

GP REDLine Survey Results: Community Engagement



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Introduction

This Research Brief summarizes the results from a short survey conducted by GP RED during summer 2016 as a part of the REDLine survey initiative. This research addressed the topic of community engagement and explored the perceived effectiveness of community engagement techniques, recent use of surveys, an evaluation of survey distribution methods, and an exploration of creative methods for outreach. Respondents originated from an array of geographical locations, which ensured that the answers provided reflected a variety of locales. The survey was distributed via email to the GP RED national email master list, with an emailed reminder to encourage response. A total of 42 completed responses were received from the invitations.

Selected Findings and Conclusions

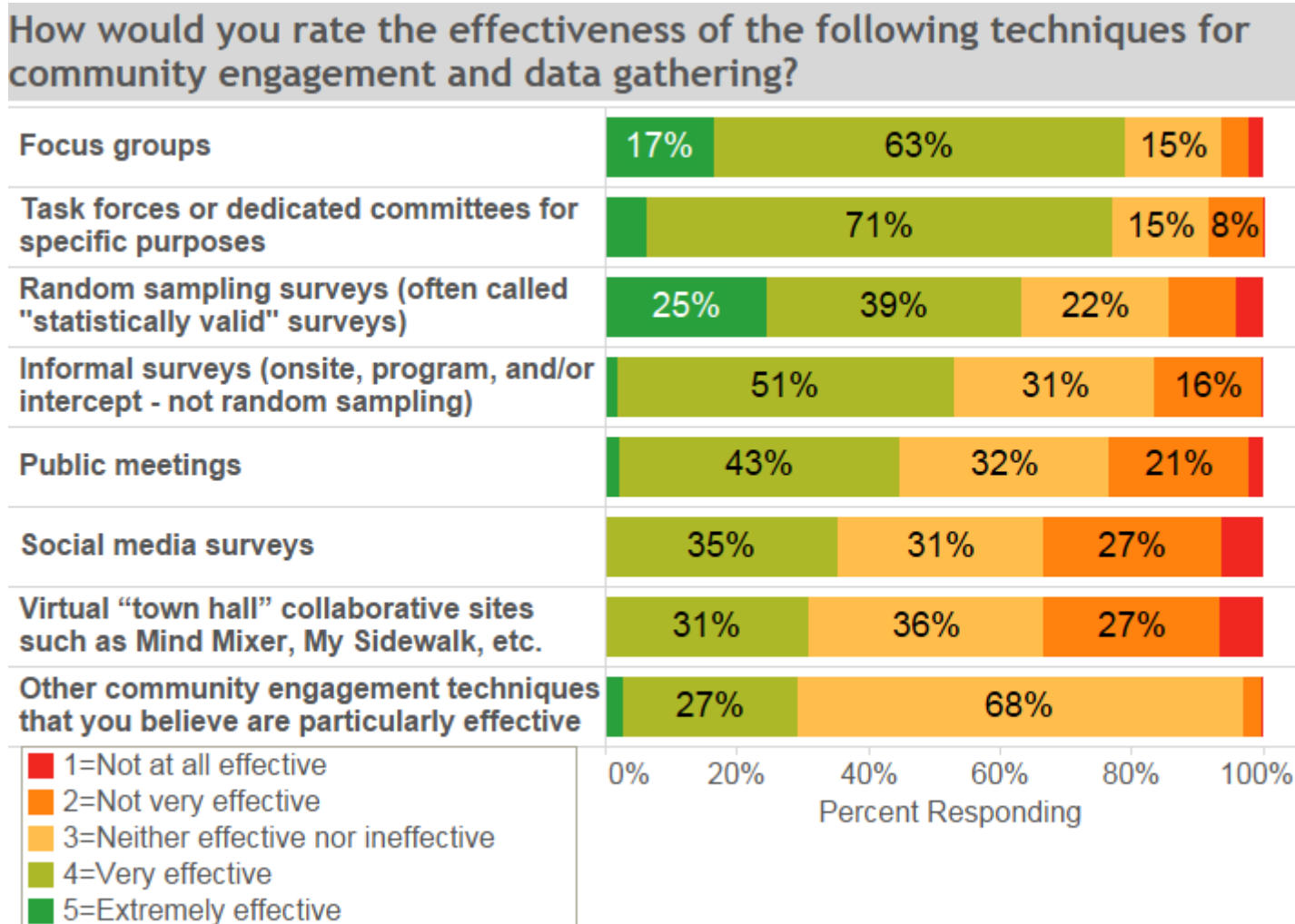
- The Community Engagement Survey results suggested that focus groups, task forces (i.e., dedicated committees for specific purposes), and random sampling surveys were perceived as the most effective techniques for gathering information and encouraging community engagement. The open-ended comments provided further insight in that respondents felt that most of the available techniques could be effective if they were selected for a specific purpose and used appropriately. The idea of *triangulating* using different techniques was also mentioned.
- More agencies reported using random sampling (“statistically valid”) surveys than general surveys conducted without systematic sampling. These surveys were most likely to have been conducted by outside consultants (about half the time), or by a city department or agency (one third of the time).
- Concerning the most effective techniques for survey distribution, Web/Internet based methodologies were rated most effective, followed by intercept techniques and mail-based programs. Social media efforts were also deemed effective in some settings. Phone surveys were rated lowest in effectiveness. For communities that had identified a *best* method for distributing surveys, mail and Web/Internet were most identified by a large majority--almost two to one over other techniques.
- The survey evaluated creative techniques for outreach to special populations and the results suggested no *silver bullet*. Communities identified not having success more often than being successful in this area. Among those reporting success, focus group opportunities and door-to-door outreach were mentioned.
- The survey results indicated that many communities are engaged in various types of youth-specific outreach. About half the respondents reported that their communities had been involved in efforts to include youth. We noted that the majority involved in youth-oriented outreach reported that their efforts were highly effective. Focus groups and social media tools were most often mentioned as techniques that were familiar to and effective for respondents.
- As summarized above, the survey resulted in multiple insights for agencies and communities considering methods for engagement. The conclusion is that there are a variety of proven tools that may be considered; the appropriate techniques will depend on particular situations but this survey provides quantitative findings that indicate current use and perceived strengths of alternative methods. By sharing these insights among professionals and practitioners, the overall understanding of best methods will be encouraged.

Evaluation of Community Engagement and Data Gathering Techniques

Respondents rated a variety of community engagement and data gathering techniques on a scale from 1 to 5 (1 = “not at all effective” and 5 = “extremely effective”). Overall, focus groups were perceived to be the most effective method, with 79% of respondents providing a 4 or 5 rating (see Figure 1). Following closely behind were task forces/dedicated committees (77%) and random sampling surveys (63%). Random sampling surveys received the largest share of “extremely effective” responses (25%).

Virtual “town hall” collaborative sites were identified as relatively less effective, with a larger share of respondents indicating that they were not effective (34%) compared to effective (31%).

Figure 1. Effectiveness of Community Engagement/Data Gathering

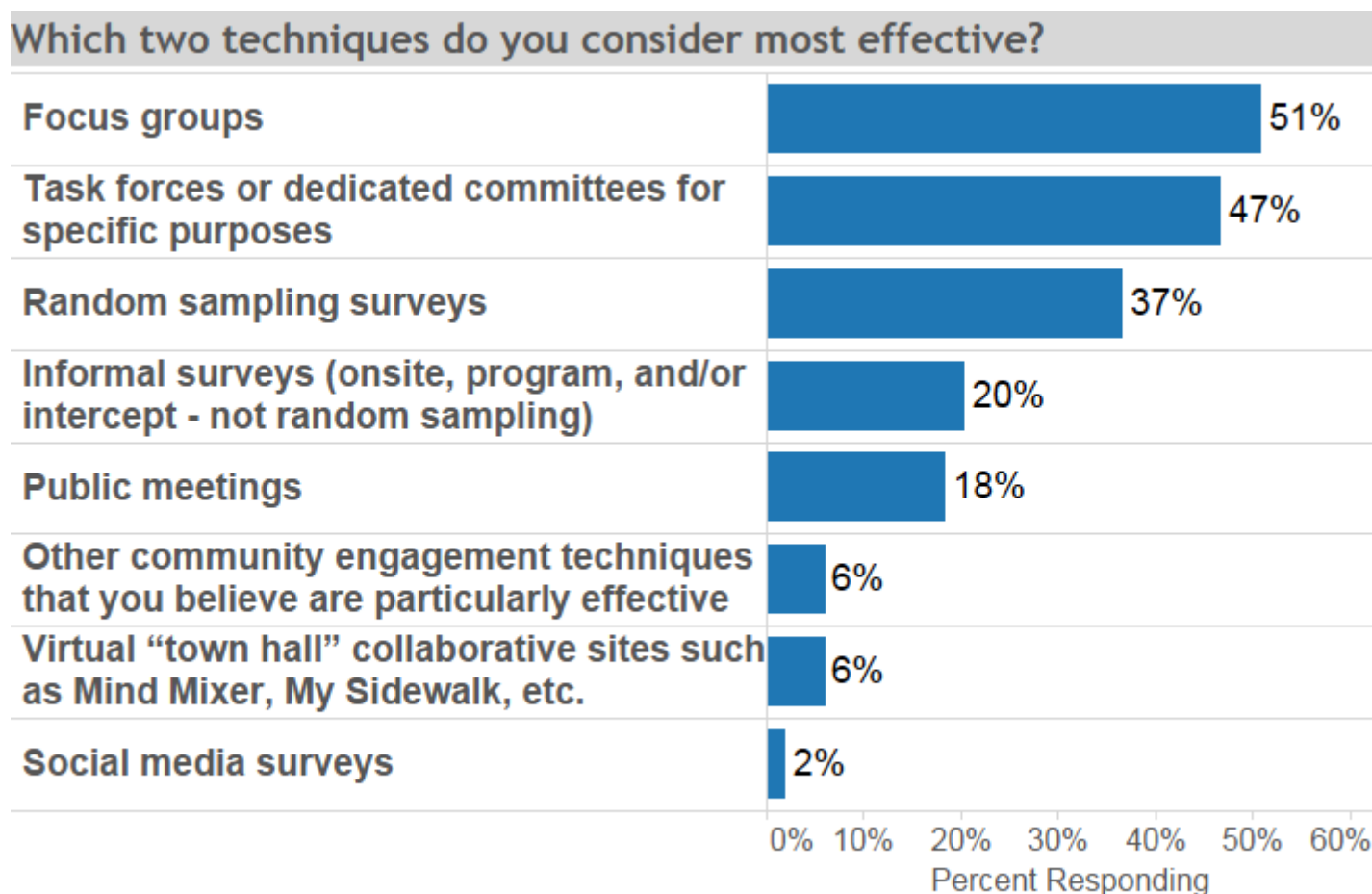


Source: GP REDLine 2016 Community Engagement Survey, RRC Associates.

Respondents who indicated that “other” community engagement techniques were effective were asked to describe these techniques in a follow-up question (see Figure 2). The most common technique was outreach to where the people are, which included locations such as special events, neighborhood parks, churches, and schools.

From the same list of techniques, respondents selected the top two techniques they considered to be most effective. Focus groups again emerged at the top with just over half (51%) of respondents choosing it as one of their top two most effective techniques. Other effective techniques included task forces/dedicated committees (47%), random sampling surveys (37%), informal surveys (20%), and public meetings (18%).

Figure 2. Most Effective Community Engagement/Data Gathering Techniques



Source: GP REDLine 2016 Community Engagement Survey, RRC Associates.

Respondents were asked to comment on why they felt the tools they selected were particularly effective in their professional practice. Those who favored focus groups said they were most effective because participants were dedicated to the outcome, the setting allowed for a group dynamic and face-to-face interaction, a variety of people can participate, and focus groups provided rich qualitative data including a deeper exploration of issues than is available on surveys. Reasons for selecting task forces/dedicated committees were highly similar. One exception was that respondents felt task forces allowed for a long-term, thoughtful resolution of an issue while incorporating a variety of opinions. Finally, respondents who said random sampling surveys were most effective mentioned the statistical validity of the data and the ability to reach all community members, including various population segments and non-users. Examples of verbatim comments included:

Do you have any comments on why these tools are particularly effective in your professional practice?

- “Focus groups and task forces are groups gathered for a specific purpose or goal. There is more buy-in and dedication to the outcome.”
- “Most community engagement activities can be effective if they are conducted properly. It is often the mix of techniques that provide the best overall insights.”
- “Random sampling surveys are the only tool that reliably gets to non-users.”
- “Statistical validation of the random sample. Task forces can weed through issues and dig deeper.”
- “While informal surveys are extremely helpful, they do not always report the opinions of the entire population. Truthfully, using a batch of types and triangulating the data seems to be the best approach”

Recent Usage of Surveys

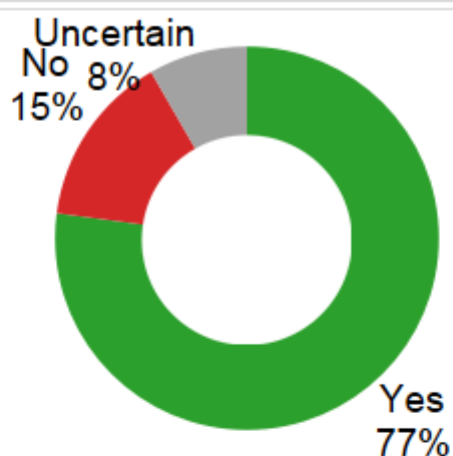
Over three-quarters of respondents (77%) indicated that their agency had involved their community or constituency in a random sampling survey or other type of survey during the past three years. Fifteen percent said their agency had not conducted a survey, and 8% were uncertain (see Figure 3).

Among respondents who said their agency had conducted a survey, a majority (64%) used a random sample that they deemed “statistically valid.” About a third (36%) said a general survey was conducted without systematic sampling or with limited attention to statistical considerations. Eight percent didn’t know how it was conducted.

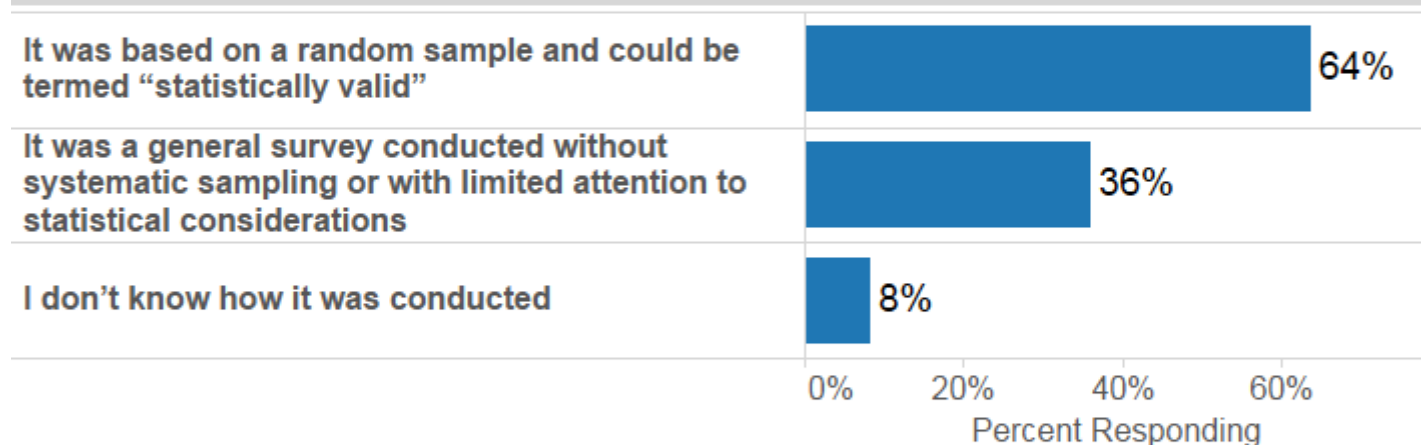
Respondents were asked if the most recent survey their agency conducted was implemented by a representative of their agency, a consultant, or some other group. Half said a consultant conducted the survey, 31% said their city or agency conducted the survey, 8% said the survey was done by a college or university, and 6% said a local interest group conducted the study. An additional 6% did not know.

Figure 3. Usage of Surveys in the Past Three Years

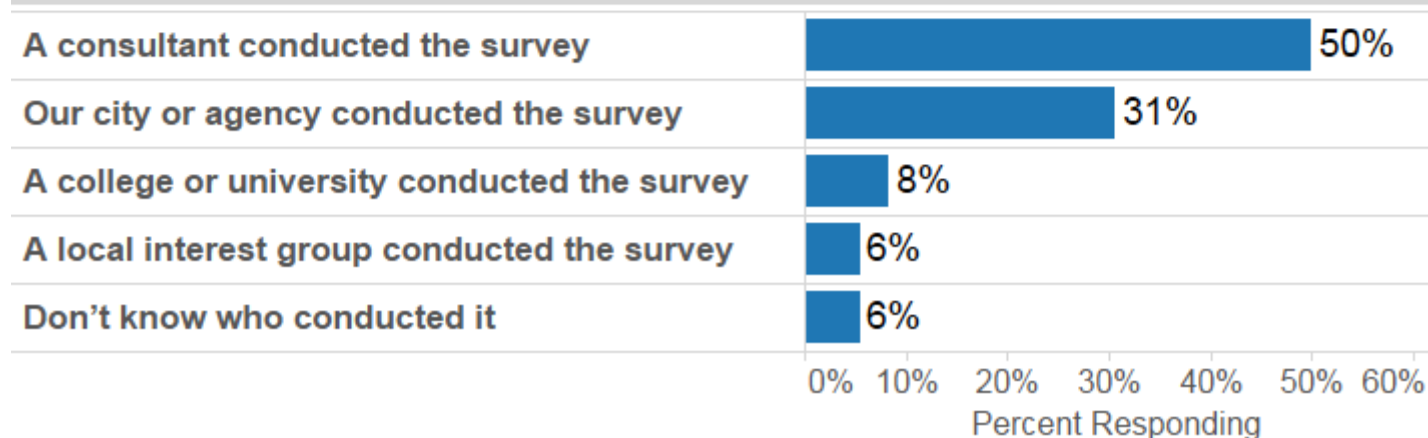
In the past three years, has your agency involved your community or your constituency in a random sampling survey or other survey for opinions or needs assessments?



(If yes) Which of the following best describes that survey or surveys?



Was this most recent survey conducted by a representative of your agency, a consultant or some other group?

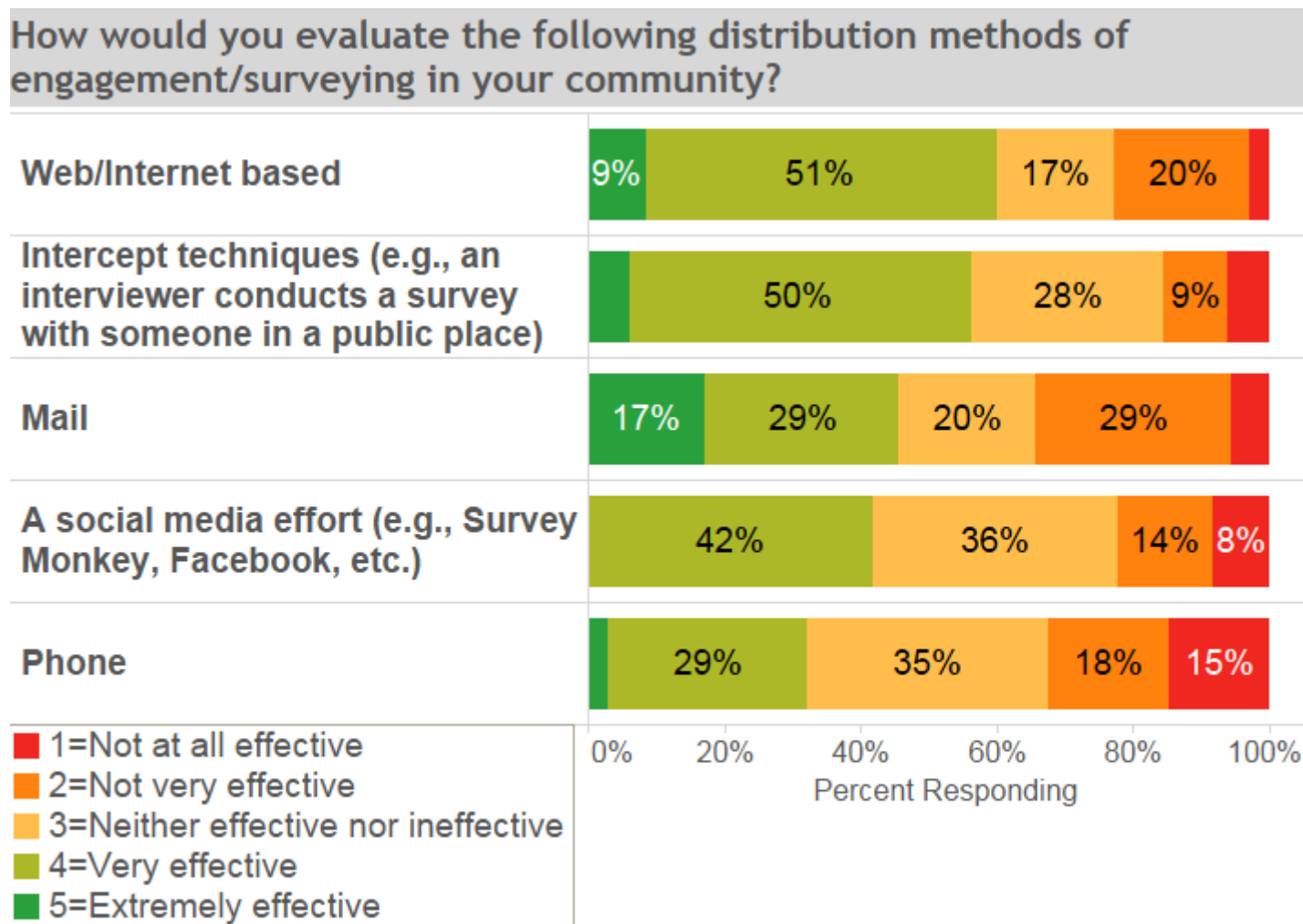


Source: GP REDLine 2016 Community Engagement Survey, RRC Associates.

Evaluation of Survey Distribution Methods

Respondents who indicated that their agency had conducted a survey in the past three years were asked to rate the effectiveness of survey distribution methods in their community on a scale from 1 to 5 (1 = “not at all effective” and 5 = “extremely effective”). (See Figure 4.) Web/Internet based methodologies were rated as most effective with 60% of respondents providing a 4 or 5 rating. Intercept techniques (56%), mail (46%), and a social media effort (42%) were also perceived to be relatively effective. In contrast, phone-based methods were identified as less effective, with a slightly larger share of respondents rating it a 1 or 2 (33%) than a 4 or 5 (32%).

Figure 4. Effectiveness of Survey Distribution Methods



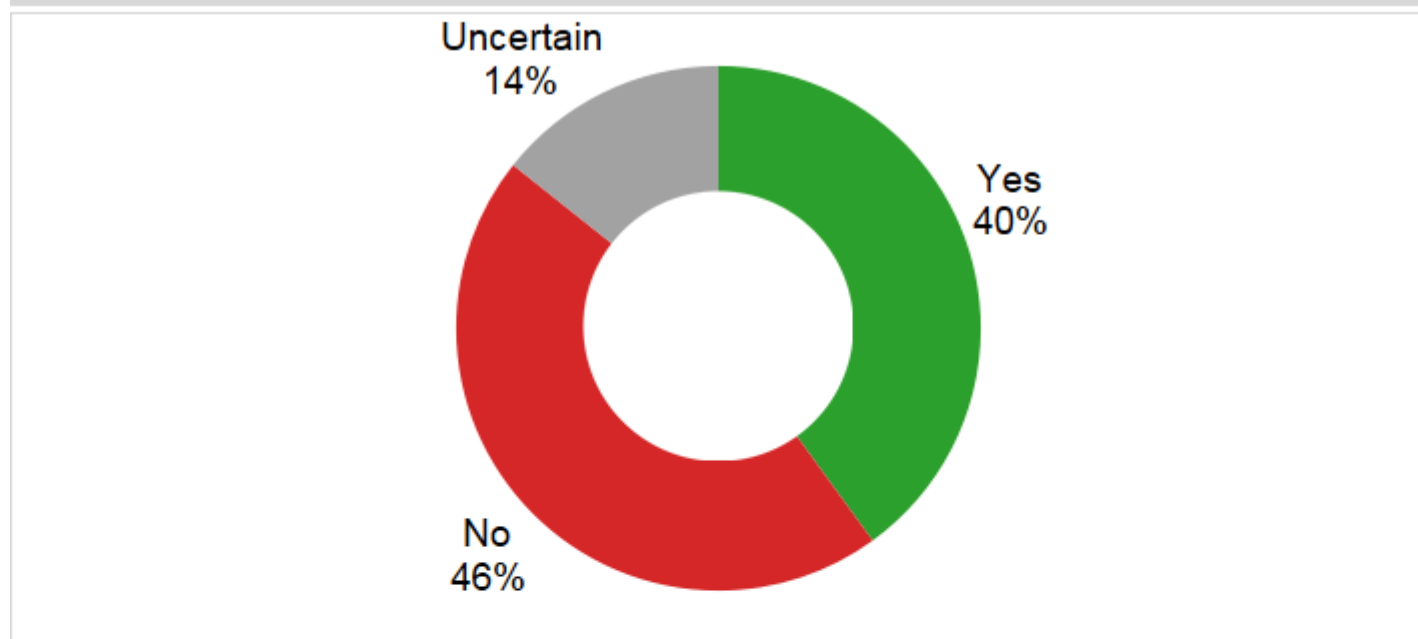
Source: GP REDLine 2016 Community Engagement Survey, RRC Associates.

An open-ended question asked respondents to specify which websites or apps they used if social media methods were used for the survey. The top site used was Facebook followed by Survey Monkey, Twitter, and Constant Contact.

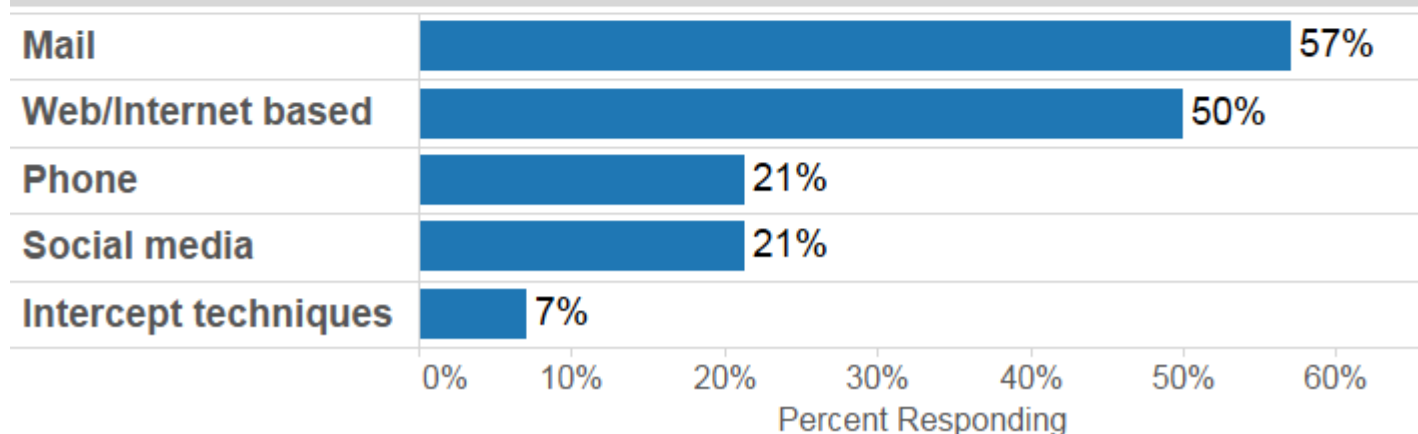
Among respondents who indicated that their agency has conducted a survey in the past three years, two out of five (40%) said that they had found a best or most preferred method for distributing surveys in their community. About half (46%) had not found a best method, and 14% were uncertain (see Figure 5). Those respondents who had found a best method were asked to choose their top two best or most preferred methods of survey distribution. Mail topped the list (57%) followed by web/Internet based methods (50%), phone, and social media (each 21%). In contrast, intercept techniques were identified by only a small share of respondents (7%) as one of the two preferred methods for distribution.

Figure 5. Preferred Method for Distributing Surveys

Have you found that there is a "best" or most preferred method for distributing surveys in your community?



What are the two best or most preferred methods for distributing surveys in your community?



Source: GP REDLine 2016 Community Engagement Survey, RRC Associates.

A follow-up open-ended question asked respondents why they felt the techniques were best for their community. Respondents who chose mail said it allowed them to conduct a random sample and reach a broad group of people. Those respondents who selected a web/Internet based approach as the best also indicated that this methodology allowed a wide reach. In addition, they said it was convenient for participants, typically had strong response, and provided a rich data set that could be translated into actionable goals. Some examples of verbatim comments included:

Please describe in a few words why you feel that technique is best for your community:

- “Intercept surveys are quite productive (97% response rate) and gain a great perspective of existing user views and profiles. Augmenting with consultant based phone surveys permits a check to measure differences between current and prospective users.”
- “Mailed randomly selected surveys potentially can reach all members of a community. Web/internet based surveys allow all members of the community to participate while providing feedback and input.”
- “Our communities have an older demographic, so traditional mail seems to work. It’s the best method to collect the sample size or participants.”
- “Ours is national so a combination of Survey Monkey, Mind Mixer, project advisory groups and focus groups to take large amounts of information and boil it down into primary goals and objectives”

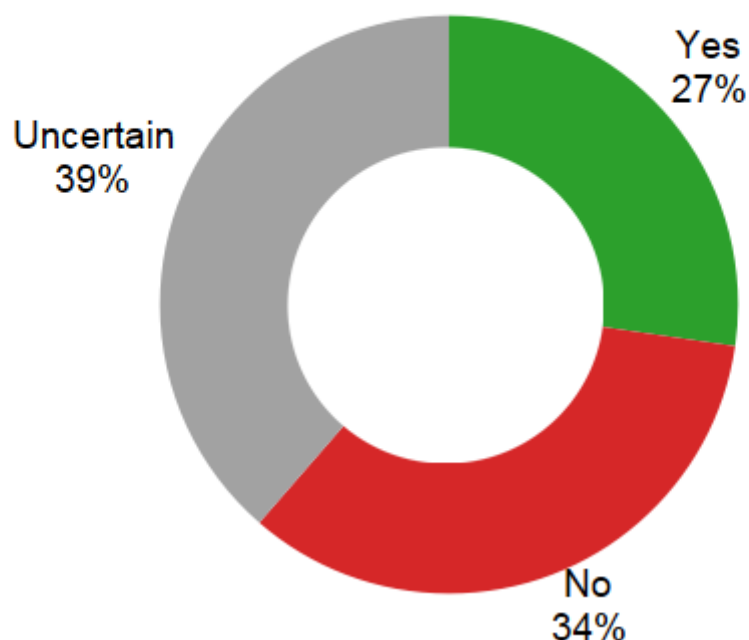
Creative Outreach Techniques and Group-Specific Outreach

When asked if their community has had success with creative or innovative outreach techniques to engage with special populations that are hard to reach, approximately a quarter of respondents (27%) said their community had success, with 34% saying they had not and 39% uncertain (see Figure 6).

The creative and innovative techniques that respondents mentioned in the comments for the follow-up question included targeted focus groups and distribution of surveys in a variety of ways like door-to-door or at venues the target group frequented. Many respondents mentioned bilingual outreach including focus groups held in a different language and the use of translated publications.

Figure 6. Creative or Innovative Outreach Techniques

Thinking specifically about special populations that may have language, learning, or other characteristics that make members hard to reach, has your community had success with creative or innovative outreach techniques?



Source: GP REDLine 2016 Community Engagement Survey, RRC Associates.

A series of questions asked respondents specifically about their attempts to engage with younger community members in planning or policy decisions. Almost half (48%) indicated that their community or agency had conducted youth-specific engagement programs, while 41% had not conducted such programs. Eleven percent were uncertain (see Figure 7).

Those who indicated that their community or agency had reached out specifically to youth were asked to elaborate on what methods they used. Commonly mentioned methods included youth focus groups and outreach through schools, libraries, and churches as well as youth groups or youth programs.

Respondents who used youth-specific engagement programs also reported on the effectiveness of these methods on a scale from 1 to 5 (1 = “not at all effective” and 5 = “extremely effective”). Youth-specific engagement programs were reported to be highly effective overall, with 84% of respondents rating them a 4 or 5 and no one rating them a 1 or 2.

In an open-ended question, respondents who had used youth engagement techniques were asked, “Is there a single method that you think works best for reaching and engaging youth?” Respondents overwhelmingly indicated that the best method to reach and engage youth was to go to them and engage with them at schools, libraries, and other locations where they were present. Some of the comments included:

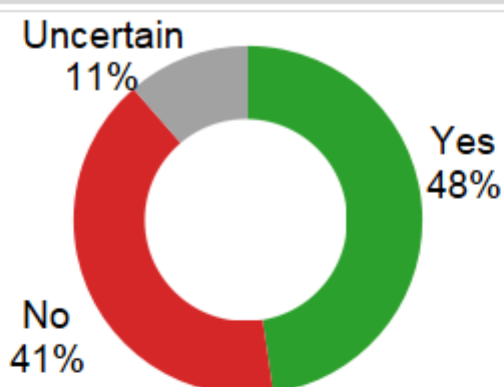
Is there a single method that you think works best for reaching and engaging youth?

- “Focus Groups”
- “Go to where they are. At school is probably the best if you can do it.”
- “Going to where they are-- on campus, for example.”
- “No-- the method needs to be customized to the situation and audience.”
- “Web based using their phones”

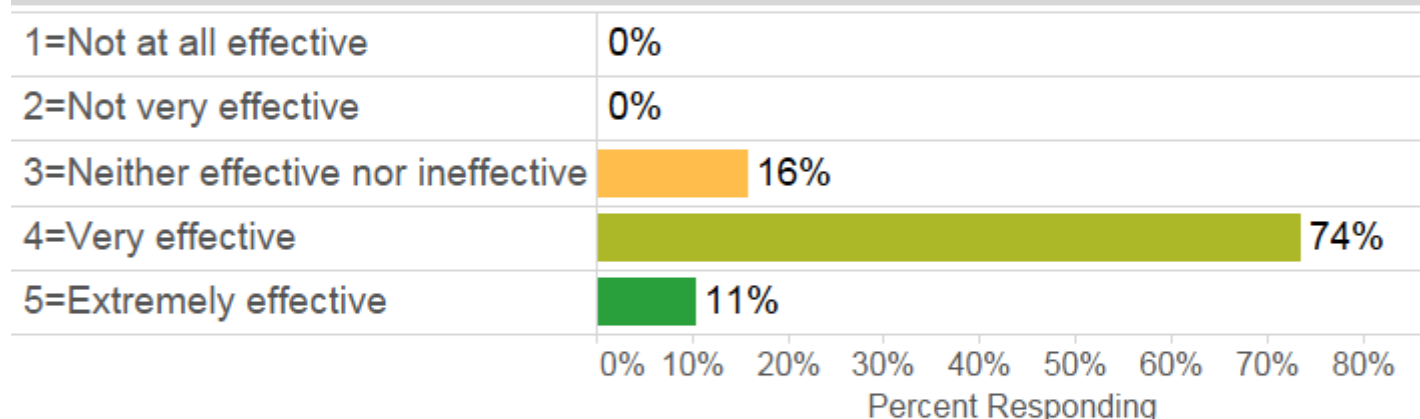
Finally, respondents who had used approaches for youth were questioned about their familiarity with a variety of youth engagement tools. Respondents were most familiar with social media tools (83%) followed by UMap/ARCGIS online/ Google Maps or similar mapping tools (44%) and WalkScore (28%). Photo Voice (11%) and the GP RED Youth Activity & Nutrition Survey (6%) were fairly unfamiliar tools among respondents.

Figure 7. Youth-Specific Engagement Programs

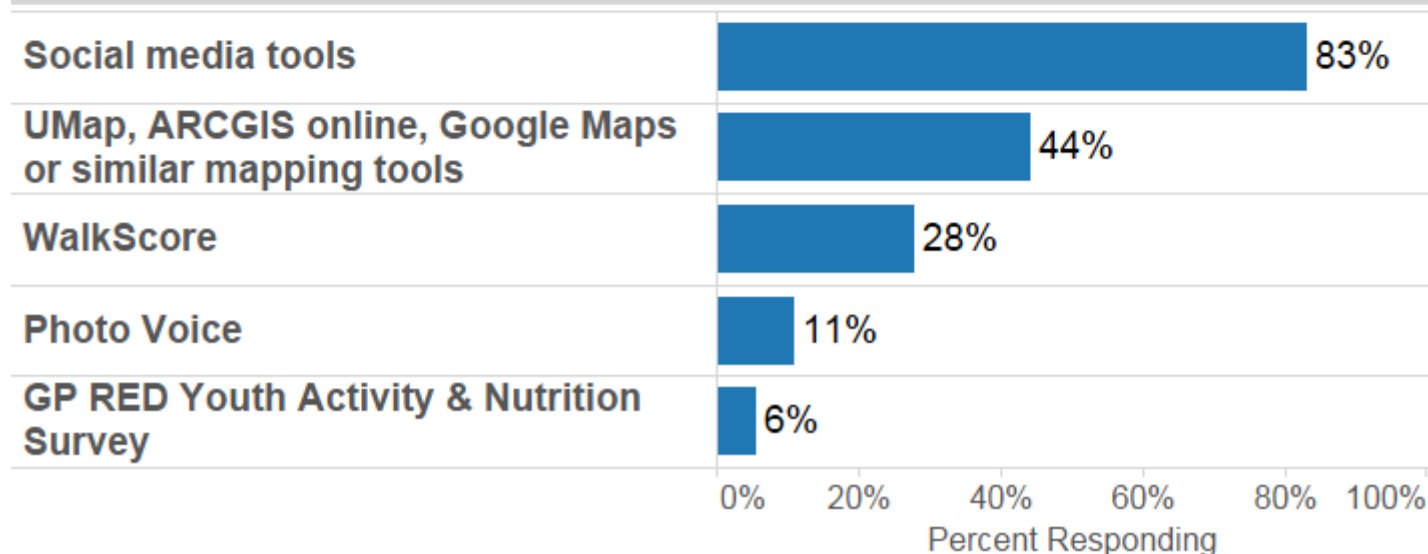
Has your community or agency conducted youth-specific engagement programs to involve younger community members in planning or policy decisions?



(If yes) Overall, how effective are these methods?



Are you familiar with any of the following youth engagement tools?



Source: GP REDLine 2016 Community Engagement Survey, RRC Associates.

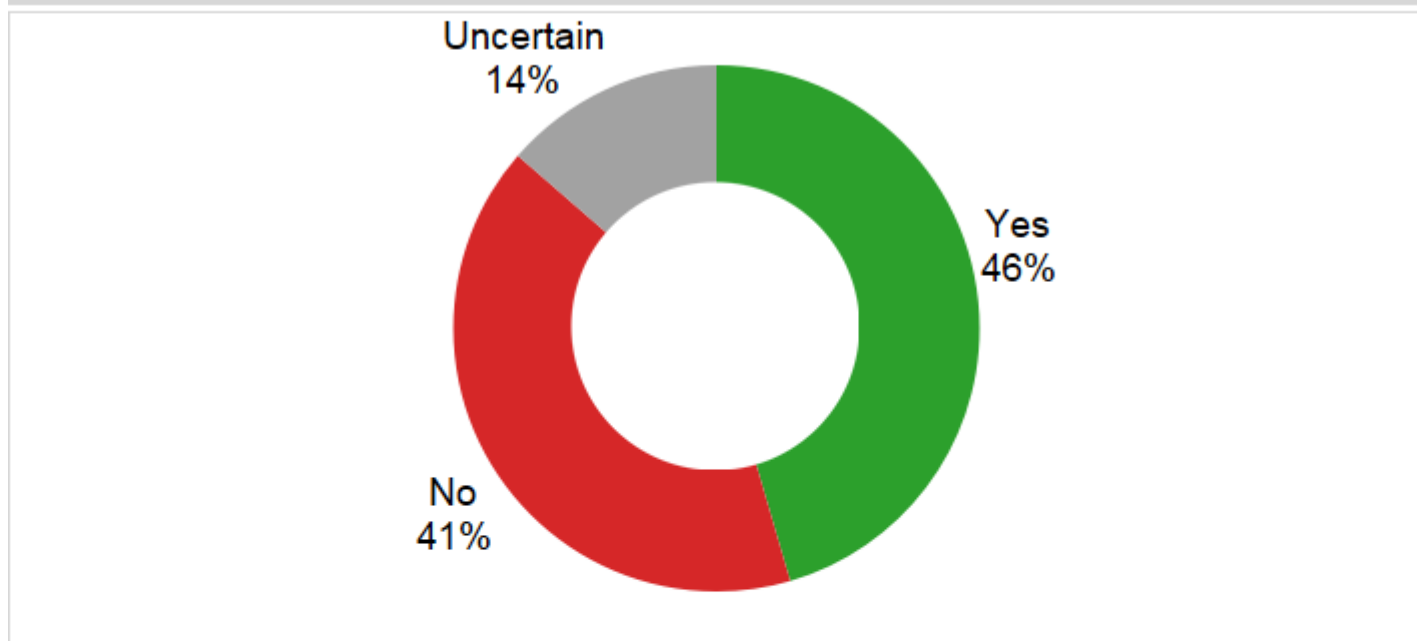
Respondents were also asked about their agency's outreach to community members of different races and ethnicities. Almost half (46%) said their community or agency had conducted specific engagement programs to involve community members of different races/ethnicities in planning or policy decisions. Forty-one percent of respondents indicated that their community or agency had not, and 14% were uncertain (see Figure 8).

The most frequently used methods as reported in open-ended comments included going to these community members at their community groups or churches, focus groups, and a bilingual approach with translators and translated surveys.

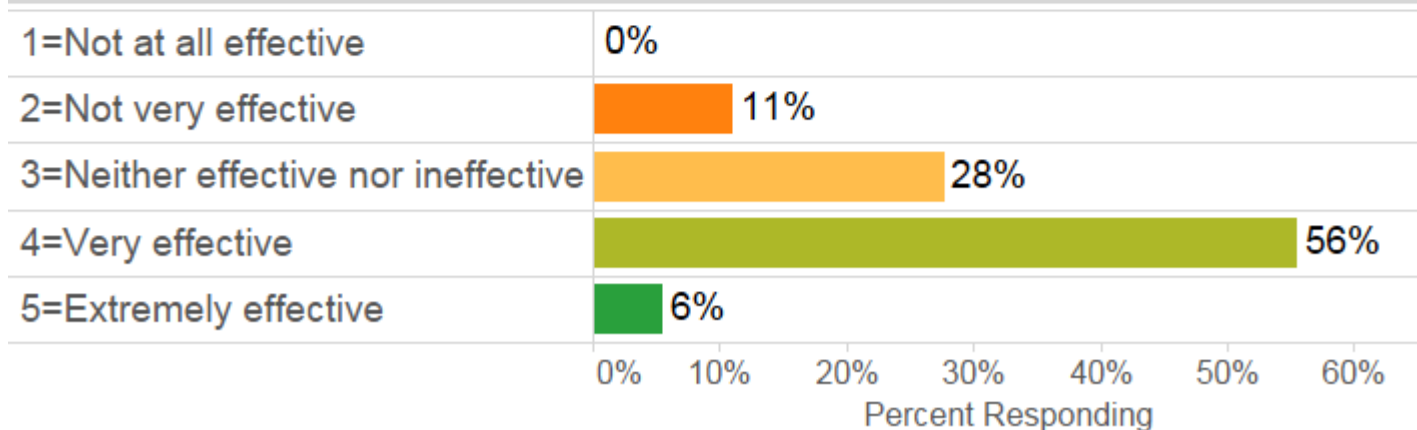
Lastly, respondents who had used these programs rated the effectiveness of these tools. The methods were rated as moderately effective, with 61% providing a 4 or 5 rating and 11% providing a 1 or 2 rating.

Figure 8. Race/Ethnicity-Specific Engagement Programs

Has your community or agency conducted specific engagement programs to involve community members of different races/ethnicities in planning or policy decisions?



(If yes) Overall, how effective are these methods?



Source: GP REDLine 2016 Community Engagement Survey, RRC Associates.

At the end of the survey, respondents were provided with an opportunity to share any further comments on the use of community engagement techniques and surveys in their profession. The useful verbatim comments included:

Do you have any further comments on the use of community engagement techniques and surveys in our professions?

- “As stated before, it is more about how the techniques are used than the inherent qualities of each technique. I still use flip chart workshops to get meaningful insights.”
- “Best to attempt multiple methods and assess their success rate.”
- “No but please share your results.”
- “No comments at this time.”
- “Not at this time.”
- “Our area does not have a large diversity in race/ethnicity. But it does have a large population with low income. They don’t feel that these issues are necessary. They don’t see the connection between jobs and outdoor recreation or natural resource asset management.”
- “There are many many ways”
- “This is a very important topic. In most local projects, on-line tools should only supplement face-to-face engagement. For regional projects, online tools are a godsend. Keep in mind that surveys capture opinions at a point in time. Opinions can change with a genuine engagement process that involves deliberation and consideration of multiple perspectives.”
- “Use a group of methods to get the best data”
- “We are currently reviewing our community engagement processes in order to improve our engagement practices.”
- “We are looking for statistically valid survey techniques that will capture youth and Hispanic citizens. The only funds we have for survey work are for the State Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan.”
- “We target underserved populations. People over the age of 55, people under the age of 18 and people with disabilities. The “traditional” group of participants (i.e. business leaders, staff, interested general public) are always part of the process.”
- “While engaging the community is important in setting priorities, I am not sure if a pool, ball field, tennis court, golf course or other recreation amenities would be justified by a majority of survey instruments so attention needs to be placed on what end product you want and use of a professional survey company helps with credibility.”
- “Very important and wish had the answer for best engagement”