing. In addition, they study the number of visits to this section of the website to develop action plans and to make decision for subsequent years. The Director of the magazine reports to the General Director of INE with everything to take into account, like press penetration, journalist response, if there is problem with some subject matter units, etc.

Project Risks:

1. Lack of interest or commitment on the part of the subject matter units when they prepare articles. The non-fulfilment or delays on the delivery time could cause that readers do not find attractive enough pace to keep the attention on this channel. In this case it would possibly be suitable to have a periodic output (weekly, for example) to the total number of articles received.

2. Misuse of statistical information by the media and misinterpretation of INE attitude under different scenarios. For example, if INE-Spain publishes an article, which crosses with breaking news and both are about the same topic. (Although we will handle an internal publication calendar for Magaz-ine, the public would not know of it. The reason for not allowing public access to the calendar is that INE prefers to offer certain flexibility to the authors involved in the articles).

3. Burden for subject matter units: With suitable planning, the individual commitment should not exceed more than two articles per year per responsible of the statistical operation, so we believe the project is totally feasible.

Resources

It is estimated that at least one day a week (20% of working days) the Director of the magazine should be devoted entirely to review the contents of the articles to be published the next week, arranging the publication, meetings with editors of the subject matter units....

In addition, it will also require a part-time employee to adapt content to the website.

We have to take into account holidays, sick leaves.... Therefore there must be other people ready to take on the task immediately in such cases.

Like the rest of our website, the articles of Magaz-INE would be both in English and in Spanish, so the translators will have to dedicate some of their time to the magazine too.

From difficulties to new challenges: The change

To reach this new project that we would like to launch on the website, it is evident that we cannot do it by ourselves and we need an effective internal communication. First of all, we needed the support of the board of directors, we are lucky as we already have gained this. Secondly we need to successfully communicate to those involved in this project what exactly is required of them. We aim to do this by giving them advice on how to produce articles. For this reason we have begun giving special seminars to the subject matter units about how to write for the website, because they are not trained in communication. We have also just started collaborating on some articles to be used as examples for how we intend the publications to appear.

With the seminars we try to teach them to write using plain and simple language, because it is the only way to get that the public can read and understand our statistics. Furthermore they understand that we have to adapt the user's needs.

Writing and preparing content for the web requires a different approach to writing and preparing content for printed documents and publications. When we are writing for the website we have to take into account that readers usually scan text, they are impatient, scarce for time and sceptical; they want to avoid an information overload. Besides it is not easy reading from a computer. Therefore, there are some skills that we have to know, like the use of short sentences, words and paragraphs, only one idea per paragraph and include internal sub-headings. The inverted pyramid style is very useful, putting the most important point or the conclusion first. It is very important use simple words to reach every kind of audience. This sort of knowledge is what we teach in the seminars.

In the past, the subject matter units used to think that the dissemination of their statistical information was not their business. But now we are convincing them that nobody can do this better than them. It is time to encourage and engage the rest of the INE-staff to work with us; trying to show them how important it is that they know about the data and why they have to communicate it in an effective way to the general public. They are the experts on this matter, but they have limitations, they are not experts in writing in an effective way for the website. On the other hand, we are not experts in any statistical operation; our job is the dissemination of statistical outputs. So we can work together and in helping each other have the best of both worlds. Obviously is a win-win situation.

The fact that the article may be signed also motivates them.

Users require three things when using a website: a logical structure so they know where to look for information, an easy-to-use interface to get them to that information and easily-understandable information. We will try to ensure that our web_magaz-INE meets all these elements.

Conclusion

The help of the Making Data Meaningful guides has been very valuable.

We are just starting out, but we hope that by working and writing together, our e-zine will be read by millions of people starting to take an interest in statistics.

Interesting Links:

Making data Meaningful guides:

<http://www.unece.org/stats/documents/writing/>

Plain language gov

<http://www.plainlanguage.gov/webPL/index.cfm>

Note: Throughout the text the word we refers to the Dissemination Unit of INE Spain.