

Improving media coverage for a statistical institution

by Leon Østergaard, Head of Dissemination, Statistics Denmark

Abstract: Starting in 2000 several improvements have been made to the service offered to the media by Statistics Denmark. From 1 January 2001 a new media strategy was systematically implemented through a number of in-house media courses. The media coverage of Statistics Denmark increased markedly over the two years, from a total of c 500 monthly mentionings to now c 800 mentionings each month. In the nation-wide media, coverage has more than doubled, from c 200 monthly mentionings to c 400 in recent months.

Background

Until recently the media strategy of Statistics Denmark was rather traditional for a government institution: Reactive rather than proactive, and in the opinion of many employees, assistance to the media was not a task of the highest importance. The management decided to improve media coverage in order to increase the use of statistics in society and to show taxpayers what they get for their money.

Realizing that communicating statistics is not different from communicating other kinds of specialist knowledge, we decided to use professional methods which have proved successful in other organizations and public institutions.

Making media relations visible

Improved media relations must originate in the statistical divisions of the NSI, where employees have to look upon media relations as an important part of their everyday duties. To achieve this, we decided to make our media coverage and media contacts more visible in the organization:

Every day at 10 a.m., brief summaries of today's media coverage are now mailed to the management and interested staff members, and published on our website. This service is bought from a commercial media monitoring company. The media mentionings are commented upon, when necessary, and related to the press releases from the statistical division in question, when possible. Hence, every employee can see the immediate media reaction to recently published statistics.

Every month we publish in-house statistics on our media coverage, compared with the same month in the previous years and including statistics on the number of media contacts for each statistical division (see below).

Improving active media service

Our main source of quotations in the media is a two-page newsletter "News from Statistics Denmark". This used to be on a paid-subscription basis only, but from 1 January 2001 we made it available free on our website. Journalists – like other users – still have to pay for subscriptions by paper or e-mail, though.

We decided to improve the quality of "News from Statistics Denmark", the text of which originates in the statistical divisions, to make it more appealing to the main user group, namely journalists. This was done in a series of in-house workshops with the statistical divisions, where we focused on the journalistic angle, headline, graphs and language in general.

"News from Statistics Denmark" is used for publishing all our statistics. We have introduced ordinary press releases for other purposes, e.g. when publishing books. All publications are now available free to the press, and some of them are forwarded in advance to the media subject to a clause as to the time of publication.

Press meetings and press releases are used only on rare occasions, as they are not liked by most journalists. We have introduced informal seminars for journalists working on selected topic areas, where they are briefed on new statistics that are to be compiled or important developments in existing statistics. Our new quarterly magazine "Behind the figures" is gradually becoming an important inspiration for journalists as well.

The latest improvement is an offer to all journalistic faculties in Denmark of a lecture on the use – and misuse - of statistics in journalistic research, including an introduction to national and international statistical information on the Internet. This offer has been greatly appreciated by all three journalistic faculties.

Improving service to "incoming" enquiries

Our aim is that journalists with an enquiry can get fast and easy access to the most knowledgeable person in the subject area – normally the person directly responsible for the statistics in question. And that this person will provide quick and professional service to the journalist.

To achieve this, we planned a series of in-house media courses for all employees who might be contacted by the media, including the management – in total close to one third of our total staff. The courses did *not* focus on traditional interview training, as our media contacts almost invariably are on a factual and cooperative basis, but on the way journalists work and think and on how to provide fast and good service to the media.

All media contacts by employees have to be reported immediately afterwards to the press office in Dissemination Centre, stating the name of the media, the name of the journalist, the purpose of the contact and the expected outcome. The reporting is done fast and easily through a facility on our Intranet and makes it possible for the Press Office to monitor the daily

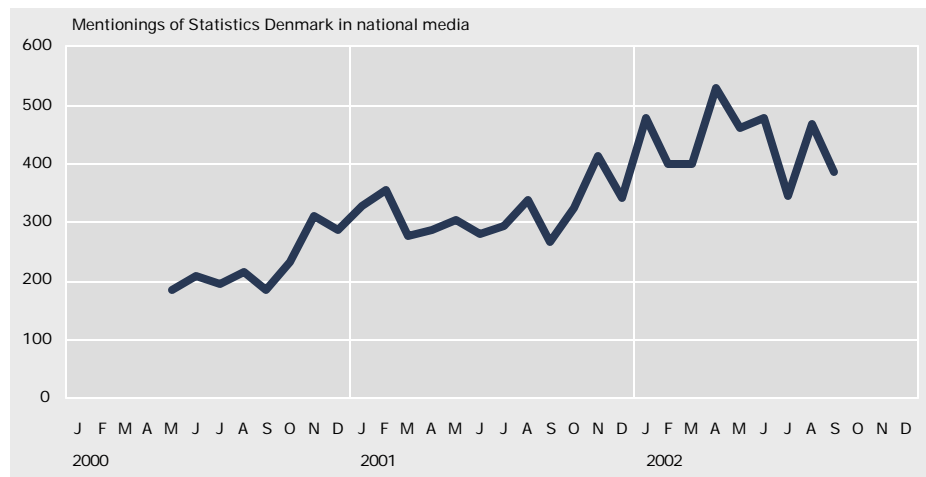
press contact in real time, ensuring same high level of service to all enquirers.

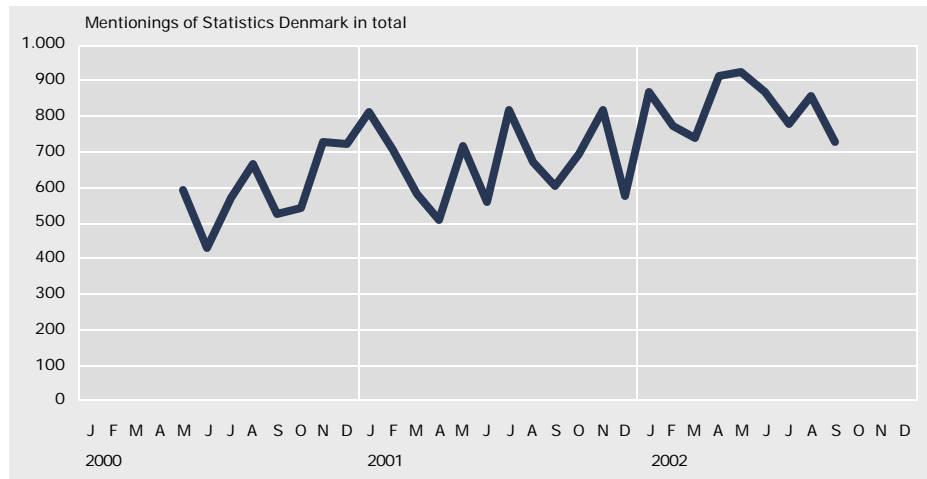
Most press contacts go directly to the relevant person in the statistical division, and the Press Office only works as back-up and guide to journalists, who do not know whom to speak to. Outside office hours the Head of Dissemination is accessible to the press and his private and mobile phone may be found on our website, press releases, etc.

Before major interviews, press briefings, etc., the Press Office offers assistance and sparring to the staff members in question, and after major stories in the press they evaluate the outcome together with the statistical division. Another task of the Press Office is to react to errors and misunderstandings of our figures in the media – and react when our figures are used without mentioning Statistics Denmark.

Results

Since we started the current press monitoring in May 2000 the number of mentionings of Statistics Denmark in the nation-wide media has more than doubled from around 200 each month to more than 400 a month. If we look at the total number of media mentionings, i.e. including regional and local media, it has increased from around 500 mentionings each month to around 800. A survey by a national magazine indicates, that Statistics Denmark is now the public body most often mentioned in the media – that is under normal conditions and barring major public scandals!





We expect a continued but slower increase in press coverage next year, as we have started a series of media-workshops with the statistical divisions making use of the information, we already have gathered concerning the interest from journalists and the use of their individual statistics in the media.