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Communication process with respondents throughout institutions surveys

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Abstract

The strengthening automation of data production procedures are necessary for data collection in order to accelerate the research process, to reduce costs and to achieve further burden reduction. In this contest the importance of a good communication is crucial to motivate respondents to provide reliable and timely data.

Automated methods of data collection (Reporting Portals, online survey tool, website) lead to new methods of communication.

From the respondent's point of view, the major difficulty with these methods is that they haven't direct contact with the interviewer. Appropriate communication with respondents, designed with the purpose of providing them with detailed and practical guidelines on data required, is central.

Therefore, this paper has the purpose of analyzing the methods of communication with respondents of surveys concerning the Institutions.

These last are mainly conducted by web and involve institutions with different characteristics: local institutions such as municipalities, provinces, regions or institutions operating in the social-health sector such as hospitals and schools or social-assistance centers.

This paper will outline the various communication methods used on every stage of the surveys on Institutions, with a focus on data collection phase.

Keywords: communication with respondent, data collection, survey on Institutions.

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Communication process with respondents throughout Institutions surveys

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The statistical offices of many countries are implementing the collection of data from different sources such as administrative sources or big data, in order to cut costs and reduce the burden for individuals and businesses. Although the traditional role of the respondent seems to be less important, some information must be gathered directly from the respondents through a survey.

Surveys can help assess the representativeness of individual opinions and experiences and provide concrete numbers on people's opinions and behaviours that can be used to draw conclusion and to make important decisions.

In surveys, the role of respondent is not only a data provider, obliged to submit data by law, but also a partner for the system of official statistics (Dlugosz A., 2017). This partnership, in which respondent is central in the survey process, requires a good communication, cooperation and mutual trust. Good communication is not just about providing respondents with information about their obligations and deadlines. Respondents need to be sure that data submitted by them really matters for statistics and community.

Dillman (2000) theorises that a kind of social exchange's takes place between the survey organization and the respondent.

In order to achieve this exchange, it is important to communicate with respondents in some different ways, depending on their different characteristics and on every stage of a survey.

Groves, Cialdini and Couper (1992) propose that the initial contact between interviewer and respondent can affect any future relationship; a strained or awkward relationship could lead to the survey being perceived as more burdensome. Baumgartner (1978) theorise that initial contacts which demonstrate special attention will increase the sense of importance to the respondent.

In this preliminary phase, all respondents should be given any information about the organisation: how and why they have been selected, the aim of the survey; whether responses are voluntary or mandatory, what will happen to the information provided they can always ask for help in case of any problem connected with the survey.

Follow-up communications can also have an effect on response rates. Heberlein and Baumgartner (1978) theorise that if follow-up communications demonstrate attentiveness, greater effort and expense. Kanuk and Berenson (1975), also propose that follow-up contacts can be used to great effect and successive use of them can increase response.

The contents of survey notes and guidance can also affect perceived response burden as many researchers include long, complicated notes that increase the cognitive burden on respondents. Dillman, Sinclair and Clark (1993) found that long, complicated and perhaps contradictory instructions contribute to survey non-response.

In the context of surveys on Institutions, Istat communicate with respondents in many ways and on every stage of a survey. The way in which we communicate is linked to the type of respondent and to the type of survey; both determine the communication choices to be adopted for a more effective data collection. A fundamental role in this area is represented by the automated methods of data collection used by Istat, which allow acquiring reliable and prompted data thanks to the security protocols. The use of survey tools and online reports lead to the definition of a communication with the respondent as direct and timely as possible to shorten distance that can be generated when there is no direct contact with the interviewer.

Communications strategies adopted in Surveys on Institutions

The sector of statistical surveys concerning Institutions involves institutions with different characteristics: public entities as Regions, Provinces and Municipalities and Institutions operating in the social-welfare and social-health sectors such as public and private structures that provide social-assistance and socio-health services, anti-violence centres and women's shelters, health facilities as hospitals and schools.

For better analyse the communication flow with the respondent during data collection process, it is useful to examine the communication dividing a survey into three data collection phases:

- *Start up phase*
- *Fieldwork phase*
- *Recovery of non-responses phase*

During the *start-up phase* Data Collection Department (*Direzione Centrale per la Raccolta Dati*) send an informative letter. This institutional communication state the purpose of the survey, a description of the topic of the survey, the methods of access to the questionnaire and survey deadline.

To simplify the relationship with the respondent, the text is essential with a short introduction that focuses on the objective of the survey and on how this can be achieved thanks to the collaboration of the respondent.

Often, the informative letters include respondent’s name or name of the Institution. According to the literature, this personalization creates the impression that respondents are receiving the researcher’s special attention and that their answers are singularly important and should increase the likelihood of them responding to the survey request (Gendall P., 2005).

The core of the letter is dedicated to data acquisition procedures and the instructions to access to the questionnaire: link to the website, ID and password, IT equipment required.

Then are indicated the deadline and the communication channels to support the respondent. These are diversified according to the typology of the respondent; in particular for the survey "Residential socio-assistance and social-health facilities" (where about 14,000 structures are involved) and for the "Survey on the insertion of pupils with disabilities in state schools and non-state" (where 55,000 schools are involved) we decided to use an external Contact Centre.

Contact centres facilitate communication and speed up response times to requests for assistance, to process requests that can easily be traced back to the most frequent problems and for which a list of FAQs has been prepared.

On the other hand, for the type of strictly confidential issue concerning the health surveys "Discharged from medical institutions due to spontaneous abortion" and "Voluntary interruptions of pregnancy" and the surveys on social services or the "Survey on women's shelters ", the "Survey on anti-violence centres” it was decided not to make use of external support to ensure greater privacy and to have a direct contact with respondents.

The website to fill in the questionnaire is a fundamental communication tool during *the fieldwork phase*. On website homepage respondents can get information about the surveys, about the statistical production process, the legal basis and procedures and answers to FAQ’s.

Among the tools to support the completion of the questionnaire, respondents are provided with a guide and a questionnaire *facsimile,* which can be easily downloaded from the "Documents and Instructions" website section.

The guide describes each question in each section of the questionnaire in the same order in which is in the online questionnaire. Any technical terms used in the questionnaire and particular rules to be followed are also explained.

For the *recovery of non-responses* up to two or more reminder letters were sent. The first reminder letter is usually sent around two or three week after the initial invitation.

The second reminder letter is sent to all non-responding addresses, two to four weeks after the first reminder letter. The reminder letter contain instructions of how to register to the website and complete the questionnaire.

In order to maintain a collaborative relationship with the respondent, the reminder emphasize how the respondent contribution is essential for the success of the survey. The goal is to establish a dialogue not only a sense of obligation to reply to the questionnaire. That is, a communication aimed at soliciting the civic sense to participate in the survey as it is carried out by a public entity that will make these data available for development projects in the country.

An example of strategy adopted: Statistical survey of building permits

Among the various types of surveys on Institutions, we can find those conducted by Istat with an infra-annual frequency (monthly or quarterly) defined as "conjunctural surveys" for which there is an obligation to reply and, in some cases, pecuniary sanction. Let's take the following surveys as an example: Statistical survey of building permits (IST-00564) involving 6871 municipalities and "Rapid" statistical survey of building permits (IST-01675) involving 1032 municipalities. Municipalities involved in both surveys are required to reply and, moreover, if their resident population on the date of 31/12/exceeds 20,000 People, they are at risk of a pecuniary administrative sanction.

Once the starting list with all responding units has been acquired, we can proceed with the massive sending of certified e-mails to let respondents know when the survey will actually start.

During the *start-up phase* of the survey, each Mayor of the municipality receive an institutional communication written using a formal language (informative letter) in which they are informed in detail on objectives, methods of access to the questionnaire, duration of the survey, deadlines, survey reference period, regulatory constraints, etc.

In the information letter of this survey, after having illustrated the contents of the survey, it is specified that the survey questionnaire of building permits is divided into a cycle of 12 monthly data supplies. The importance of the participation and collaboration in this survey by the municipalities and the sending of data within the time limits established according to the European regulation is specified below. This will be both be useful for a successful survey and to enrich the wealth of statistical data useful for the community. Furthermore, for the purposes of applying the sanctions, pursuant to art. 7 of Legislative Decree no. 322/1989, the types of supplies to be considered omitted or incomplete are specified. This assessment of the sanctionability of the survey units is carried out at the end of the survey period considering the entire annual supply cycle.

If the respondent encounters difficulties in accessing the portal, problems with the password, doubts about the support, the communication channels to support them are indicated in the letter.

To stimulate the respondent's participation in the survey and to avoid the risk of incurring a pecuniary sanction, a reminder notice is sent in the recovery phase of the non-responses close to the deadline of the date of dispatch of the monthly supply (7 days before that date), a reminder shortly after the expiration date (7 days after the expiration date) and a last notice close to the final date to avoid incurring a penalty (14 days after the expiry date of the supply) via PEC and mailbox of institutional e-mail.

In the text, after a brief reminder of the survey content, the respondent is invited to send the data relating to a specific month not yet received to allow Istat to comply with the terms provided for by the law. The letters, which are all registered and signed by the Director, refer specifically to when the investigation started, to the certified email address to which the information letter was sent, to the registration number of the information and to the date of protocol. Information is again provided for a possible request for support and we remind that this Survey is subject to an obligation to reply and, in some cases, to a financial penalty.

One of the most successful organizational innovations since this survey was taken over by the RDF service is the use of Certified Electronic Mail (PEC) for the management of communications, reminders, and other notices to the survey units (municipalities) to search to minimize the number of non-replies and late dispatches of supplies for individual months. Over time, there has been an increasing need to find a more timely and effective means of communication with the municipalities than the contact methods traditionally used in statistical surveys.

The choice of this tool was motivated by the fact that the PEC is an e-mail system that provides the sender with the certainty of sending and delivering messages: it allows the exchange of messages and attached documents, in maximum security and with the same legal value of the registered letter with acknowledgment of receipt. The main difference with traditional electronic mail is the ability to consider receipts as proof of sending, receiving and the content of the message sent.

To implement this operation of sending notices, a standardized statistical procedure has been developed that allows us to know, in real time, which municipalities are in default on a specific date. This means that we can send the communication letters to the municipalities

concerned in a precise manner and by inserting specific details on the missing data and on the survey.
As a demonstration of what has been said, the two graphs (cfr Figure 1 and Figure 2) below show the trend of sending data from 2018 to 2020 for both surveys. The monthly data entered were taken on the twentieth day after the expiry date of the monthly supply (before the municipality risks being sanctioned) after sending all 3 types of reminders. Overall, there has been a marked improvement in the transmission of recorded data starting from May 2019. In that month we started to adopt the systematic procedure for sending reminders to non-responding municipalities. If you look to both line chart, you will notice an increase in response rate in that period which then lasted over time compared to 2018. In particular, the response rate increase in May 2019 compared to May 2018 was 53%. The same was for the increase between April 2019 and May 2019. This is proof that monitoring and sending specific reminders has increased the response rate for both surveys. If we look at the trends over time, we can easily see that the system developed stabilize the data delivery process thanks to the use of this data processing and monitoring system. In fact, the trend of the line chart for mid-2019 and all 2020 has consolidated on a certain level much higher than that of 2018. The only exception that can be seen from the graphs concerns the sending of data for October and November 2020 as there was a problem with the data acquisition system and, consequently, with the sending of reminders.
Over time we have seen a substantial increase in the sending of data within the established times. The entire process aimed at acquiring greatest number of information has led to a net decrease in the number of non-responses and units sanctioned.

Figure 1 *Response rate in PDC_RAP (IST-01675) by month (%)*

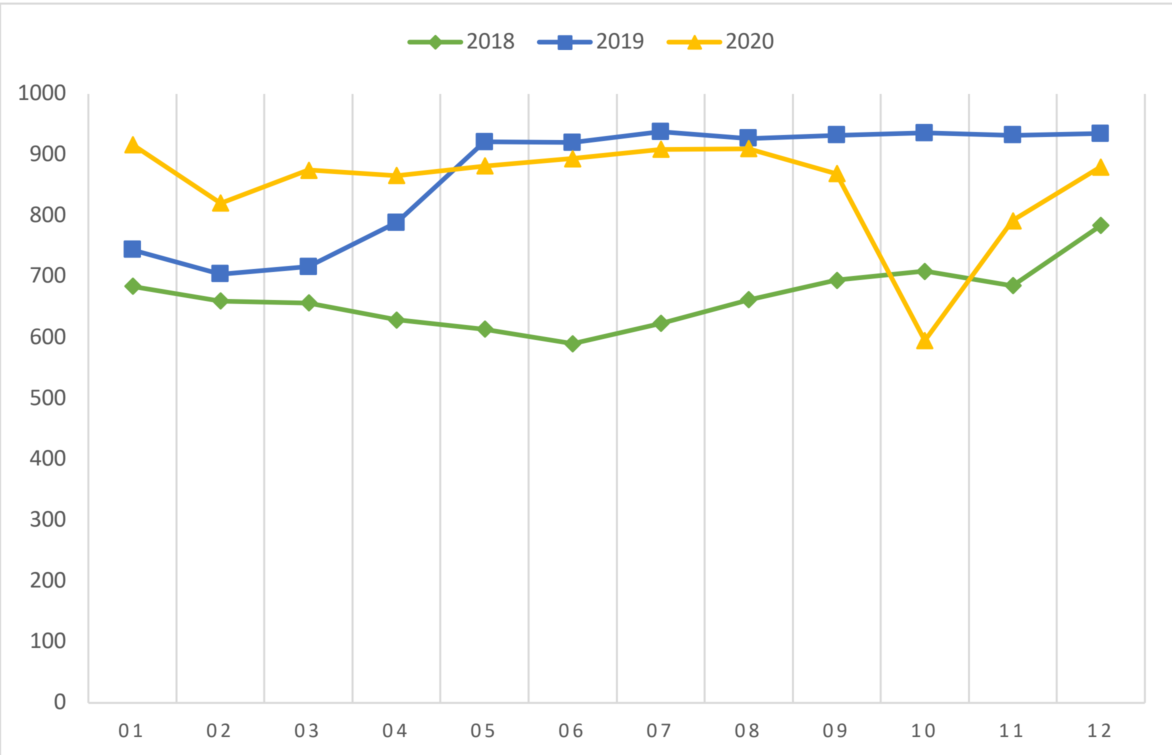
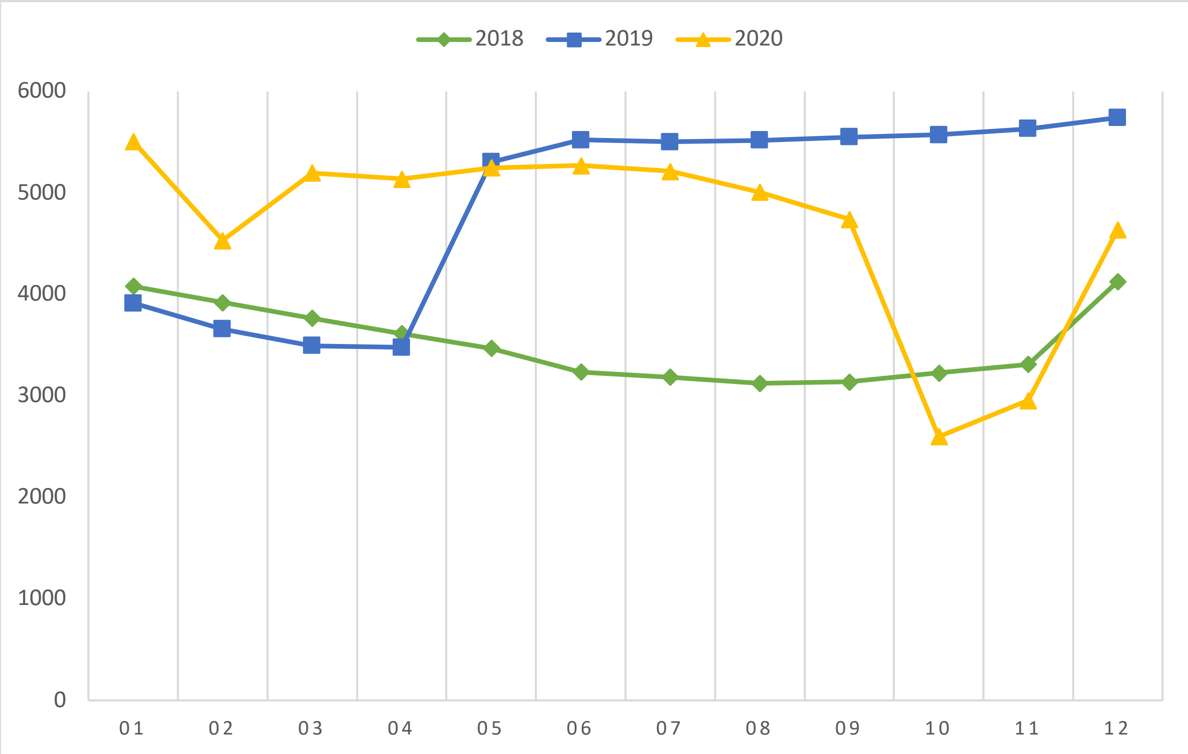


Figure 2 *Response rate in PDC (IST-00564) by month (%)*



As we have seen, the main activity we deal with in this context is the preparation of survey lists for sending reminders and notices. The PEC system allows valid monitoring that permit to know, almost at the same time as sending, the non-delivery. Furthermore, both in the reminder phase and in the formal notice phase, this procedure has given excellent results. In fact, over time we have seen a substantial increase in the sending of data within the established times and therefore the effectiveness of this tool and of the entire process aimed at acquiring the greatest amount of information from the municipalities. Consequently, all this has led to a net decrease in the number of responding units sanctioned.

Future developments

We are constant improving and developing new methods of communication and cooperation with respondents. Future efforts should focus on redesign of websites, improve information letters and establish studies on statistical call centres.

The following strategies could be used for even more effective communication through the website:

- rearrange the order of the information in the paragraphs giving precedence, at the beginning of the page, to the instructions to follow to access the questionnaire

- improve the use of font colours to highlight important communications such as the extension of the survey deadline, insert icons at the beginning of each paragraph that immediately recall the content described after creating a communicative synergy between text and image.

The visual aspect is very important in the guide to completing the questionnaire, whose length and referential setting could discourage reading.

Finally, improvements should be made in the text sent to non-respondents during the recovery phase to give the respondent greater motivation to fill in the questionnaire. In order to maintain a collaborative relationship with the respondent, the text should aim to invite the public to participate in the survey as it was carried out by a public body that will make these data available for development projects in the country.

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