

[Editor's note: The Workshop on Private-Sector Applications in Planning and Marketing was scheduled to be chaired by Frances Banerjee of the Community Redevelopment Agency, Los Angeles. Mrs. Banerjee was unable to attend due to illness. Rube Diamond of the Southern California Association of Governments (SCAG) ably served as her substitute in Orlando. Mrs. Banerjee's introductory comments precede the workshop recommendations, which were prepared by Diamond.]

Private-Sector Applications in Planning and Marketing

Frances Banerjee

The transportation data set collected as part of the decennial census has gradually replaced most metropolitan large-scale area surveys of travel. Federal, state, and local agencies have acted to create specialized data bases derived from the census in order to plan and monitor a wide range of ongoing public programs. Generally these agencies have been the primary users of the census transportation data.

Even the limited experience of local census data centers in serving the information needs of a wide range of users has indicated that a broad market exists for data application. In fact, if census data are merged with local data files, there is a significant opportunity for metropolitan governmental organizations to provide a more comprehensive range of information services. Little attention has been given to definition of an ongoing product line that merges census data with local data and provides a continuum of services between decennial censuses.

The key to creating more demand for the census data is in innovative manipulation of federal and local data files and in subsequent aggressive marketing. In this paper the focus is primarily on the marketing component. Some barriers to effective marketing that could be overcome in design and administration of the 1990 census are briefly:

1. The institutional and organizational process currently governing local census centers diminishes the likelihood of an aggressive marketing program;
2. Timing and reliability of the census tapes can undermine the viability and credibility of subsequently developed data files;
3. Costs of obtaining census data can be prohibitive to small users; data becomes available to them only after local public agencies bear extensive data management costs to verify and process the tapes;
4. Data should be formatted to increase the range of uses; and
5. New types of data should be developed for use in developing transportation policy.

With changes, an extensive secondary user market could be created for the 1990 census. Changes could be accomplished by 1990; however, the most difficult is that of institutional arrangements. If problems in this area cannot be overcome, subsequent marketing efforts are unlikely to succeed.

OVERVIEW

The decennial census collects a wealth of transportation data that has become the standard inventory of travel behavior information in metropolitan areas. At first glance, there would appear to be a wide range of users for this data set other than transportation planning organizations. These users could include

- Travel-related commercial organizations such as the insurance industry,
- Advertising organizations,
- Chain retail organizations,
- Development groups,
- New industry such as the cellular telephone business,
- Nonprofit organizations and private providers of public services.

To date, this seemingly broad demand for the data has not emerged. In asking why, one must review the barriers that have hindered an effective program.

BARRIERS TO MORE WIDESPREAD USE OF CENSUS TRANSPORTATION DATA

There are numerous barriers to a more widespread use of census transportation data. Following are five major barriers that appear to be pervasive.

Institutional Arrangements

Current processing and accessing of data from the U.S. census are generally undertaken at the local level, often by the Council of Governments (COG). Information is collected by the census; however, a small user must access the information through a metropolitan census data center or a private vendor. The census could not be responsive to requests from smaller users, and so serving this potential market was delegated to local governments. The COGs were selected as census data centers because of their extensive involvement in a range of public planning programs. Yet while this transfer in responsibility was being accomplished, there was no commensurate effort to fund and staff the COGs' transition into responsive data service providers. Few COGs have the money or means to transform their broader planning activities into a streamlined competitive data operation. Furthermore, although providing timely data to a range of private users is a service of considerable value in any metropolitan region, such services are not a priority item in ongoing funding programs of metropolitan planning organizations. In order to be successful, COGs must rely on the commitment of highly imaginative and qualified staff or must somehow bootleg the operation until it can operate as an independent cost center. In order to provide data services, the census center must have experience with marketing, advertising, mail-order sales, and direct sales. Deadlines become critical, as do customer services, and access to computer time must be guaranteed. Also, imaginative product development must be phased to generate ongoing sales. Few COGs have functioned in this overall working environment.

Within the near term, the Census Bureau should carefully assess the institutional arrangements for providing data at the metropolitan level and develop a set of measures to assess the resources and the performance of local

service providers. If there are indications (based on budget, staffing, and past experience) that a public provider cannot fulfill the functions of a census data center, that opportunity should be opened to the private sector. Joint ventures between public and private organizations should also be considered in this review of institutional arrangements. Alternative institutional arrangements should be presented to COGs so that the most appropriate institutional and organizational arrangement can be tailored for each metropolitan area.

Once metropolitan data centers are operating, every attempt should be made to promote cooperative efforts among major public centers throughout the country thereby allowing sharing of programming, sharing of comparable data files, and so forth. Ultimately, each major public census center should be able to access data of other metropolitan areas so that they will be able to compete in the national data market. This incentive for long-term growth potential is essential to creating an aggressive data unit.

Timing

Timing of the availability of census data is critical. The census is designated by year of collection so that to a casual potential user, the data are always released late. The 1980 census data were not made available until 1982 and certain portions were not released until 1983. Such a delay is usually not a problem for major users; however, smaller organizations who are not familiar with census data are apt to view the information as out of date. Little can be done to change the actual delivery date of the national census; however, a considerable amount of advance work can be done to change the attitude of potential users and to ensure that final editing and processing proceeds on a timely basis once the material has been received locally.

In 1990, as the data are being collected, census data centers should be contacting a wide range of potential users. The product should be marketed as the data are being collected in order to benefit from the overall public awareness level. Potential users should be informed of the possibility of creating merged files with local data sources so that advance orders can be secured and processing of coordinated data files can be prepared.

The availability of a usable metropolitan transportation file depends on agreement between public-sector transportation agencies to share the costs of editing and reprocessing the tapes. Often those costs are not known until the data are actually collected and processed. If the cost appears high, as it usually does, local agencies must undergo a lengthy process of trying to assemble a budget for the project. This process should begin before the period of data collection.

Cost and Budget

Cost of obtaining information is a major barrier for firms with limited budgets or analytical experience or both. This applies to public as well as private operations. Metropolitan travel data sets should be verified before they are released. This process, which has proven to be costly and cumbersome, must be undertaken to assure reliability of the information. To the extent that these costs can be minimized, the overall demand for census information should increase.

Currently, metropolitan areas have completed verifying the census data. This conference constitutes a carefully focused study to identify measures that could be applied to the 1990 census to improve reliability. After this conference, the Census Bureau should report back to major metropolitan areas regarding steps

to be taken at the national and local levels in order to assure major users that the issues of cost and reliability are being addressed. This is an interim marketing step that can help build a base of support for the 1990 census data.

New product development is one area of the overall program that suffers most from management neglect and consequently contributes to budget overruns. Initially, the census data are relatively timely; however, by mid-decade, demand has usually slackened. The national census operation functions throughout the intervening census periods because of the scale and complexity of the undertaking. However, the local census centers have limited windows to market their services. Census centers are faced with two alternatives. One option is a relatively unprofitable course of adjusting overall work programs to process data on an intermittent basis. The second option is a more intensive effort to broaden services so that a full complement of varied data sets is made available on a continuing basis. Innovative methods of developing an entire product line are essential to preparing a balanced budget. However, during the initial start-up years, funds must be secured to initiate this process.

Format

Formatting data can be a real incentive to increase the range of potential census users. Most businesses now have personal computers, but the census data are currently available only on tape or in print. Use of floppy disks would be valuable, and by 1990 other methods are likely to be available. Data format can provide a marketing tool to the census centers and to the extent possible such measures should be fully explored.

Data

Transportation policies at the national level are undergoing considerable change. At all levels of government, efforts are being made to involve private-sector groups in providing transportation services to their employees. Ridesharing programs, transit passes, and carpool parking are all variations of this effort. It would be most valuable if the census could collect transportation information from the employee regarding the extent of transportation subsidy offered by his or her employer and then cross-check this information with data that should be collected by the Census of Business and Industry.

Employers faced with the prospect of developing transportation benefits to employees would be interested in comparative assessment data, user profiles, and so on. Public transit agencies could track this significant trend. Air quality agencies could monitor program participation.

CONCLUSION

Local census centers have a future but not a guaranteed one. Their status is that of a fledgling, and their biggest challenge will be performance during the 1990 decennial census program.

Many local planning agencies view designation as a census data center as a means of transitioning their organizational growth. Accordingly, many such agencies are eager to assume this new function. These local data centers are a key to providing public information to a wide range of users, and their performance will ultimately affect the overall demand for census data and the range of its application.

The adequacy of such agencies to assume this function has rarely been

questioned because creation of these data centers is still somewhat experimental. To many users, these centers are the census offices and their performance reflects directly on the census. In designing the 1990 census program, this conference offers an appropriate opportunity to focus on federal and local institutional arrangements and on program development plans for the local census centers.