

## **Summary Report: First WCO Global Communication Strategies Conference**

1. The World Customs Organization (WCO) organized the 1st WCO Global Communication Strategies Conference on 8 and 9 October 2019 at WCO Headquarters in Brussels, Belgium. The Conference attracted 200 participants from 50 countries, including 48 speakers from Member administrations, international organizations and the private sector. The Conference discussed topical themes such as internal communication, stakeholder engagement, storytelling, social media, and the use of technologies such as artificial intelligence and data mining for communications.

### **Session 1: Understanding Customs challenges and the new Communication landscape**

2. During the first high-level panel discussion, WCO Deputy Secretary General Ricardo Treviño Chapa introduced the nine priorities identified by the WCO following discussions with Members, which form the basis of the new WCO Strategic Plan 2019-2022. The Director General of the European Commission Directorate-General for Taxation and Customs Union (DG TAXUD) stated that he considered the main challenge to be related to Communication. He explained DG TAXUD's strategy regarding "inward and outward messaging", pointing out the importance of providing more autonomy to employees, meeting regularly with them, and focusing on social media to communicate with stakeholders. The Head of Customs Investigations at the European Anti-Fraud Office (OLAF), representing the Director General of OLAF, highlighted the need for enhanced co-ordination between partners in the fight against fraud, but also the unique role of Customs during joint investigations. The Chief, Trade Facilitation Section of the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, (UNCTAD) shared some insights on UNCTAD's strategies for motivating more participation from stakeholders and commended the WCO for its leadership role as well as its drive to strengthen cooperation with partner organizations.

### **Session 2: Catalogue of best practices for communicating**

3. In the second session, WCO Members were invited to share their experiences with Conference participants. Antigua & Barbuda shared the challenges for a small island economy as well as the Caribbean perspective, and explained the importance given by Customs to Communication and the strategies adopted. The representative of Benin presented the traditional methods of communication used by the Customs administration, highlighting future projects regarding the use of web-based communication strategies. Botswana presented its communication strategies and described the identification of communication gaps that had led to a new strategy of leveraging the use of digital infrastructure to reach internal and external stakeholders, involving the use of a Chat board as well as social media. The Dominican Republic discussed the strategy of linking the work of Customs with the impact it has on the public, as well as the need to involve stakeholders through outreach communication campaigns. The speaker from Peru focused his presentation on SUNAT's strategy to improve Customs' performance by reducing dwelling time, and use this story to demonstrate the positive impact of Customs. The United Arab Emirates, represented by Dubai Customs, introduced the concept of communication through Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), and went on to explain the "happiness index" of government agencies, highlighting the fact that Customs had obtained the highest score after reviewing its strategy. The representative of US Customs and Border Protection provided an expert view on storytelling, sharing useful tips on: how

to find a story, make it interesting for the audience, use language that they understand, provide value to readers by rewarding them with useful material, look at a story from the reader's perspective, and tell a "story" rather than just offering facts.

### **Session 3: Internal communication**

4. The participants in this session discussed the relevance of internal communication in Customs strategies to boost staff morale. The speaker from Saudi Arabia shared his experience of change management from traditional communication channels to modern communication tools such as a "gamification strategy" using a mobile application to train employees, leading to increased commitment of staff. The representative of Uruguay Customs highlighted the link between strategic planning and internal communication, and explained the three levels of commitment: institutional, interpersonal and intrapersonal. Mexico Customs provided an insight into its internal communication plan in relation to the administration's general strategy. Through the efficient use of radio, TV, intranet and multimedia tools, Customs connected a SAT community of 32,812 people, and a survey on the climate and organizational culture showed that 94% of staff identified with the values of the institution. The conclusion was that no communication strategy can be efficient if it does not start with the most important asset of an organization: its people. The European Commission's internal communication strategy was presented, the focus being on internal meetings, use of a weekly newsletter, boosting the feeling of belonging by creating an internal brand and organizing internal events, providing a welcome kit to newcomers, and exchanging postcards to congratulate staff for their achievements, among other activities.

### **Session 4: Engaging with stakeholders in a common dialogue**

5. Moving on from the topic of internal communication, the Conference went on to demonstrate how Customs could improve its communication impact by involving its stakeholders at different stages of the communication process. The participant from OECD explained the work that the Organization is doing to determine the level of efficiency of public institutions' communication strategies, and underscored the high importance given to stakeholder engagement. IATA indicated that Customs administrations could leverage on their unique position to strengthen communication with all the actors along the supply chain. Interpol's representative referred to the role played by Customs in global and national operations and the need to enhance the cooperation between Customs and Police. Uganda Customs shared its local experience of communicating with remote stakeholders and strategies to adapt the language and message to various types of stakeholders, including women entrepreneurs, as well as discussing examples of partnership with bordering countries. Belgium Customs shared their experience working with stakeholders through National Forums as well as interacting with partners along the supply chain in regular meetings to discuss future Customs projects and ensure cooperation through dialogue. The private sector perspective on knowledge translation was provided by Crimson Logic, which also highlighted technologies and tools to improve the methods through which Customs communicates with its stakeholders.

### **Session 5: Storytelling: engaging emotionally with customers**

6. The "storytelling" session discussed the concept of transforming data into a story and understanding the audience from their perspective, as a means of changing their

behaviour. Netherlands Customs presented the theory of “behavioural insight” as well as its practicability, exploring the conscious and subconscious reactions leading to acceptance. Through techniques such as reciprocity and cognitive dissonance, messages can be constructed in a way that is conducive to self-persuasion. The participant from Zambia demonstrated how local storytelling techniques can be used to reach out to the general public. The examples of roadshows with local comedians and the use of drama to explain a new tax were highly appreciated by Conference participants. The WCO’s work on gender and diversity was highlighted during this session, where participants learned about the importance of gender neutral language for an inclusive approach. The session also provided an insight into the use of “smart” visuals to sketch ideas and make them simpler to visualize and understand. All the sessions of the Conference were sketched, and participants were invited to visit the event’s website after the conference to discover the visuals.

### **Session 6: Engaging with audiences – unlocking the power of social media**

7. After having listened to experts on how to tell a story, the participants went on to discover best practices in relation to social media. The representative from Frontex explained techniques for discovering fake news and ensuring that target audiences obtain facts that are verifiable. The presentation also focused on the challenges related to ensuring the credibility of information spread on social media - specifically that statistics demonstrate that fake news attracts more engagement than legitimate news, the “news-like” format of information shared, the increased use of “fake news” by politicians and its spread by traditional media, and the inherent tendency for humans to seek information that confirms their existing bias. The speaker from Finland Customs shared best practices regarding social media, namely the use of sniffer dogs to create emotions that are relatable by the general public, as well as stories that create emotional engagement. Europol shared the experience of the Organization regarding “crowdsourcing”, thus involving the general public in the search for “most wanted” EU criminals. Such an experience could be applied to Customs where the assistance or support of the public could be sought for global/regional/local operations. DGTAXUD shared its experience of effective social media campaigns involving the Customs community; useful tips shared during the session included: speaking the language of the audience, joining the conversations of other stakeholders, engaging the audience with questions and games, diversifying content, and being helpful, informative, personal and emotional. The representative from Morocco explained how the setting-up of an audio-visual strategy for communicating on social media has had a positive impact on the way Morocco Customs communicates with its stakeholders, as well as the public perception. The participants listened attentively to the advice on the implementation of such a strategy with minimal investment and management commitment.

### **Session 7: Embracing new technologies: Ideas lab**

8. The last session of the Conference saw experts from Microsoft, Accenture and Meltwater explain how Artificial Intelligence (AI) has transformed the communication landscape and how the technology is already a reality. From Natural Language Processing to Machine Learning and Deep Learning, participants discovered how AI can power efficient communication tools mimicking human-to-human interactions that are less resource-intensive, and provide a 24/7 response to Customs queries. Indonesia Customs described its hands-on experience of introducing AI in a Customs communication strategy, and the

results of adopting such a strategy. The speaker from Indonesia went on to explain how “chatbots” are used on the Customs website to respond to queries from the public, alongside a dedicated app “Noni bravo” and a “signal” mobile application. The level of engagement of the public, and the positive feedback, have been overwhelming, pushing the administration to invest further in such technology. Antigua and Barbuda also shared their future strategy on implementing AI to improve customer service and make effective use of the available human resources.

**Conclusion:**

9. At the end of the Conference, the participants congratulated the WCO for this initiative, and proposed that this event becomes a regular feature in order to provide Members with an opportunity to share best practices while inviting experts to present new strategies to raise the profile of Customs and assist in providing information to the public in a more effective way.
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