

Communication strategies for the recovery of non-response: the example of surveys on Building Permits

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Surveys concerning the Institutions involve different types of respondents with different characteristics: Institutions operating in the social-health and social-care area and local Institutions such as regions, provinces and municipalities.

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". They are characterized by a formal communication process that follows a systematic procedure from the first contact with the respondent to the recovery of non-response and there is an obligation to reply and, in some cases, pecuniary sanction.

Two examples of this type of survey are the Survey on Building Permits and the Quick Survey on Building Permits. Both surveys involve the Italian municipalities that monthly validate on line questionnaires to make them available to ISTAT. They collect information on new residential or non-residential building projects or enlargement of pre-existing buildings with the aim of producing a set of indicators and variables that will be transmitted to Eurostat.

The first contact with the respondent begins with sending the informative letter that describes the aim of the survey, the mandatory nature of the response, references to which to turn in case of problems in filling in the questionnaire, what will happen with the information provided etc... Despite the formal language and style of the informative letter, it is underlined how important the individual participant's response is for the success of the survey.

Since 2019 when this survey was taken over by the Istat Data Collection Directorate, data collection management and communication strategies have evolved. Specifically the improvement of automated IT monitoring procedures have guaranteed a higher quality of the data.

One of the most successful organizational innovations 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. PEC provides the sender the certainty of sending and delivering messages in maximum security with the same legal value of the registered letter with acknowledgment of receipt.

We worked on writing texts of communications to be sent to the respondents and on the design of the very strict planning of the calendar for mass sending of reminders and warnings via PEC and ordinary mail, aimed at preventing the respondent units from failing to respond.

This scheduled communication process ensure a greater timeliness of data collection in order to achieve the decrease of the number of municipalities sanctioned for non-compliance for both surveys. In this scheduled contact with the respondent, 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.

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 addition to all this, we also started to adopt a systematic procedure for sending reminders to non-responding Municipalities.

To implement this operation of sending notices, a standardized statistical procedure has been developed with SAS (Statistical Analysis System), that is a command-driven software package used for statistical analysis and data visualization, and 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.

We worked on the design, implementation and ordinary management of the generalized procedures in SAS language for the preparation, normalization and standardization of the lists of municipalities for the various mass shipments as well as for the monitoring of data collection activities and for the simplification of manual procedures.

In this context, other procedures have been created in SAS language useful for the elaboration of survey monitoring tables to verify the response rate, as well as for the analysis of distribution of responding municipalities compared to the expiry dates for sending the data.

As part of this activity and following the introduction of the new complex sanctionability criteria introduced in the context of short-term statistics, we have also edited and prepared the lists of units in breach of the obligation to respond. The IT systems and procedures (Oracle and SAS) necessary for monitoring the subsequent editions of the investigation were therefore prepared and the structured output files were produced according to the layouts agreed with the initiative that deals with preparing the assessment files.

The procedures in SAS language for the extraction of the lists of defaulting units follow complex criteria of sanctions in the economic context, based on the dual criterion of compliance with the punctual monthly deadlines with a tolerance period and maximum admissible annual cumulative delay. Processing was then carried out to create the lists of survey units to be subjected to the sanctioning procedure following the failure to transmit the data within the times established by the survey information.

Consequentially, both in the reminder phase and in the formal notice phase, this procedure has given excellent results. So all this has led to a net decrease in the number of responding units sanctioned.

Over time we have seen a substantial increase in the sending of data within the established time. 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.

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 and that the survey as it is carried out by a public entity that will make these data available for development projects in the country.