



SENATE OFFICE OF RESEARCH

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Statewide Media Efforts: Best Practices, Strategies, and Lessons Learned

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The census, mandated by the U.S. Constitution, has been conducted every 10 years since 1790 and seeks to provide an accurate count of the entire U.S. population. Census data is used nationally to apportion seats for the House of Representatives and to distribute billions in federal funding. Some states, including California, use the decennial census data to redraw district lines for statewide legislative district boundaries.

While census efforts strive to count all individuals in the country, some groups of individuals are considered hard to count. Hard-to-count areas include communities with large concentrations of immigrants (both documented and undocumented), renters, low-income individuals, and rural areas, among others. California is the largest and most diverse state, which makes it the most challenging to accurately count its residents.

In order to inform the public about the upcoming census, the California Complete Count–Census 2020 Office (Census Office), the entity in charge of the state's census efforts, has earmarked a total of \$132.2 million¹ in state funding for outreach, broken into specific initiatives, summarized in Figure 1 (see page 2). With such a large investment in census outreach lessons may be learned from other statewide outreach efforts in order to identify processes and best practices that might be successful during the Census 2020 campaign.

Figure 1: State Funding Allocated to Census Outreach

Sector Outreach	\$2,000,000
Education Outreach	\$4,250,000
State Agency Outreach	\$500,000
County Outreach	\$26,683,500
Tribal Government Outreach	\$316,500
CBO Outreach ⁱ	\$10,000,000
ACBO Outreach ⁱⁱ	\$34,950,000
Statewide Media Campaign	\$47,500,000
State Programmatic Costs	\$6,000,000

ⁱ Community-Based Organizations (CBOs) are organizations tasked with targeting outreach efforts based on statewide hard-to-count demographic populations, such as farmworkers, LGBTQ, and veterans. The Census Office contracted with 13 CBOs to carry out this effort.

ⁱⁱ Administrative Community-Based Organizations (ACBOs) are regional organizations tasked with conducting outreach to hard-to-count populations in their regions. The Census Office contracted with 10 ACBOs within each 2020 census region.

Source: Census Office July 2019 Report to the Legislature.

What is the U.S. Census Bureau Doing to Support Outreach for Census 2020?

While the state has invested significant funding into statewide communications and outreach activities, the U.S. Census Bureau is also funding nationwide outreach and communication efforts.

According to its communications plan, the U.S. Census Bureau's communication approach is to raise awareness and drive participation, with the goal of a high self-response rate through Internet or mail response, thus saving money in follow-up costs. The U.S. Census Bureau has developed a multifaceted paid advertising campaign that will feature print, radio, television, and digital advertising to feature both general messages and advertising tailored to specific communities.²

In March 2019, the U.S. Census Bureau announced that its communications contractor built a platform that was tested in multiple languages and in diverse focus groups in order to develop an outreach strategy to reach diverse audiences. The platform tagline is called "Shape your future. Start HERE." and will be paired with creative materials that are being tested around the country before being built into advertising and media.³ According to the U.S. Census Bureau's timeline, advertising is set to begin in January 2020.

While the state Census Office plans to cover gaps identified in the federal campaign efforts, there are concerns that the U.S. Census Bureau's efforts and approach for Census 2020 are lacking. Further, the Census Office may not even use certain materials that the U.S. Census Bureau develops if they are not culturally appropriate materials for small communities. During Census 2010, the U.S. Census Bureau

developed a Native American print ad that featured the Great Plains, which does not resonate with tribes in California.⁴

How Did California Approach Communication and Outreach During Census 2010?

Preparations for the Census 2010 effort were impacted by the recession, illustrated by the fact that the state allocated only \$2 million—about \$23 million less than in 2000—for Census operations and outreach.⁵ Due to the budget constraint, the Census 2010 campaign focused on leveraging partners who could conduct their own outreach without state funding, and the Census Office relied heavily on the assumption that many people would be reached by the U.S. Census Bureau’s advertising.⁶ While state funding for Census 2020 is significantly higher than the previous census, lessons can still be learned in how to conduct census outreach effectively.

Though it relied mainly on partnerships, the Census Office developed branding, best practice tips and toolkits with customizable templates for its local outreach partners in specific sectors, including business, higher education, elected officials, and K-12 education.⁷ This helped partners stay on message and developed a single brand to emphasize consistent census messaging. In its final report, the Census Office reflected that the toolkits were efficient and cost effective but needed to be created with input from industry experts within each industry to be most successful.⁸ It stated that in 2020, the toolkits could be made more interactive and modifiable for partners to tailor the materials to fit the needs of the targeted community.

Due to funding constraints, the Census Office did not have the staff needed to deploy the comprehensive communications design that was initially planned for the Census 2010 effort. The communications strategy instead used a broad set of activities to “Engage, Education and Encourage,” which was designed as a bilingual multimedia strategy using a mixture of traditional and social media. Success was measured using the number of visits to relevant census webpages, as well as followers, reposts, and interactions on the official social media pages.⁹ In addition to Internet sites, the statewide campaign focused on messaging from state agencies that interact with California residents, such as printing messages on California Lottery Tickets during the month leading up to the official census count and employee paycheck stubs from the State Controller’s Office.

After the Census 2010 campaign, the Census Office noted that for outreach to be successful in the future, staff should consider both emerging and lower technologies depending on the target audience.¹⁰ Further, it stated that the overall communication strategy should be focused on motivating and encouraging target audiences to participate, which requires a good understanding of those audiences and focusing the message on hard-to-count audiences, so they understand why their participation is important.¹¹

During the Census 2010 effort, the Census Office worked directly with ethnic media organizations Pacific News Service and New America Media to engage over 50 ethnic media news outlets to participate in a marketing campaign designed to increase the

mail response rate.¹² These organizations helped the Census Office to match hard-to-count areas with the most appropriate media outlets. The final Census 2010 report noted that ethnic media should not rely on a “one size fits all” national campaign that tends to result from the U.S. Census Bureau, and instead, the state should coordinate local ethnic and in-language media buys and engage the community directly in the outreach process.¹³

Lessons Learned From Other Statewide Outreach Campaigns

Many other state agencies and departments have developed outreach and communication campaigns to disseminate information to large swaths of the state population and therefore have methods and processes that may help to inform the Census Office’s outreach efforts for Census 2020.

Covered California

Covered California is the state’s health insurance marketplace under the federal Affordable Care Act. Covered California established marketing plans to publicize health benefit options and encourage individuals to enroll in its health insurance options, spending roughly 24 percent of its budget on marketing and outreach.¹⁴ Similar to the Census Office’s strategic plan, Covered California’s efforts were focused on a statewide marketing and outreach campaign that emphasized partnerships with community-based organizations and media.¹⁵ A key part of its marketing plan was to identify the target audiences who would be eligible for subsidies under the exchange and those who did not have employer-sponsored healthcare, then stratifying those target audiences into groups based on demographic factors.¹⁶ The marketing plan recognized that members of different demographic groups have different needs and motivations and therefore need different messages and delivery systems for outreach. Covered California also promoted public awareness and enrollment through an assister program in which individuals and organizations conducted outreach mainly through one-on-one, in-person assistance provided in a culturally and linguistically appropriate manner to address the needs of consumers facing barriers to enrollment.¹⁷

Since the launch of the health exchange, Covered California annually conducts extensive marketing and outreach to encourage more people to enroll or stay enrolled. In 2018–19, Covered California planned to spend more than \$107 million on marketing and outreach—\$45 million of which was spent on paid media—and while it is difficult to establish the effect of marketing on the marketplace, California’s marketplace outpaces the federal marketplace in enrollments.^{18,19}

Covered California makes a notable effort to reach ethnic groups and consistently evaluates demographic data to address gaps in its marketing plans. For instance, according to a 2017 report, Covered California determined that 22 percent of those eligible for health care subsidies were Asian Americans. However, in 2016 Covered California found its health plan providers collectively spent 87 percent of their marketing and advertising budget on materials in English, 12 percent on materials in Spanish, and only 1 percent on materials in other languages. Based on this information, Covered

California prioritized Asian-language advertising targeting Asian-language dominant populations.²⁰ Further, it runs a multicultural campaign to reach demographic groups through roundtables, foreign language TV stations, worship, and special events.²¹

Covered California's outreach strategy can inform the Census 2020 effort because they both have large marketing and outreach budgets that need strategies to focus on certain target audiences, but still need to reach California as a whole. Covered California has success in its overall strategic approach to outreach, by surrounding target audiences with messages and calls-to-action where they live, learn, work, worship, and play. This demonstrates the importance of being able to reach target populations through trusted messengers, but still reinforce a consistent message for the state as a whole.

Flex Your Power

"Flex Your Power" was California's statewide marketing and outreach campaign to create awareness about what businesses and households could do to help alleviate the stresses faced by California's electricity supply system in the summer of 2001. The State and Consumer Services Agency (SCSA) received state funding, from 2001 through 2004, to develop a strategy involving advertising, education, outreach, and partnerships to reduce energy usage. SCSA contracted with a central advertising agency that initially designed a critical response strategy, with 13 initiatives to target different sectors in the state including local governments, building managers and operators, janitors, CEOs, schools and universities, agriculture, grocers, retailers, and manufacturers, among others.²² After 2002 when the crisis receded, the campaign continued through scaled back efforts of the most successful initiatives, while incorporating new partnerships with retailers and manufacturers, and designing a new website and electronic newsletter.²³ The campaign designed several taglines aimed at empowering Californians to take small actions to help the crisis. Flex Your Power also initiated numerous cooperative marketing efforts with major manufacturers and retailers and formed a partnership with the California Cable & Telecommunications Association to advertise and send newsletters at no cost to the campaign.²⁴

The Flex Your Power campaign also focused efforts on ethnic media and non-English languages as well, with six different ads in over 100 ethnic newspapers covering 16 ethnic communities and 14 languages.²⁵ It additionally provided sales brochures and point-of-purchase displays in multiple languages.

Consumer feedback three months into the campaign showed that Flex Your Power had a positive correlation between conservation behavior and campaign awareness.²⁶ While it is impossible to attribute all energy savings to the campaign, the California Energy Commission estimates that in 2001 during the time of the highest system peak, savings from direct customer response for curtailment and conservation was about 14 percent.²⁷

At the time, Flex Your Power was the largest electricity conservation campaign ever conducted in the United States, and it helped convince Californians to reduce peak energy use sufficiently to curtail power outages. The Flex Your Power campaign

demonstrates that a comprehensive media campaign can be effective in eliciting a significant direct customer response. It confronted a huge crisis by informing individuals about the small actions they could do to help, such as waiting to do laundry until 7 p.m. and adjusting air conditioning to 78 degrees. Following this model, the census effort could educate the public about how the small action of filling out the census questionnaire will benefit the state and their community.

California Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC)

Beginning in 2015, California adopted the EITC for state taxes, which is a tax credit intended to reduce poverty among California's lowest-income working families by increasing their after-tax income. In the first year, the state estimated that 825,000 filers would claim the state EITC, but fewer than half that many actually claimed it, demonstrating a lack of awareness of the credit and eligibility requirements; however since that year the number of EITC claims have increased steadily.²⁸ To promote awareness, the Franchise Tax Board (FTB) has received funding annually since FY 2015–16 for EITC education and outreach. FTB's outreach activities included directly contacting individuals who appear to qualify for the state EITC, distributing education fliers, posters and brochures—in five languages—to libraries, schools, and tax preparation locations, conducting media interviews, and posting to social media.²⁹ The FTB also awarded grants to 10 organizations in 2017 to expand on education and outreach activities within target areas. Beyond the public awareness that outreach and education provide, some point out that another effective way to raise EITC claims is to provide free tax preparation because it ensures that tax forms are actually filed.

With this in mind, the Census Office could consider the benefits of providing a central hub for households to fill out their census questionnaires (whether online or hardcopy) where experts can provide answers to questions that arise. Outreach could be conducted through trusted community messengers to tell people where in the community they can go for help in filling out their forms, especially in communities that may not have reliable access to the Internet, such as rural or low-income areas. Further, those that are potentially eligible for the EITC may also be among the hard-to-count for the census, and therefore the Census Office could consider any benefits of partnering with the FTB on outreach to these individuals, especially since tax preparation time coincides with the census outreach period.

Tobacco Free CA

Tobacco Free CA is the smoke-free campaign developed by the California Department of Public Health to help encourage tobacco users to quit and keep tobacco products out of the hands of the youth. The campaign functions through advertising, education, and working with numerous local partners to create smoke-free environments, especially focusing on demographic audiences that are more likely to smoke or be targeted by tobacco ads. Tobacco Free CA's main strategy focuses on the negative effects of smoking, including health and financial costs.³⁰ Similar to other statewide outreach efforts, it is difficult to attribute success in the reduction of smokers directly to the Tobacco Free CA program when laws and taxes also play an important part; however,

the combined results are notable: 90 percent of adult Californians do not smoke cigarettes, youth smoking rates are some of the lowest in the nation, and lung cancer incident rates are nearly a third lower in California compared to the rest of the country.³¹

Tobacco Free CA is somewhat unique compared to other statewide outreach campaigns reviewed in that a significant part of the campaign is conveying the negative effects of a behavior and countering advertising efforts from tobacco companies. The Census Office could replicate aspects of this campaign by educating communities about the negative effects of people not responding to the census and what an undercount could mean for the state. Further, it is likely that the Census Office will need to combat misinformation and distrust about the census operation.

Conclusion

One theme that arises when looking at statewide outreach efforts is the reliance on local government and community partners to deliver the state's message. It is apparent that in a state as diverse as California, it is important that the information is translated into multiple languages and advertised through established ethnic media in order to reach target audiences. For the highest response rate, California's Census 2020 outreach efforts must reach the entire population regardless of citizenship or age, which intensifies the challenge. Further, most entities can evaluate and make changes to their outreach plans, whereas the California census has only one chance to count the population. Therefore, it will benefit the Census Office to study these and other statewide strategies in continuing to develop its communication and outreach plan. In the statewide campaigns reviewed above, one of the chief barriers was public knowledge of the issue. Due to news coverage of the citizenship question being added to the census, before that path was later disallowed, it is likely that more Americans are aware of the census; so the media campaign challenges will likely be contradicting misinformation or concerns about how and what information is collected. Finally, the Census Office must act as the coordinating body between the U.S. Census Bureau, local governments, and its contracted partners in order for its communications and outreach plan to be successful.

—Sara Noceto, Senate Office of Research

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