USDA/NASS Data Collection Practices Across Field Offices

Jaki S. McCarthy
USDA/NASS
Research and Development Division

Enhancing Data Collection for Complex Agricultural Establishments Workshop
June 2011
Data collection for Complex Operations handled locally in NASS field offices

- Each field office director is responsible for data collection for operations in their state
- Multi-state operations handled by mutual agreement of field offices
- Each operation has its own unique issues
Please describe your data collections strategies for these operations

Percent of Field Office Responses Mentioning Category

Category
Constanding / Specific Interviewer / FO Representative
Negotiated Arrangement / Frequency
Personal Enumeration or Preferred mode of collection
Data Collection Frequency Changed to Accommodate
Collection Strategy is Survey Specific
Collect Multi State Operations Centrally (Usually)
Let List Frame Comments Guide Actions
Use Producer Groups for Influence. Presentations
Customized Data Collection Instrument
Customized for Each Respondent
Coordinating Surveys to Maximize Data Collected
Access Administrative Data

1/ All Forty-six field offices responded, forty-four provided a codeable response to the question. Open responses were coded into all categories mentioned.
“Please describe your data collection strategies for these operations...”

- Use specific/consistent person to collect data
- Collect data in person
- Maintain specific contact information
  - For example, manager #1 can report for crops, manager #2 can report for livestock
- Take global reports and break it down to level needed (e.g. county)
“Please describe your data collection strategies for these operations...”

• Move data from one survey form to another
  – Use data from ag yield survey to complete crops/stocks
  – Use available administrative data to complete survey

• Take global reports and break it down to level needed (e.g. county)
“Please describe your data collection strategies for these operations...”

• Provide custom spreadsheets instead of questionnaires
• Assign agronomists for data collection
• “Data collection strategies are customized for each operation.”
There is NO standard Field Office approach to data collection

• “We just try to be responsive to their needs and wishes.”

• “Data collection strategies are customized for each operation.”

• “We want to provide the best number possible for your industry/company, tell us the best way to collect it— we’ll do it. Whatever it takes.”
Data collection cited as much less of a concern than cooperation

• “Special handling most likely starts with a personal visit from the Field Office staff.”
• “We accommodate the producer’s request as much as possible while still meeting our data needs.”
• “It is all about building relationships and having a consistent NASS representative...”
The Science of Influence

• Research in social psychology on persuasion, influence, and cooperation

  (lots of work by Cialdini)

• The intent for us:
  – to understand why respondents would want to cooperate with data requests
  – Have responding be viewed positively
Motivation to respond can be viewed on two levels:

- **Establishment:**
  - Corporate social responsibility (understanding impact on society of good data – e.g. stock market, prices, etc., responsibility to public good)
  - Attention (if higher level management puts priority on response, subordinates will pay attention)
  - Prioritizing (data requests are prioritized against other company activities)
  - Statistical hub (requests must be delivered to appropriate respondent within establishment)

- **Individual respondent:**
  - Emotional aspects (perceived burden, personal ties with National Statistical Institutes, empathy and sympathy, mood)
  - Habits (reporting on a routine basis, familiarity with reporting task)
  - Worth attached to survey task (value for business, survey sponsor, beliefs about statistics & surveys)
  - Obligations (mandatory reporting, reporting as part of job description)

*Based on work by Statistics Netherland, Statistics Norway, Statistics Sweden, Statistical Office of Slovenia, University of Bergamo and University of Ljubljana*
Motivation and Influence from a Social Psychology Perspective

- Material Self-Interest
- Reciprocation
- Consistency
- Social proof
- Liking
- Authority
- Scarcity
Material Self-Interest

• The most basic motivation, but really not much to work with here for us

• So why else do people want to cooperate?
Reciprocation

“You do for me, I’ll do for you.”

- This goes both ways:
  - Once a “debt” has been accepted, there is a sense of obligation to return the favor
    - Providing data products, services before requests for data
    - If operations agree to report, we may make reporting concessions (limited data, extra processing, etc.)
  - “Providing useful, or even interesting feedback.”
  - “We also do provide some personalized data products ...such as cropland data layer maps with their operations plotted on it.”
  - “NASS needs ...to develop products specific to producers in relation to the data they provide.”
  - “…we may have to make deals to only collect for specific surveys and not others...”
Consistency

“Once a responder, always a responder.”

• Individuals want to remain consistent in their behaviors and beliefs
  – If you’ve agree to report before, you should report the next time
  – If you, as a member of an commodity organization, support the agency, you as an individual business should also

• Sending same person to collect data makes each experience consistent with past visits

• “We try to maintain consistency ...by sending the same enumerator back over time.”
• “The other primary strategy we employ is communication with industry leaders about the survey we are doing.”
• “…when an operation is asked to provide a tour or host a meeting, they respond to our surveys.”
Social Proof
“‘I’m not the only one who thinks this is a good idea.’

• Knowing what other people do, gives you a sense of what is appropriate

• “The #1 strategy that is paying dividends is meeting with groups of producers when no data is needed, and discussing the NASS reports and their impact.”

• “We try to attend as many ag meetings as we can. ... Most of these groups have influential growers on them which can help spread the word.”
Liking
“Well, aren’t you nice.”

• You’re more likely to comply with people you like
• Enumerators try to build rapport and on-going relationships
• Personal visits without data collection to build rapport

• “It is easier for the respondent to refuse USDA/NASS than Troy the guy in Trenton.”
• “Experienced agronomists are assigned for data collection, and usually, they have a long term relationship with the operators.”
• “I seek them out just to visit….I want them to know they can talk to us without us always wanting information.”
Similar to business “customer visits”

- Businesses often send out technical reps to do on site customer visits
  - “… it drives the point home that the customer information that you lack is often not a matter of facts or details. Instead, what is missing is a key perspective, a basic principle or a bedrock assumption.”
  - “customers want to have contact with vendor personnel who are intimately familiar with and have decision making power over the core product technology.”

*from: Customer Visits, Building a Better Market Focus*
Authority

“This request is from someone with a respected position.”

- Requests from authority figures carry more weight
  - Statistical Agency as respected organization (versus commercial organizations)
  - Seek approval from corporate headquarters
  - Field Office director versus “regular” interviewer
  - Support from respected trade/commodity organizations

- “When commodity association boards have buy in, it really helps to say this when talking to these complex operations.”
- “Attending and speaking at trade organizations allows NASS reps to generate a familiarity and legitimacy…”
- “...headquarters personnel of the appropriate stature should negotiate with high ranking officials at corporate agricultural firms....”
- “NASS needs to engage the consulting services and market advisors that these folks pay to give them advice...”
Scarcity
“This is a limited opportunity to be heard.”

• Limited opportunities are more highly valued
• Scheduling in person data collection also means there is a limited window for help providing the data
More can be done to support data collection and processing

• The emphasis at the Field Office level is maintaining relationships and cooperation
• Data handling strategies are individual and likely diverse – know the individuals!
• Strategies are not formally shared
  – “There needs to be an ‘inventory’ of these practices so that other similar circumstances can be adopted without re-inventing the wheel.”
• What can we do to support data handling activities for the small set of “special handling” operations?
Some possible areas to develop suggested by Field Offices

• Working with existing organization data systems
  – For example, accepting spreadsheets
• Expanding use of administrative data
  – FSA, RMA, are there others?
• Incorporate more previously reported data into current requests for data
• Formally combine data collection instruments for multiple surveys
• Formalize a NASS “dog and pony” show of highly knowledgeable & capable speakers
Statistics are not just numbers

• Without cooperation, there is no data
• Cooperation leads to understanding the organization and how it is structured
• In person visits are key to this
• Data quality can be impacted either positively or negatively
Hard to Evaluate Impact on Data Quality

• Without cooperation, there is no data
• Cooperation leads to understanding of the operation and how it is organized
• “Customer visits” by Field Office staff are important part of this
• Data quality can be impacted either positively or negatively
Cooperation is Key!

- At both the establishment and individual level, social psychology principles can be employed
  - to motivate operations to respond
  - to help respondents view reporting as a positive
Thank You!

Questions?
Comments?