

## **Adapting Communication Methods within the 4-H Program Based on Participant Preference**

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### **Abstract**

*Through the use of a survey, volunteer communication preferences were gathered and the preferred method of communication was implemented. Having a strong understanding of the communication methods 4-H volunteers prefer is essential to their engagement in the 4-H Youth Development program. Volunteers who are informed about activities, events, and program needs are more likely to be engaged in those positive youth development opportunities about which they are most passionate.*

**Key Words:** assessment, electronic communication, volunteer preferences

### **Need**

The ability of an organization to engage volunteers to accomplish its goals and objectives depends upon the effectiveness of an organization to coordinate, manage, and lead volunteers (Boyce, 1971; Culp, Deppe, Castillo & Wells, 1998; McClury & Lynch, 2006; Penrod, 1991). In order to meet the mission and vision of the organization (Brandt & Teuteberg, 2014), volunteers need to be connected to current information.

The 4-H Youth Development program in two rural counties historically used a mailed monthly newsletter as the primary communication method with 4-H volunteers. This monthly newsletter covered a wide variety of topics from event and meeting announcements to youth and 4-H volunteer recognition.

This monthly newsletter took a considerable amount of the 4-H staff's time, approximately 10 hours a month per county, to compile data, format articles, proof, print, label envelopes, and mail. Often, important

information was not included in the newsletter due to timing challenges or size limitation of the newsletter. General operating budget reductions over the past few years further restricted the process of a monthly newsletter. The costs of paper, envelopes, printing and postage have increased over time.

Advances in technology have changed the way young people and adults interact with school, social programs, family, and friends. Today's youth cannot remember a time without a computer in their home (Draves, 2007). Families are communicating in new ways.

Having a well-founded understanding of the communication methods 4-H volunteers prefer is essential to their engagement in the 4-H Youth Development program. Wanting to use current technology to engage a wide age range of 4-H volunteers, 4-H Youth Development staff and dedicated volunteers brainstormed better ways to communicate this important information.

**Action**

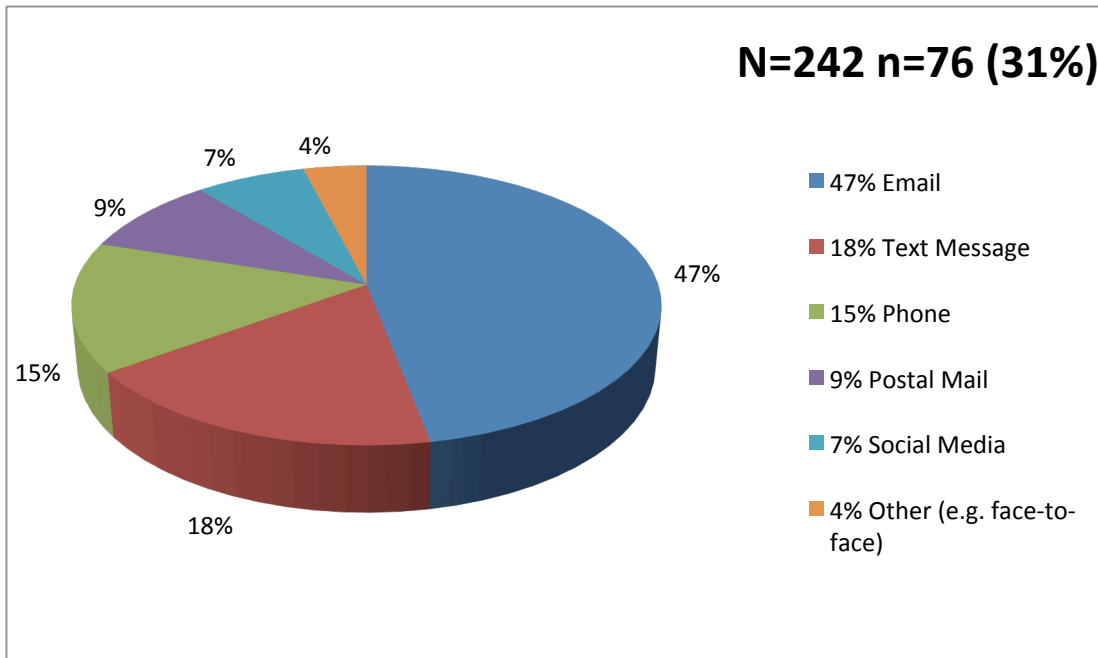
A survey was conducted in Mason County (N=122/n=35 29% response rate percent) and Grays Harbor County (N=120/n=41 34% response rate percent) to gain a better understanding of the preferred communication methods of 4-H volunteers. The survey was administered by calling each enrolled 4-H volunteer from the previous 4-H year, using the same predetermined questions. Multiple attempts were made to connect with the individual over the span of four weeks using various

methods such as phone, email, and face-to-face interaction.

**Survey Results**

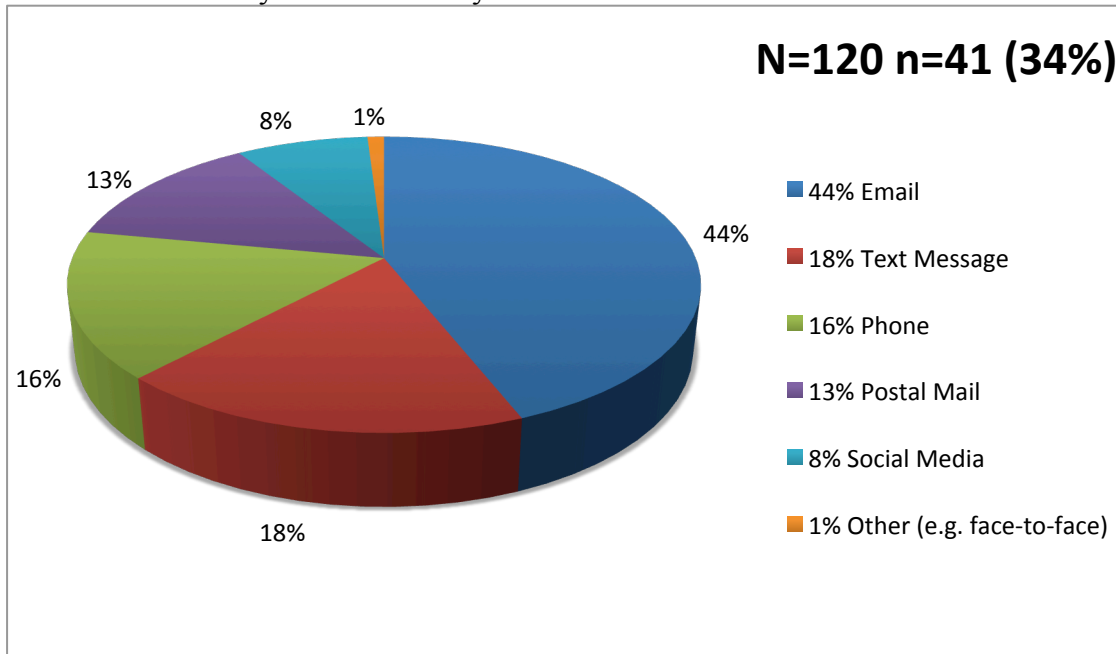
Chart 1 shows the communication preferences of all survey volunteers from both Mason County and Grays Harbor County. Email (47%) was found to be the most preferred communication method for volunteers in both counties. Notably, text message and phone both ranked similarly at 18% and 15% respectively.

**Chart 1: Combined Counties 4-H Volunteer Communication Preferences**

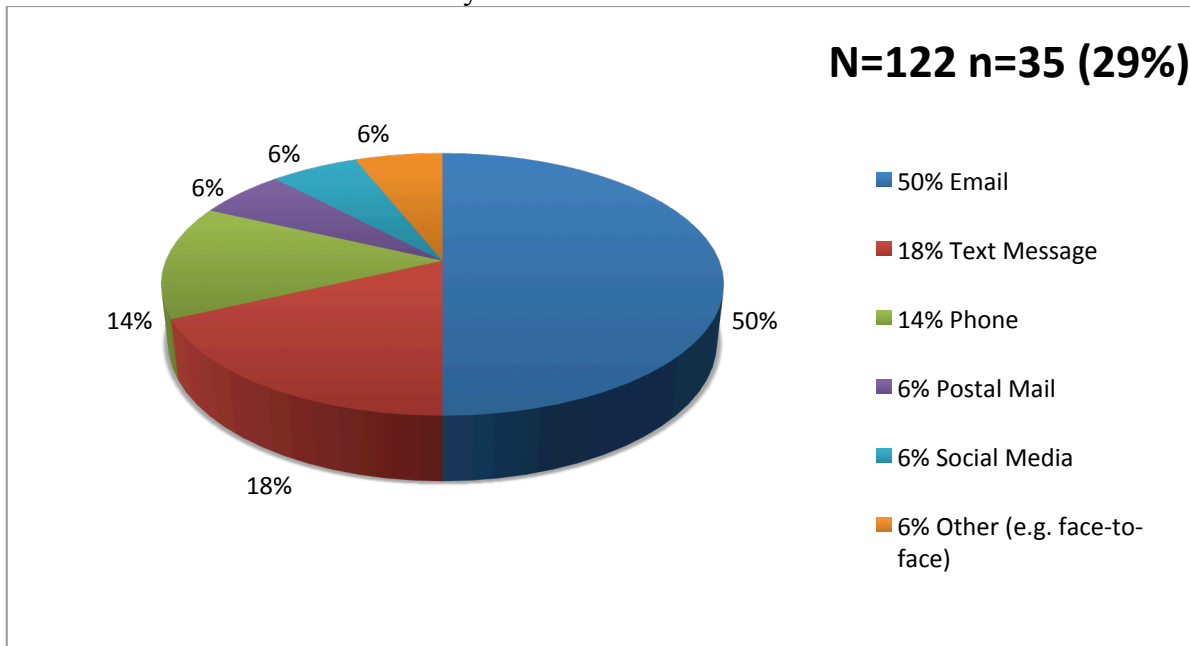


The individual county communication preferences are shown in chart 2 and chart 3. Preferences between Mason County and Grays Harbor County were very similar. The majority of surveyed individuals indicated that they prefer to use email and text messaging as their method of communication. Surprisingly, both counties indicated that 18% of responding individuals prefer text messaging. This communication method will be integrated into the communication system as well.

**Chart 2:** Grays Harbor County 4-H Volunteer Communication Preferences



**Chart 3:** Mason County 4-H Volunteer Communication Preferences



Grounded in an understanding of the survey data and the use of a new 4-H enrollment/management software program called *4-H Access*, the 4-H Youth Development program in both counties transitioned from a monthly mailed paper

newsletter to a weekly electronic newsletter. This transition addressed the need for a more efficient communication system, as well as reduced operating budgets. Staff time spent on the newsletter went from approximately 10 hours a month to 1 hour a

week (4 or 5 hours per month). This reduction is approximately half of the initial time allocated to the monthly paper newsletter

The increased frequency of this newsletter dramatically improves the volunteer connectivity with the 4-H Youth Development program.

### **Initial Response to Changing Methods of Communication with 4-H Volunteers**

The 4-H volunteer response to the weekly electronic newsletter has been positive. One volunteer stated, "I appreciate the weekly newsletter. It is a nice reminder of all the activities happening in 4-H." Another volunteer expressed, "Thanks for putting together this e-newsletter. It is full of great ideas and tips to help with my 4-H club. Thanks!"

The 4-H staff developed a simple format to share the information each week. They are more efficient and no longer spend hours designing the layout for a more complex newsletter each month. Again, staff spend half of the amount of time on this new communication format.

The frequency of the weekly electronic newsletter also allows the 4-H staff to be more responsive when sharing time-sensitive information. Relevant information submitted by local, state, and federal entities are also included within five business days versus twenty business days.

Since text messaging ranked second on the list, both county 4-H staff are now sending text message meeting reminders through the new enrollment system *4-H Access*. For volunteers who still prefer a paper newsletter, staff print off copies of the electronic newsletter and have them available at the office and at 4-H meetings throughout the county.

### **Next Steps**

Volunteers who are informed about activities, events, and program needs are more likely to be engaged in those positive youth development opportunities about which they are most passionate. Over the next few months, volunteer engagement will be assessed to see if there is a correlation between more effective communication and 4-H volunteer engagement.

The overall communication strategies used within the 4-H Youth Development program in Mason County and Grays Harbor County likewise will continually be assessed. This assessment will take place at the beginning of the 4-H year with the annual volunteer survey. Information gathered from the assessment will be used to improve communication strategies with 4-H volunteers.

The use of text messaging as a communication tool within the 4-H Youth Development program has yet to be evaluated. While the use of this communication tool is at the beginning stages of implementation, an evaluation of its effectiveness will be done once this tool has been used for six months within the program.

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