

Work Session on Statistical Output for  
Dissemination to Information Media  
(Voorburg, Netherlands, 25-27 September 2000)

**ENGLISH ONLY**

**HOW TO BUILD A CORPORATE DESIGN  
AS A MODERN INFORMATION PROVIDER?**

**What methods can statistical agencies use to achieve a high profile  
and visibility in media and general public relationships – the Italian experience**

Paper submitted by ISTAT<sup>1</sup>

**INTRODUCTION**

1. For public statistics, visibility is closely tied to credibility: it is not possible to obtain the attention of the media and the general public when a solid credibility, based on tangible, verifiable elements, has not been attained. ISTAT has invested much energy in communication in recent years, particularly from 1994, and communication has followed, step by step, the evolution of the Institute's role. Three phases can be identified for the process, which is still in course:

- in the recent past, attention was devoted to the specialistic targets, both at the media and the general public levels. We addressed, not exclusively but mainly, economic journalists and businesses, as suppliers and users of statistical data. As for the Institute's image, its characteristics of scientific reliability and political independence were emphasised;
- today the most significant commitment is directed towards the target of the non-specialist citizens, also in view of the censuses that will take place in 2000-2001. Communication is taking on the tone of popularisation. The work being carried out on the Institute's image stresses the accessibility of official statistics and the collaboration of individuals in the success of the surveys, and enhances the function of statistics as a tool for decision-making, both in the governing of public matters and in private life. The development of the Web,

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which allows an unmediated relationship with citizens, is now a thing of the present, although private accesses to the Internet are not yet too developed in Italy;

- the future has already begun, and the main challenges invest the new technologies, the personalised services, and the visibility of the supranational statistics.

### **1. The recent past: the specialists**

2. Up until and through the year 1994, the ISTAT made its data known whenever they were available, without a specific calendar or timetable for issuing them. By successive approximations ISTAT stressed the time of production of figures so that the data of the economic situation – the “hottest” data, those capable of influencing financial markets – would be issued on a quarterly schedule first, then half-yearly, and lastly yearly. By making known the dates and times when the press releases were to be issued 12 months ahead of time, the Institute demonstrated:

- its transparency: by stating the availability times of the data in advance, it is not possible to be suspected of favoring or opposing the government in office by presenting ad hoc information that may put its work in a positive or negative light;
- its independence: the data are available for everyone, including the government, at the same time. This protects them from any possibility or suspicion of tampering

3. The calendar of the press releases enabled the economic journalists to devote a otherwise unthinkable attention to statistical data, since the space to be devoted to the analysis of the economic situation could be planned ahead of time. Moreover, the briefings, held in the morning by the technical services staff, in collaboration with the press office and using the “lock-up” system already experimented by our English colleagues, permitted a sort of quality control “ex ante” on the takes of the press agencies and the better quality of the mediation had a positive effect on the Institute’s image and credibility. The telephone line for journalists, functioning from Monday through Friday from 8.30 a.m. to 6 p.m., also fostered a better relationship with the media and the consequent better coverage of the news had a positive effect on the knowledge of public statistics by citizens as well.

4. The dialogue with the professional respondents, the businesses, was aided with the creation of sectorial “focus groups” on industrial, commercial, transport and tourism enterprises and non-profit activities. Representatives of the business associations and experts of the individual sectors were regularly involved in the definition of the strategies for the collection and return of the data. This created a more relaxed atmosphere with a target that was very sensitive to the statistics burden. At the same time, the production times of the economic situation and structural data were significantly reduced and the offline and online publication of the statistical data grew, meeting the needs of professional users. The reduction of the statistics burden was obtained with a rationalisation of the samples and the systematised use of administrative sources.

## **2. The present: the citizens**

5. In the early 1990s, also at the urging of a political class which today is more mindful than it once was of data of a social nature, the “Multiscopo” survey, the most important source of knowledge of social dynamics, the citizens’ habits, their perception of many aspects of everyday life and existence in general, was reorganised. Everyday life also includes the different social roles of men and women. The ISTAT’s commitment for the development of gender statistics had two important moments: 1996, when the President of ISTAT urged the other agencies of the Italian statistical System (co-ordinated and headed by Istat) to produce and publicise statistics produced from the standpoint of gender, and 1999, when the Institute hosted the illustration of a bill of law for the development of gender statistics and for the assessment of the gender impact of the laws, presented by the Minister for Equal Opportunities.

6. **Attention to social dynamics.** In the past two years, communication has been based on the publication and exploitation of the data on social dynamics. This kind of information has great public appeal, great impact, and is easy to remember and relate to other phenomena. Since it represents something tangible and close to the everyday experience of any citizen, it lends itself better than anything else to bringing “outsiders” closer to quantitative information. However, in the media’s attention, it is necessary to compete with public and private parties who have long acquired credibility in this field, even though they are often less reliable scientifically. In addition to the greater editing care and the new publishing look, today an attempt is made to make information “last”. In all cases, a publication on social themes contains a goldmine of information that the hard law of journalism burns in just a single newspaper article or news flash during the evening news, without going into the different aspects and sometimes overlooking significant information because of a lack of space. Thus, ISTAT see to issuing a “short note” (a kind of unscheduled press release) before the issuing of the volume, developing only a few of the points covered in the publication. Later, in the note for the press that accompanies the issuing of the printed volume, various aspects can be highlighted. This generally grants to double the presence in the media in the social statistics field, remaining longer in the public’s attention. Moreover, the constant evidence of the metadata (numerousness of the sampling, data survey procedure, extent of statistical error) on both the volumes and on the material worked on for the press, should accustom the citizens to questioning the reliability of surveys carried out on insufficient samplings and to distinguishing between official statistics and other forms of quantitative research.

- **The hot media.** The attention to the media which are most suitable for reaching a vast, unspecialised public has grown progressively with the development of communication. In particular, work has been done on the widespread presence of statistical information (through a continuous quality control) in the national radio and television network schedules. Fixed, regular appearances in discussions on topical themes, during which the Institute’s representatives provided quantitative information on the phenomenon and framed it in light of more general trends, were arranged. In particular, between 1999 and 2000, the ISTAT President participated once a week for three months in the radio news programme at 8.45 a.m. Every week a theme was discussed, in light of the most recent data supplied by the Institute. The participation in this edition of the radio news programme rather than another offered an advantage: the data on the listening audience showed that that radio news programme, in that timeslot, was the one most listened to by opinion makers. That news

programme thus had a capacity for penetration also with regard to a particularly interesting target.

- From the volume to the book. The decision to approach the unspecialised public entailed an adjustment of the “tone of voice” of statistics and the visual characteristics of the products. A general restyling of the volumes was carried out, producing a new graphic style and greater care in editing. The “*argomenti*” (“subjects”) series, which deals with themes of general cultural interest, is published in a smaller format than the standard ones, much more similar to books on the shelves of unspecialised bookshops. Our aim was to create familiarity with statistics themes, bringing them closer to the manners and models of cultural communication *tout court*. In particular, the Institute’s annual report on the situation of the country, a collection of detailed analyses on the various aspect of Italian life of the year just finished (the report is presented in May of each year and refers to the previous year), is also produced in a pocket-sized edition, in collaboration with a national publishing house, which summarises the same themes in a less technical language that is accessible to non-insiders as well. The pocket version is available both in bookshops and at newsstands. Lastly, in recent months an agreement was reached with a national distributor who has brought the ISTAT’s volumes to all the major Italian bookshops, while up to just a short time ago they were present only in the statistics information centres and specialised bookshops;
- Joint ventures for communication. Visibility with the unspecialised public is also obtained by associating statistics with the institutions that are most known to citizens:
- For three years the presentation of the ISTAT’s annual report has taken place at the Chamber of Deputies, to emphasise the fact that the data and analyses produced by the Institute belong to the entire country. This year the event was enhanced by the presence of the Head of State.
- For five years the ISTAT has produced the free informational booklet “University and Work, Statistics for Choosing”, a summary of data on the Italian university, conceived for a public of young people, with a large paragraph devoted to the professional outlets of graduates with diplomas and degrees in the various disciplines. For two years the booklet has been presented at the Ministry of Public Education, personally commented on by the Minister, and sent as guidance material to last-year students of high schools who have to pre-enrol with a university if they choose to continue their studies after receiving their diploma. Thus we manage to transmit to students and their families the concept that statistical information is useful for making decisions in private life also, not only in the governmental cabinets.
- In June of this year, the ISTAT hosted the presentation of the UN’s report for the year 2000, “Women in the World. Trends and Statistics”.

**7. Presence on the territory.** Approaching citizens is a must. The annual report for the year 2000 has been re-proposed and discussed in a series of meetings all over the Italian peninsula. In 1998, the “book fair” that takes place each year in Turin was the seat chosen for the presentation of the new data on reading and readers. Rather than an aseptic communication from the Rome office, we preferred to bring the contribution of statistical information to the place of a cultural event.

- Institutional advertising. The purchase of advertising spaces is a delicate subject for a public body. Is advertising an appropriate use of public money? This is not an easy question to answer. However, while the co-operation of the respondents – citizens, businesses, and institutions – is indispensable for statistical information to be produced, investing in advertising – especially during general census periods – is not only justified, but also advisable for the purposes of the quality of the survey. Advertising campaigns are a formidable opportunity for strengthening the identity of a statistics institute. The choice of the verbal and visual messages identifies the communicating body and the type of relationship it intends to establish with the respondents.

8. For the last institutional campaigns and for that which is presently being prepared for the occasion of the fifth general agriculture census, messages have been chosen which bear witness to the user's orientation, stressing the closeness of statistics to citizens and enhancing the "gentlemen's agreement" between official statistics and the respondents.

### **3. The future challenges**

9. The culture of the statistical datum has grown much in recent years, just as the awareness of its usefulness for economic and financial purposes. The demand is growing exponentially. The online access of even very fine disaggregations of data has already been experimented: the data warehouse of the intermediate industry and services census has made it possible, for more refined users, to create personalised tables and transfer them free of charge to their own PCs. Thousands of contacts have been recorded. But today, the users demand even more: specialised and personalised services, the supply of which has enormous production costs, which risk sacrificing the "poor statistics", those which do not have a market but are of public utility. Paid services on request seem to be the way. What to do and what to say, as public statistics communicators? What kind of "corporate identity" could we underline?

10. Another open question, which is increasingly urgent since the adoption of the euro will shortly become effective and the Europeanisation of the market will become stronger, is that of the visibility of statistical data which by now are fully comparable. Up to now the commitment of those working in communication was concentrated on national statistics; what will our job as public statistics communicators be tomorrow? Whose commitment will be the image of European statistics?