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Newspapers Still Key in Reaching Rural

Media

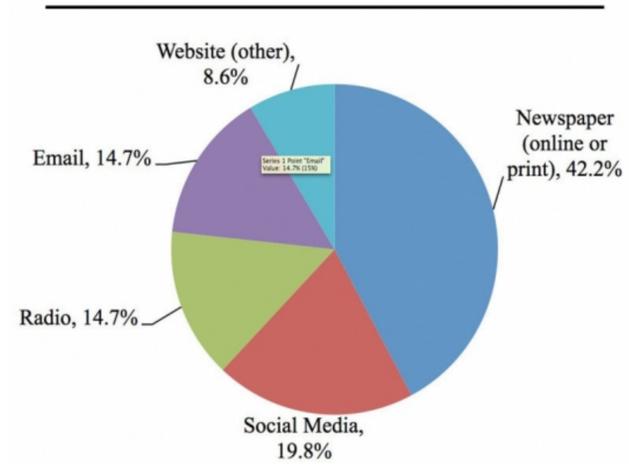
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An Oklahoma study finds that more rural residents prefer to get information via their newspaper (either print or online) than any other mode of communication. For groups trying to reach rural constituents, that's important to keep in mind.

[Brian Whitacre](#) | [By Lara Brooks](#) | [Corie Kaiser](#) | [Grant Irby](#)

Figure 1. Survey Respondents' Current Source of Information



The decline of newspapers has made many headlines in recent years. Lower revenue, declining readership, and increasing competition from a variety of online sources have led many to believe that traditional newspapers are on their way out.

Some recent survey results from Oklahoma, however, make clear that rural residents still highly value their local newspapers.

In fact, when residents of 12 rural communities were asked about their current (and preferred) way of receiving information on local community events, respondents selected newspapers over social media or email by an overwhelming margin. This pattern held regardless of whether the surveys were paper-based or collected online.

Thus, even in this age of endless Facebook feeds and dizzying arrays of other social media options, the good ol' newspaper still has a beloved place in many rural residents' hearts. This is important for many businesses, nonprofits, clubs, governments and social networks that might be interested in promoting an event in a rural community. That's not to say that new media isn't part of the rural communication equation, as well. The second most preferred method of receiving information was social media.

A Little Background

Previous research has found that since 2001 there has been a notable increase in online media, while offline media such as newspapers experienced sizable declines. Businesses and people working in rural communities are left grappling with how to best inform the local community about future events and programs.

To answer these questions, we turn to a survey distributed as part of the [Community Health Needs Assessment \(CHNA\) program in Oklahoma](#). CHNAs allow communities to gather valuable information about their community and the needs of their residents. Completing a CHNA is a new requirement for non-profit 501(c)(3) hospitals that submit IRS Schedule H Form 990 – implying that all non-profit hospitals must complete the process every three years. Most of the facilities that participate are critical access hospitals, which, by definition, are small facilities located in rural communities.

The CHNA process in Oklahoma is led by the [Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Service](#) in collaboration with the [Oklahoma Office of Rural Health](#). The process consists of four community meetings (usually over a three-to-five-month period). One particularly important requirement of these meetings is the distribution of a community survey. The survey gauges current healthcare usage, potential gaps in service and identifies possible additional health services to offer. In addition, questions are included to determine how community members are currently informed of community events, and how they prefer to be informed. The 21-question survey is offered in two formats: hard-copy and online (electronic). Respondents have four weeks to complete the survey. Communities are encouraged to gather a comprehensive cross section of responses that are representative of the community both economically and demographically.

Surveys from Rural Oklahoma

Surveys were completed in 12 rural Oklahoma communities (Figure 2) from March 2013 to June 2014. Hard-copy surveys were distributed at the first community meeting in each community. A total of 100 hard-copy surveys were delivered in each community, and attendees were urged to take extra copies with them to help distribute within the community. A survey link for the online version was also made available at the first meeting. Community members who signed in to the meeting received an email following the meeting with a copy of the link to distribute through their local contact lists. A total of 1,863 surveys were collected for an average of 155 per community. Of those responses, 52.8% were derived from the electronic survey offering, and 47.2% were collected from the hard-copy paper survey.

Figure 2. Community Survey Locations



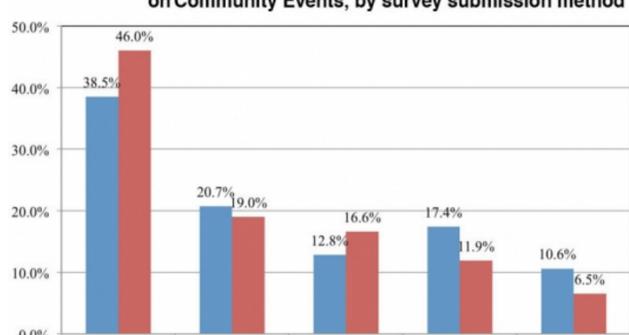
Tables 1 and 2 display demographic and racial statistics for the 12 communities that participated in the CHNA process. Due to space limitations on the survey instrument, questions were not included to gauge demographic or income characteristics of the survey takers. Therefore, demographic and income data are derived from the Census and Bureau of Economic Analysis, respectively. In addition to place and county-level statistics, Table 1 also includes data from an aggregate of the zip codes that comprise the medical service area of the hospital facility. As might be expected in rural communities, every community had a higher percentage of over 65 population than the state average. In some areas the over 65 population accounted for as much as 20% of the service area (compared to the 13.5% seen statewide). Of the 12 communities surveyed, only two had higher county-level per capita income than the state average. When examining racial trends (Table 2), half of the communities included had a Native American population that was larger than the state average (8.2%). Three communities had a larger Hispanic Origin population than the state rate of 8.9%.

While the primary focus of the survey was on health care in the local community, survey questions were included to determine (1) how community members are currently informed of community events, and (2) how they prefer to be informed. Survey respondents had checkbox options to select all current modes of information that they used (newspaper, social media, website, and email); many selected multiple options (average of 1.7 responses per survey).

Survey Results

The survey results (Figure 1) indicate that the newspaper (42%) is the most widely selected medium for respondents' current source of information, more than doubling the next most selected option, social media (20%). While newspaper readership has been in decline, a 2010 survey for the National Newspaper Association still showed that 73 percent of respondents read a local newspaper every week. This popularity is particularly true for small communities throughout the United States. Another study completed by the University of Missouri noted that in areas where the circulation size of the local newspaper was 15,000 or less that over two-thirds of residents read their local newspaper. Forty-two percent of respondents from these small communities said their primary source of information was the "newspaper" and "newspaper's website," which is identical to CHNA respondents from the 12 communities surveyed across Oklahoma.

Figure 3. Rural Oklahoma Residents' Current Source of Information on Community Events, by survey submission method



In Figure 3, we can see that regardless of survey submission method, the respondents overwhelmingly indicated they receive information about community events via the newspaper. Even among those who submitted the survey electronically (and may have a preference for online information), the preference for the newspaper was nearly 2 to 1.

Figure 3 does demonstrate that respondents who submitted paper surveys were more likely to gain information from traditional outlets, such as the newspaper (46% vs. 38.5%) or radio (16.6% vs 12.8%), compared to those who chose to submit online. Similarly, respondents who submitted their surveys online were more likely to select options such as email (17.4% vs. 11.9%), social media (20.7% vs. 19.0%), or websites (10.6% vs. 6.5%) compared to those who submitted paper copies.

The CHNA survey did not distinguish between traditional, hard-copy newspapers and more recent online versions of those newspapers. Of the 12 communities participating with the CHNA survey, only four (Anadarko, Shattuck, Frederick, Carnegie) do not provide online offerings of the newspaper. Of the eight communities with online offerings, two communities provide free online newspaper viewing and six communities charge an online subscription to access online content. A National Newspaper Association publication notes that 14% of users paid to view online newspaper content, which rose from 6% in 2012.

Similarly, when survey respondents were asked how they preferred to be informed of community events, the results mirrored how they are currently informed. Newspaper was the preferred source by 47.4% of paper respondents and 40.9% of electronic respondents. Social media followed with 18.0% of paper respondents and 24.7% of electronic responses. Email was the third most preferred source of information among both paper (17.2%) and electronic (19.4%) respondents.

Wrapping up

Rural residents in Oklahoma value the information they obtain through their local newspapers. The findings here may be slightly biased towards residents that are interested in community health (and their network of friends) – however, we did clearly specify that the survey should be distributed widely among the residents. In many cases people left paper copies of the survey out at the local hospital, library, coffee shop, or physician's office and had visitors fill them in. This information is valuable in terms of marketing and promoting community events, including those offered by local businesses and organizations. Utilizing the availability and scope of the local newspaper seems to be the most effective way to reach rural audiences to make them aware of events in their community. It should be noted, however, that social media was the second most preferred source of information by both electronic and paper respondents, with email communication a close third. A marketing plan that includes both traditional and electronic media may be the most effective way to distribute information regarding local events to rural communities.

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Comments

Missing Media Sources

6 October 2014 - 12:32pm — hgravelle

The high percentage of responses for Newspaper may also be due to the fact that Television is missing as a media source. Many get local news, community event information and more from television programs, whether it be from cable, satellite or free TV. This would most likely make the data collected invalid or at least incorrect by a pretty wide margin.

-Helena

Re: Missing Media Sources

6 October 2014 - 6:57pm — lara Brooks

Helena- Thank you for the great comment. Television was not included in the survey as a single checkbox option; however, we do include a line for survey respondents to include "other" sources and write out what they use. Out of our 1,863 total survey respondents, only 16 included television as an option. This equals less than 1 percent of all respondents. Also, we do not explicitly include demographic and population data of the communities surveyed in Oklahoma. The average place population of the 12 communities included is below 5,000. Thus, we chose initially to not include television as its own option since most of these communities do not have local channels. Most of the TV channels received by these communities focus on the larger nearby metropolitan communities and are unlikely to feature many of the community events that our survey asked about.

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