

Communicating for "Sistema Italia". Lights and Shadows of a Job Done with Passion

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New York. A meeting with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' Advisor for the Coordination of Public Communication, Antonio Bettanini. "When someone talks about internal communication sometimes people begin to yawn. But it's the ABC"

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We meet him in the lobby of the Roosevelt Hotel. In this hotel from the '20s renovated a decade ago, we breathe in summer, especially tourism and vacation, and certainly very little of frenetic New York. He arrives on time in a chic tourist outfit, long-distance walking shoes, and red pants.

He decided to focus on museums for part of the day we met. But Antonio Bettanini didn't come to the U.S. just to relax. Over the course of his trip, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' Advisor for the Coordination of Public Communication will also develop important initiatives.

Genovese, a true gentleman, discreet, witty, and sharp, he reflects on the Foreign Ministry's public communication. There are, in his words, even in his criticism, interesting and constructive ideas.

And he quickly begins with this:

"We talk a lot about external communication today, but in Italy everything is complicated. In Italy, first and foremost, this should revolve around a large internal communication effort which still needs to be implemented."

"The truth is that for a number of historical, cultural, and politics reasons, too time-consuming to analyze here, we are now facing a situation in which our identity is still relatively weak."

"The feeling of belonging is felt so much more profoundly outside of Italy. The image of our country seen from the outside is more intense than the one observed from the inside."

The communications man quickly gets to the heart of the matter:

"Only in recent years have certain images made positive headlines, such as the President of the Republic asking to of sing the national anthem. Not to mention the flag."

"These are obvious things in other countries, but in Italy they are still struggling to assert themselves. Let's disregard the reasons why; it would take too long to go into. I say this because, and I'm not alone, I asked myself how to project a new image of Italy that still maintains the characteristics of a cultural repository and historical reservoir, and still retains the aspects that have characterized our image since the '80s. We need to introduce a new discussion to revitalize our image, which remains rooted in the past and tied to certain stereotypical brands. The renowned Made in Italy, as important as it is, must be bolstered by an image that looks to the future...."

Bettanini admits: "I don't have an answer for what a new image of Italy might look like. We have to work on it and certainly an important factor that we shouldn't underestimate is tied to 'people', those all over the world who have become ambassadors of our country. The large numbers of men and women who carry out the missions to which Italy has committed itself abroad. People who are dedicated to cooperation while defending peace and creating institutions in so many crisis areas."

"Since it shouldn't only be about heroism but about everyday life as well, we must take a more refined approach to the so-called Made in Italy. I am convinced that innovation and talent are part of a river that continues to flow, and without offending anyone, there is more to it than the image of Ferrari.

There are some areas that should be strengthened further; I am referring to food and wine and to the little-known regions of Italy that are coming into large-scale production. There is more to our country than just Tuscany and Piedmont.

Let's consider why the activities of 'Sistema Italia' are often so disjointed. It would be very important, especially in a time of crisis."

"The work, in fact, is still not complete. Too often I have seen a disorganized presence, even with a large investment, that is unfortunately aimed at the wrong audience. And the need for coordination is increasing. There are certainly a few examples of administrative or political decisions that are aimed in this direction, such as a coordination agreement between the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the regions."

"We have also proposed a more structured effort between the Ministries of Foreign Affairs, Cultural Heritage, and Foreign Trade that includes a joint board that periodically decides on large-scale events to sponsor. We do this to share resources, streamline activities, and improve the end result.

We are working to improve our current procedures that are too scattered and disorganized, and in some instances show very little attention to quality."

And what does Bettanini think of the image that Italy has of Italians abroad? "My feeling is that sometimes we have the wrong idea about our own immigration, of Italians abroad. It's much more ordered, integrated, and less nostalgic than we imagine, and they maintain a healthy relationship with their homeland."

Bettanini is in New York to prepare some upcoming events that he has been working on for some time, events that coincide with the week-long U.N. General Assembly meeting. Several cultural initiatives are on schedule...

"There will be the presentation of a book about the G8. It's an Italian contribution to the future of the world that will be connected to public diplomacy. We present it along with an English language edition that includes an introduction by Ambassador Giulio Terzi di Sant'Agata."

"We will also present a photography book on the G8 in Trieste and L'Aquila. Next year we would like to launch an international award for journalists working in critical areas. The award would be hosted in Italy but with a jury, location, and presence in New York."

"We are also planning an initiative to share the history of the Italian presence in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Since the '50s we have realized cultural, anthropological, archaeological, touristic endeavors there. This is to tell everyone that we are back and that we are still there, since it is an area of crisis."

"We produced a DVD with the journalist Duilio Giammaria of TG1. We would like to mount an exhibition dedicated to the Italians who were there in those years, in conjunction with American institutions."

"I am pushing hard on this even if there are challenges. I care because it is a way to show the Italian presence in those areas – even more so today when American policy is more focused on culture and civil society. Our contributions are useful and appreciated. Our past demonstrates the important role that Italy has played."

Bettanini's initiatives are closely linked to the political life of Franco Frattini. He began, however, with Claudio Martelli, going through difficult and controversial periods in Italian history.

"Frattini was working with him as an advisor; he was then given a chance and he called me. I started in a different way, with a different person but with a similar personal story because I liked communication and politics. During Martelli's time there were militant politics, but with Frattini would say not. I mainly dealt with the institutional side."

A philosophy major, university lecturer, and journalist, he was repeatedly appointed press officer for the ministries and the board leadership while coordinating media relations. He also gained communications experience through numerous ad campaigns for private companies, and recently headed the campaign for Piaggio Aero Industries.

His experience in the private sector is also felt when he talks about his current work. It makes a difference and it is definitely one of his strengths.

"I have always kept the organizational model of a large private company as a reference point while making decisions. This means coordinated and integrated communications, where all of the various aspects are run by a manager."

"The Ministry of Foreign Affairs jealously guards the position of press officer for a career diplomat. So being the communications advisor and working on the coordination of communication activities is not easy."

And he removes a small pebble from his shoe...



"At the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the IT department is still separated from the Communications one...it's strange. There is a department that is called the 'servizio stampa' that reveals its anachronism in its own name."

"Work is nevertheless underway to create many multimedia projects within this office. They have already made several commercials. Enrico Vattani is handling it deftly. The 'Travel Safely' video is a good product."

"The website has also improved a lot. We now have a section for journalists. It still needs large-scale management and we are working in that direction. With the Development Cooperation office we created a great initiative to promote the Giro d'Italia. Over the course of a daily television show about cycling we demonstrated the 'best practices' resulting from our cooperation."

And so we come back, after a nearly circular path, to the beginning of our conversation. There is still a great need to improve internal communications.

"Viaggiare sicuri"

"Everything can be considered, but you have to start with internal communication. Sometimes we are still not able to appreciate the things we produce as much as we should."

"When someone talks about internal communication sometimes people begin to yawn. But it's the ABC. And if I do not know who I am, I cannot tell my story."

Is the resistance you encounter practical, cultural, or economic?

"It's a bit of everything. Relatively, it's economic. Our advantage over a large private company is that we have a value, a significant institution which allows us to do some things better. We must be the ones to put gas in the engine, of course. But if at times we don't have the content, the gasoline...."

"Sometimes we don't even talk about ourselves on our own website. Until recently we didn't even publish an interview that appeared in the newspaper because it wasn't 'official.' We have a 24-hour press office available every day of the week, but on Saturday and Sunday I can't update the home page because it hasn't been scheduled. This is despite having people who work in the media. There is still inflexibility."

There is criticism, but also appreciation. There are certainly shadows, but also light.

"There are many young, capable diplomats. They understand the challenges and they are paid for their communication services. In the end there is a lot of work to be done. I tell them, 'Be happy because if they were good at this they wouldn't need us....I like this job and I do it with a lot of passion. I don't think that I am always loved at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and in some cases I have been unjustly feared, but no one can say that I don't have great passion for the Administration. I am convinced that if I work well for the Administration, then I also perform a great service for the person I work for."

"This is also true when I use [Twitter](#) [3] for him. I do it often and perhaps someone might get angry over the constant use of such an informal method of communication..."

(Translated by Giulia Prestia)



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