

Texas 2036 Interview: A conversation about the 2020 Census with Sophia Johnson

The interview has been edited for clarity, brevity and key highlights.

Today we are joined by Sophia Johnson, founder and president of ABI, a Dallas based advertising and marketing firm. Launched in 2003 the firm has grown to become a leading agency for the transportation, education, and healthcare industries, and also for non-profit organizations. ABI was hired by the city of Dallas to lead their outreach efforts for the 2020 Census, which will be the focus of our conversation today.

Enisha Shropshire: Most people are aware of the census. They've probably heard a lot about it, but just to set the table, what exactly is the census?

Sophia Johnson: The census is a survey put out by the federal government. It's 10 questions, it takes about 10 minutes, and we ask all residents that are within the United States and its territories to fill it out. If you sleep here most of the time within our borders then you are eligible to fill out the census.

Enisha Shropshire: I understand there is about \$675 billion federal dollars up for grabs and it's based on census data. Of those dollars how much is at stake for the state of Texas and for Dallas?

Sophia Johnson: The state of Texas has upwards of \$100 billion dollars at stake. The estimates vary, but you're talking about over \$3,000 per person when you talk about the different forms of aid given to the state. The more residents you have, the more money you get.

Enisha Shropshire: What is the funding used for?

Sophia Johnson: The funding can be used for the Children's Health Insurance Program, School Nutrition Program, Medicare, Medicaid, and even the construction of highways, roads, and schools. What happens in our education system is heavily decided by the census count. It helps us plan. Will there need to be a new school in a certain area based on projections? Census data is vitally important to so much of what is a part of our regular everyday life.

Enisha Shropshire: It seems like whenever there's money involved there's always a discussion around equity. It's important for the census to understand where people are in order to distribute funds correctly.

Sophia Johnson: That's exactly right. There are groups of people called hard-to-count people. Typically, they are the people that will benefit most from census count services like School Nutrition Program, Children's Health Insurance Program, etc. We're talking

about those who are in poverty, possibly undocumented, who don't speak the English language, who are ethnic minorities, and families that have children zero to five years of age.

Enisha Shropshire: What makes them hard to count? What puts them into that category?

Sophia Johnson: The federal government hopes that people will voluntarily fill out the census without an enumerator having to come to your door. An enumerator works on behalf of the US government and they will come knock on your door and help walk you through the 10 questions. That's labor intensive and expensive, so the hope is that people get it in the mail and fill it out, or go online and fill it out at 2020Census.gov. When people don't fill out the census by mail or internet, an enumerator has to come. They are then considered hard-to-count.

Enisha Shropshire: How has COVID-19 effected your outreach efforts?

Sophia Johnson: For starters, people only want to talk about COVID-19. It's hard to get the ear of the average resident, because when they're looking online they're looking at news related to COVID-19. The census doesn't have a sense of urgency, so people think, "Meh." Another issue is that much of our strategy for Dallas County really depended on us meeting people where they are. We wanted to make sure that our team was comprised of people that know where the hard-to-count are, that know the community influencers of the hard-to-count, so we could get in front of their face. Since we can't meet them where they are physically, we're having to change tactics and meet them where they are online.

Enisha Shropshire: Census.gov has a mapping tracker and it's showing, currently, only 53.3% of Texans have responded. I think Dallas was slightly higher, but what are the consequences of not responding? What does that do to our communities?

Sophia Johnson: It puts the burden on the federal government to go door to door to find the hard-to-count. The issue for Texas is that we've got the fastest growing metro area right here, and you don't want to miss out on funding for those residents. When an area is growing, the support it needs is growing, and what should be allocated to our residents, if they're not filling out the census, doesn't get allocated. That is the more people, more money factor. There's also a more people, more power factor. If we have more residents and we're growing while somewhere like Mississippi is shrinking, then we should have more congressional representation. We should have more of a say, more weight in what happens in Congress. If our residents are accurately counted, we may pick up one, two, or three seats in Congress. Essentially, taking those seats from states that have a decreasing population. It's a big deal when you have larger congressional representation because sometimes those votes are decided by one or two people.

It also plays into redistricting, which is done every 10 years, and how the lines will be drawn. They have to take into account census data on how many people are in each area. If there are groups underrepresented, they're missing an opportunity when the lines are redrawn to have someone representing them. Your average person might not be talking about it, but people who are familiar with politics understand why the redistricting issue is so important.

Enisha Shropshire: It's about the dollars, it's about representation, it's about business, it's about community, and it's about the data as a whole.

Sophia Johnson: I think people take it for granted, but because I own an ad agency I do a lot of market research on behalf of our clients using census data. Let's say we have a client that owns a mall, and they want to know if there's enough traffic to attract stores to their mall. We look at residents and whether it's growing.

Enisha Shropshire: There's a lot of misinformation about the census and what the data is used for. Are those concerns valid?

Sophia Johnson: Last year there was the concern there may be a citizenship question, which led some of the residents here to wonder, "Is this going to be attached to law enforcement? Is there an opportunity for somebody to exploit me?" I think because so much has happened with personal information people are cautious. But it's illegal for the Census Bureau to share information submitted to the bureau with any law enforcement agency, landlord, or business. Any of the personal information given cannot be shared for 72 years. What is shared is the count- the number of people are in the area. People should feel comfortable knowing their information is protected by law, and it would be illegal for the Census Bureau to share it with anyone. It's also important for people to know there's no money associated with the Census Bureau. Nobody's going to ask you for payment or your social security number.

Enisha Shropshire: Talk a little bit more about the different ways in which people can respond.

Sophia Johnson: The good news is that everybody should have received their census by mail by now. The census actually started in the middle of March, with most people getting an invitation to answer online. That was really challenging for Dallas County and Harris County because some of our larger urban areas don't have internet connection like the more affluent suburbs do. When the census came out and welcomed people to get online and fill it out, there were a bunch of residents that couldn't get online. But a month later they mailed the survey, so now people can mail it, do it online, or call to complete the census.

Enisha Shropshire: Is it true the census is required by law to complete?

Sophia Johnson: You are required by law to fill out the census. You could be subject to a fine if you do not. I don't know to the extent that's really enforced, but it is strongly encouraged because the government can't really do what it needs to do if it doesn't have an accurate count of its people.

Enisha Shropshire: COVID-19 highlighted a lot of reasons why we should participate in the census. What are some of the ways in which ABI is leading the charge here in Dallas?

Sophia Johnson: We are using social media. If people are on Facebook, they are going to see our ads. If you look in your email, you've probably received an email from us. At the federal level you're also seeing TV commercials. We also have all of our elected officials engaged posting and sending emails. In addition, we are out to the extent that we can be. With Dallas ISD we are part of their food giveaway, giving out hand sanitizer and fliers, which makes us kind of popular. We're at Lowe's Home Improvement locations, with kiosks and pads people can fill out right there. We also have a host of churches including it in their online services. There are a lot of partnerships engaged because they benefit from the census just as much as a resident. These non-profits, churches, and government entities all benefit from an accurate count.

Enisha Shropshire: This has been really informative. Are there any last things you'd like our viewers to know about the census?

Sophia Johnson: If you want to call, if you're feeling lonely and you want to get on the phone, the number to call to fill out the census is **844-330-2020**. Or go to **Census.gov** and fill it out. It's 10 questions and less than 10 minutes. Or fill out the paper copy you received in the mail.