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Virginia Public Health Association 2015 Member and Contact Survey

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ABSTRACT

In order to assess the needs and interests of members of the Virginia Public Health Association (VAPHA), a survey was conducted for the purpose of identifying the organization's strengths and, most importantly, focusing on areas where improvement is needed. The survey helped outline steps necessary to effectively move forward and cultivate this organization into a powerful presence advocating for public health in the Commonwealth. The introduction offers guidelines for designing the survey focusing on questions that would help VAPHA's members decipher what they approve of and what they want to see changed. The methodology elaborated on how the survey was constructed and administered while the results summarized the outcomes of each category of the survey utilizing visuals such charts and graphs as well as participants' responses in open-end questions. Finally, recommendations are offered based on respondents' concerns.

INTRODUCTION

Prior to designing and administering a survey, blogger Susan E. Wyse recommends using the following as guidelines to consider:

- What are the key objectives for the survey?
- Will the results be used for critical decision making for the organization?
- Is there a similar survey within your organization?
- Who is the target audience for the survey?
- Will this survey be distributed again as a benchmark?

(Wyse, 2012)

The ultimate goal in survey design should be to choose the best or optimal blueprint to meet the primary purposes of the survey. (Gonzalez & Eltinge, 2010) In designing VAPHA's survey, it was important to focus on identifying the needs and interests of its members. Doing so required focusing primarily on what mattered most to *them*. However, VAPHA had to remain realistic about attainable goals as well. For example, if members expressed a desire to sponsor semi-annual three day conferences, but that would not be financially feasible for the organization's budget, then including that suggestion as a multiple choice answer on the survey would be disingenuous unless, on the other hand, members suggested how to offset costs. It was also essential to include questions where members could reflect on why they joined the organization and what they hoped to accomplish through their membership. From their responses we hoped to receive nods of approval for what is working and, equally important, constructive criticism for what we need to improve upon. Both would be advantageous.

METHODOLOGY

The survey instrument was developed by selecting and updating questions used in previous years. It was also cultivated by reading through numerous questions used by public health associations in other states nationwide that had a commonality with VAPHA. From among those were queries chosen and adapted for use by VAPHA. The survey was comprised mostly of multiple choice questions, but in some instances members could “free-style” their thoughts with open-ended answers where space was allotted for typing responses. It was important for the survey questions to be unencumbered, so “by reducing respondent burden, [which] is viewed as the number of questions asked to a particular respondent, data quality [would] improve because the survey would be less burdensome, and a less burdened respondent [would] be more motivated to provide significantly accurate responses.” (Gonzalez & Eltinge, 2010) The survey was then designed using SurveyMonkey® and administered by email to the 600 VAPHA members and contacts across the Commonwealth. There was also a link on the VAPHA website accessible by anyone visiting the site. The survey was designed using skip logic enabling nonmembers to bypass questions specific to members. Respondents’ answers were then exported and downloaded to Excel where the elements of each question with its corresponding responses were visible on one page. Many of the replies were displayed using multi-colored bar graphs, donut charts, and pie charts. Having this visualization highlighted stark contrasts allowing for easier analysis. Open-end responses were listed beneath the corresponding question.

RESULTS

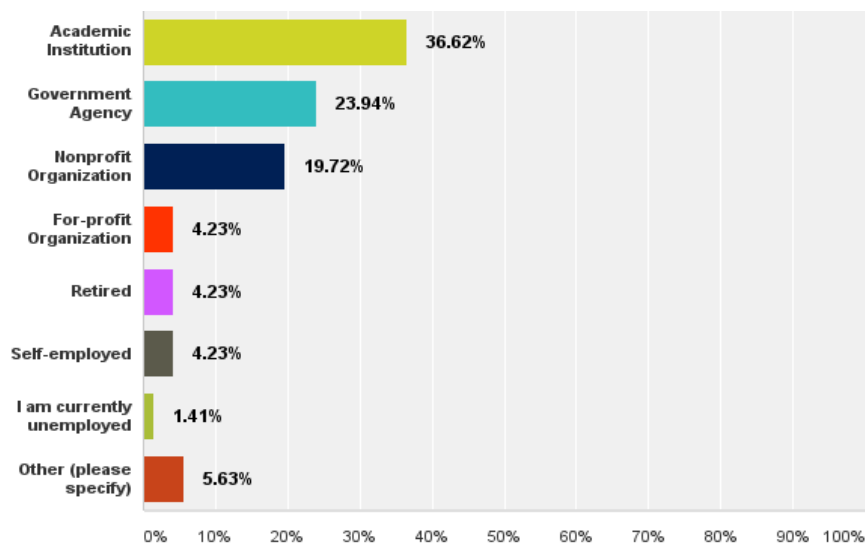
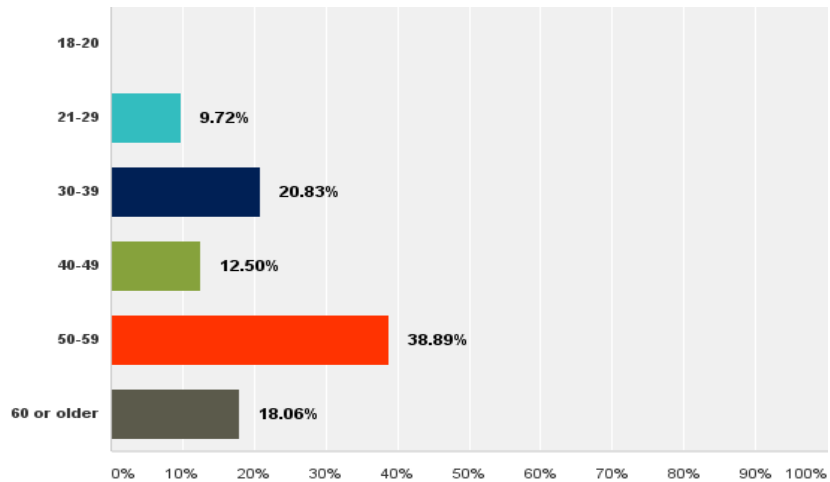
Although the 13.5% response rate seemed small at first glance, it provided a snapshot of the outlook, interests, and needs of the membership sufficient to analyze the information and initiate steps toward measurable change. “*Response rates are more important when the study’s purpose is to measure effects or make generalizations to a larger population, less important if the purpose is to gain insight*” (University of Texas, 2011) (emphasis mine), and the purpose of the VAPHA survey was to gain insight. It is worth noting, however, that the extent of the relationship between the organization and its members can make a difference in the response rates. Generally, the better acquainted respondents are with the organization the better the response rate. Members are more likely to feel part of the organization if they are treated somewhat like stakeholders. Familiarity is bred through accessibility to the organization’s board, its officers, and other members. This can be accomplished through meeting and event attendance/participation, volunteering, steady and two-way communication via emails, newsletters, and updated information on the organization’s website. “Respondents [who feel connected] will be more likely to respond to an organization’s survey than respondents who have very little contact with the organization.” (University of Texas, 2011)

Following are summaries of the results from each category of the survey.

1. Demographics:

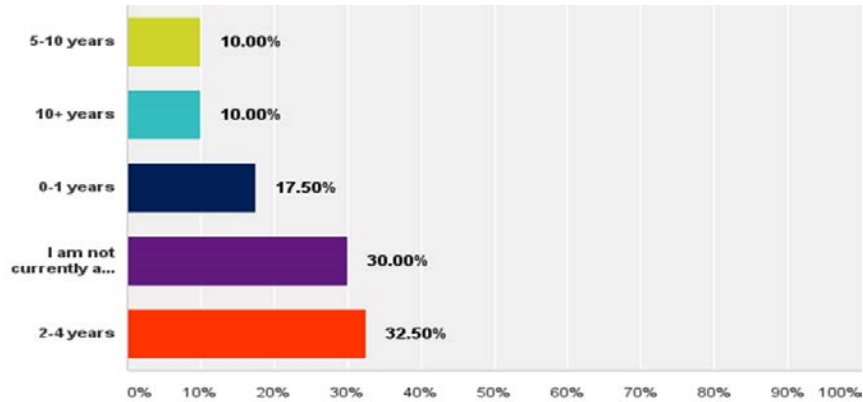
The largest percentage of respondents (38.89%) fell in the 50-59 age range group with 60 or older being the next highest at 18.06%. Approximately 80% are not students and 58.33% have a graduate level degree and 29.17% with a professional degree. The top three institutions

represented are academic institution (36.62%), government agency (23.94%) and nonprofit organization (19.72%). The majority work in public health or community health (47.69%) and education (24.62%).



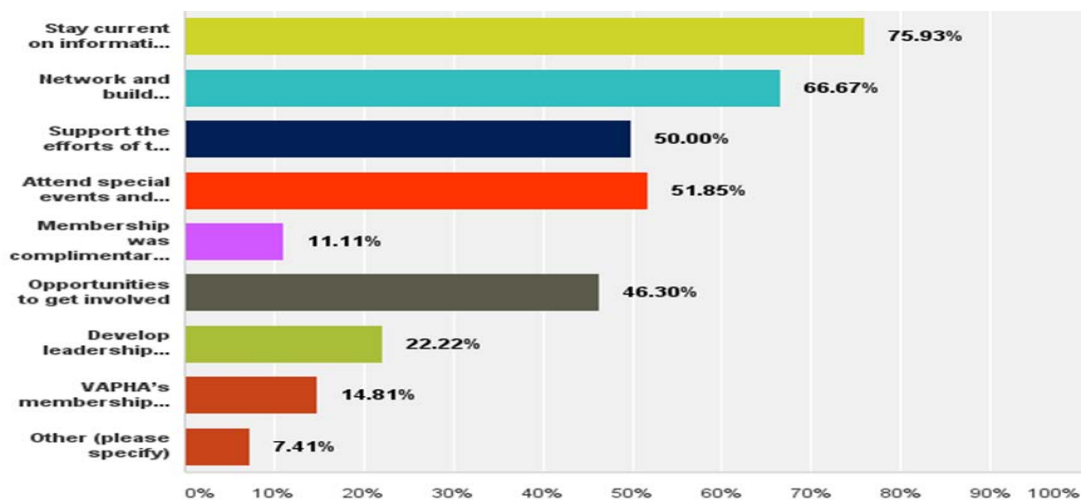
2. Membership Information

When asked how long they had been members, the two highest percentages of responses came from “2-4 years” (32.5%) and, surprisingly, nonmembers (30%) who were made up of either former members that received the email requesting participation because they are still listed as members, or they were the general public partaking in the survey via the link posted on the website.



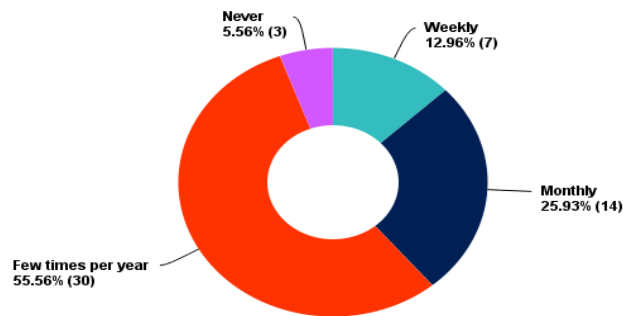
As mentioned earlier, we used the “skip logic” feature for nonmember respondents. This enabled them to bypass member-specific questions and go directly to general inquiries. One of the questions skipped was “How often do you visit the VAPHA website?” which, in hindsight, we should have allowed them to answer so their viewing frequency could have also been included. This would have given us some insight into how often the public (or former members) are going to the VAPHA website seeking information. However, their insight still proved invaluable later in the survey.

Regular memberships make up the majority at 69.9%. Reasons for joining VAPHA varied, but the top three were: (1) stay current on information about public health (75.93%); (2) network and build relationships (66.67%); and, (3) attend special events and training sessions (51.85%). One respondent not only chose the top three reasons for joining, but also elected to type in an additional explanation: “To have a foundation from which to propose, promote, advocate for improvements in Virginia’s public health ...”



Answer Choices	Responses
Stay current on information about public health	75.93% 41
Network and build relationships	66.67% 36
Support the efforts of the association	50.00% 27
Attend special events and training sessions	51.85% 28
Membership was complimentary with a conference	11.11% 6
Opportunities to get involved	46.30% 25
Develop leadership skills	22.22% 12
VAPHA's membership benefits	14.81% 8
Other (please specify)	7.41% 4
Total Respondents: 54	

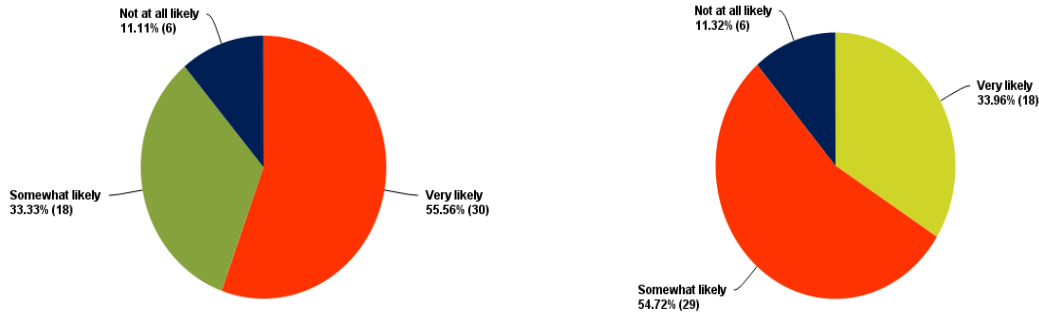
The website is visited only a few times per year by 55.56% of those who responded followed by 25.93% who visit it monthly.



Reasons for this high percentage of infrequent visits could be due to the website not being regularly updated and outdated information not being deleted or archived. For example, prior to the survey link being posted under the News tab, the last entry posted was “Implementing Quit Now Virginia Fax Referral: How to be Successful in Your Clinic and Community” on September 10, 2014. Prior to this posting, the website News tab was updated frequently.

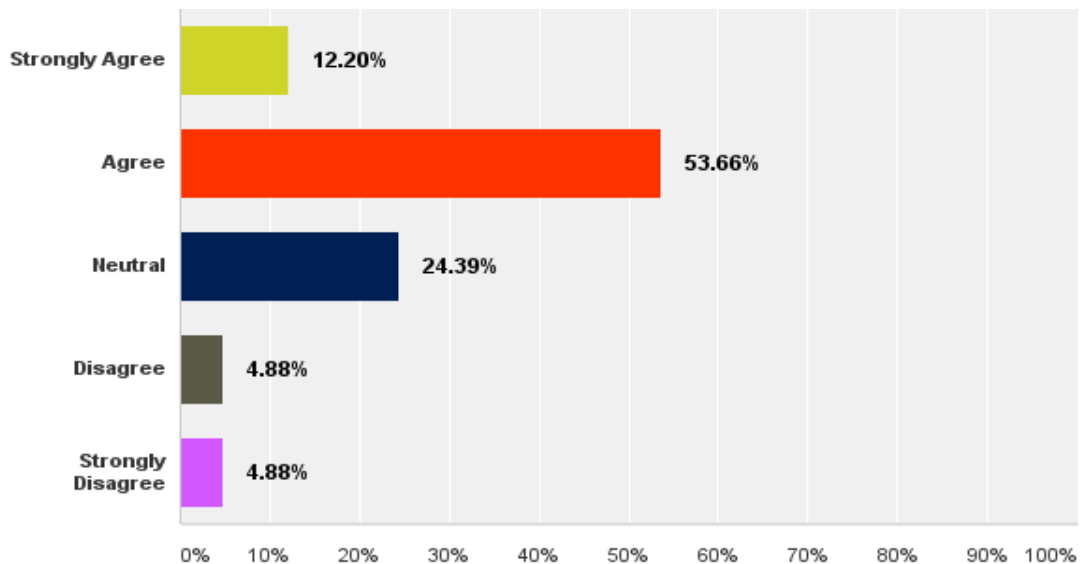
Websites are the “go to” place where an organization can keep its members informed, so keeping it current is vital. “[A] website is often the first way that many customers connect with your company, so make sure you make the best impression. Sites with broken links and stale information can confuse [members].” (Lacina, 2014) Members and nonmembers should be able to rely on the website to stay informed.

Although 55.56% are “very likely” to renew their membership when it expires, 54.72% are only “somewhat likely” to recommend a membership to others.



3. Event Participation:

A strong percentage (53.66%) of participants are satisfied with how VAPHA events have met their expectations. The percentages of those who disagree (4.88%) or strongly disagree (4.88%) are very low.



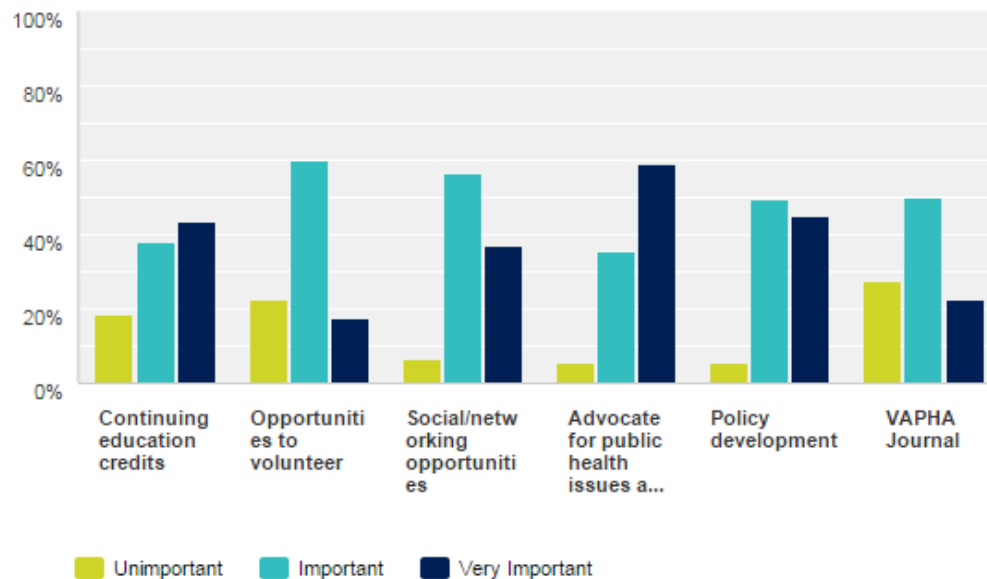
When asked in another question for reasons why VAPHA events have not met their expectations, participants gave the following explanations:

- “As a student ... I felt very inadequate and didn’t know how to really utilize the opportunities the event offered.... It would be nice if the organization could provide more events or workshops that help students build leadership skills and how to prepare for the working environment.”
- “Annual session about 4 years ago.”
- “The state organization should do more throughout the year to create opportunities to engage members.”
- “To my knowledge, there have been such few events in recent years. For example, I didn’t even know if or when a VAPHA conference was held this year.”

- “Best event in recent years was 2009 Health Equity conference. Since then, nothing has come close.”

4. Membership Benefits:

Members responded 64.47% as having “some knowledge” of VAPHA membership. The benefits of greatest interest to respondents were “advocate for public health issues and policy development” (59.74%), “social/networking opportunities” (55.84%) and “policy development” (50%).



The top three answers as to how VAPHA can improve its membership benefits were: (1) increase visibility in the community (70.83%); (2) increase training/educational events (65.28%); and, (3) publicize membership benefits more effectively (63.89%). (Respondents’ open-end answers are addressed below along with recommendations.)

Results from the Membership Benefits category have provided some of the most significant information regarding what members want from their membership.

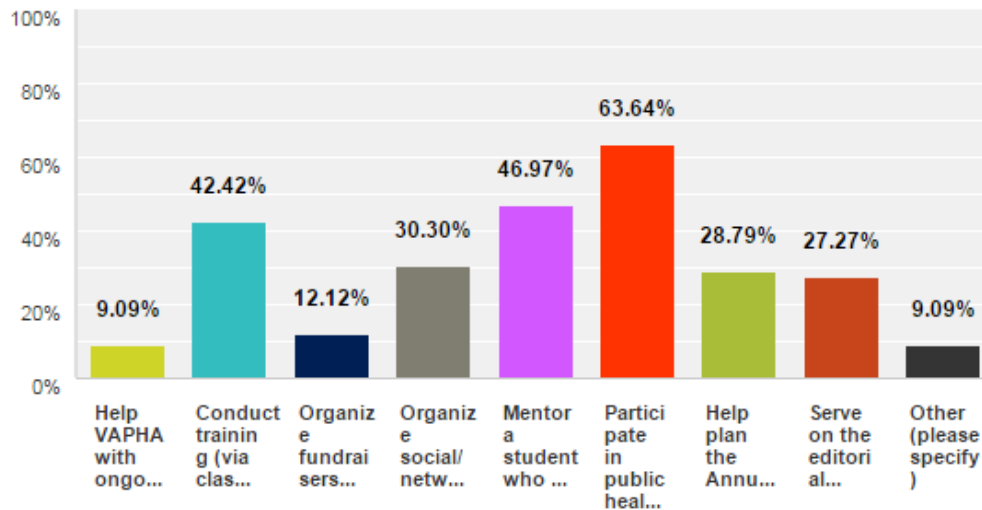
5. Volunteer Opportunities:

Members are mostly “neutral” (56.76%) about VAPHA’s promotion of volunteer opportunities followed by 17.57% who “disagree” that VAPHA is doing a good job promoting volunteer opportunities. On the other hand, 16.22% “agree” the organization is doing a good job promoting volunteer opportunities. When asked how VAPHA can improve their promotion of volunteer opportunities, members stated:

- “Connect with people other than via email that is very sporadic”

- “I am not sure what opportunities are available due to the lack of promotion.”
- “Send out opportunities by email. I don’t usually visit the website but I read the emails.”
- “I’ve never seen any.”
- “I rarely ever see volunteering opportunities or maybe not enough of it. It would be nice to get to know other members by perhaps having a VAPHA volunteer weekend or opening it up so members could come together and volunteer at a place of their choosing.”
- “I didn’t even know there were volunteer opportunities.”
- “Specifically indicate where and when volunteers are needed via email and website.”

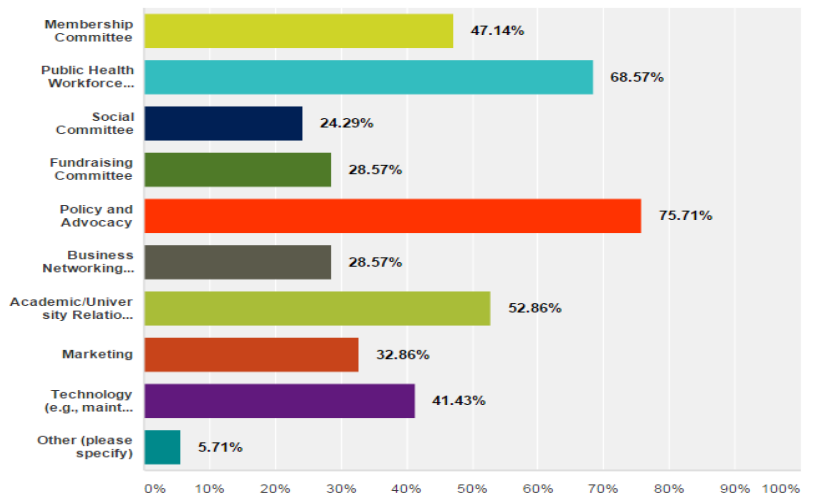
However, when asked in the following question which volunteer opportunities they would be most interested in, there was a strong response. For those participants, the top three areas of volunteer interests are: 1) participate in public health advocacy efforts (63.64%); mentor a student who is pursuing a career in public health (46.97%); and conduct training (via classes or seminars) (42.42%).



Answer Choices	Responses
Help VAPHA with ongoing day-to-day activities (for example, website maintenance)	9.09% 6
Conduct training (via classes or seminars)	42.42% 28
Organize fundraisers to fund VAPHA activities and events	12.12% 8
Organize social/networking opportunities	30.30% 20
Mentor a student who is pursuing a career in public health	46.97% 31
Participate in public health advocacy efforts	63.64% 42
Help plan the Annual Career Fair or Annual Conference	28.79% 19
Serve on the editorial board for the VAPHA Journal	27.27% 18
Other (please specify)	9.09% 6
Total Respondents: 66	

6. Committees:

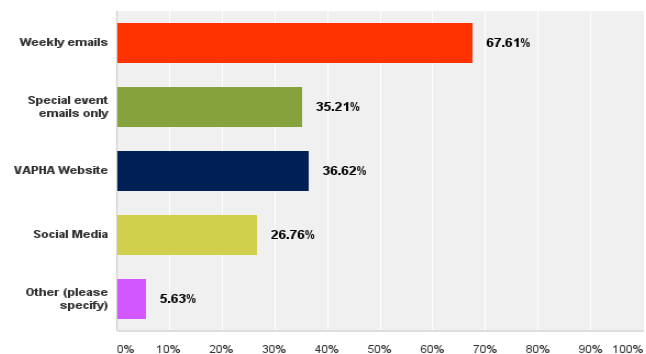
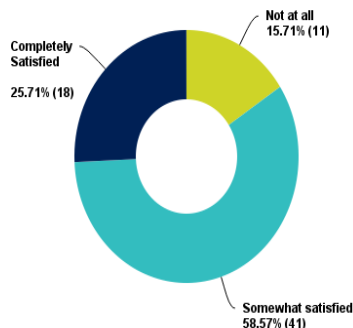
The top committee choices were: 1) policy and advocacy (75.36%); 2) public health workforce committee (68.12%); and, 3) academic/university relations committee (52.17%).



Answer Choices	Responses	Count
Membership Committee	47.14%	33
Public Health Workforce Committee	68.57%	48
Social Committee	24.29%	17
Fundraising Committee	28.57%	20
Policy and Advocacy	75.71%	53
Business Networking Committee	28.57%	20
Academic/University Relations Committee	52.86%	37
Marketing	32.86%	23
Technology (e.g., maintain VAPHA website, Facebook or Twitter page)	41.43%	29
Other (please specify)	5.71%	4
Total Respondents: 70		

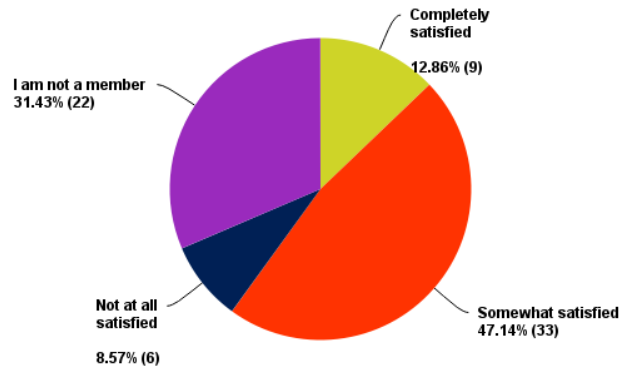
7. Communication:

Members are 58.57% somewhat satisfied with VAPHA's method/frequency of communicating with them and 25.71% were completely satisfied. A large percent -- 67.61% -- want to receive weekly emails while 36.62% prefer receiving communications via the VAPHA website.



8. Member Satisfaction:

Members are “somewhat satisfied” (47.14%) with how VAPHA is serving their needs. Although that is a good percentage, the percentages for “somewhat satisfied” and “completely satisfied” (12.86%) may have been higher if not for the 31.43% of respondents who identified as nonmembers.



9. Member Involvement:

There were 23 respondents who gave their names, email addresses and/or phone numbers.

CONCLUSIONS

One of the primary goals is to retain current members and find ways to recruit new members. Word of mouth is still essential, so utilizing results from this survey as a means to raise the satisfaction level of current members is crucial. Now that they have spoken, the “ball is in VAPHA’s court.” One suggestion on word of mouth communication was written in an article by Andrew Miller, *Communicate Value, Increase Membership*:

Video has become one of the most effective ways to communicate a message. Short, compelling videos [posted on the website or Facebook, for example] are easy to watch, easy to make, and easy to share with [other members and nonmembers alike]. It is one of the quickest ways to get a message out to a large number of people.

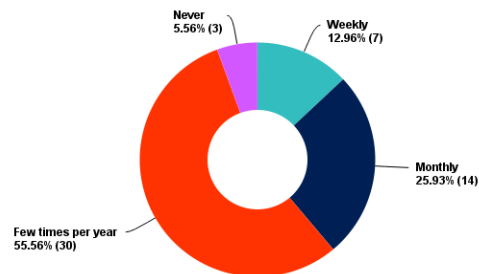
Associations should leverage this technology by video-recording different members talking about how they have personally and professionally benefitted from being a part of the association ... because see[ing] one of their peers talking about the value of being a part of that community ... [will] help tell the story of what the

association can actually do. [Video testimonials] are a much more powerful tool than mere words on a website. (Miller, 2011)

1. Keep VAPHA Website Updated

When respondents were asked why they joined VAPHA, the strongest response was to “stay current on information about public health” (75.93%). A quarter of the respondents (25.93%) said they visit the website monthly; 12.96% visit weekly; and, 55.56% only visit the site yearly.

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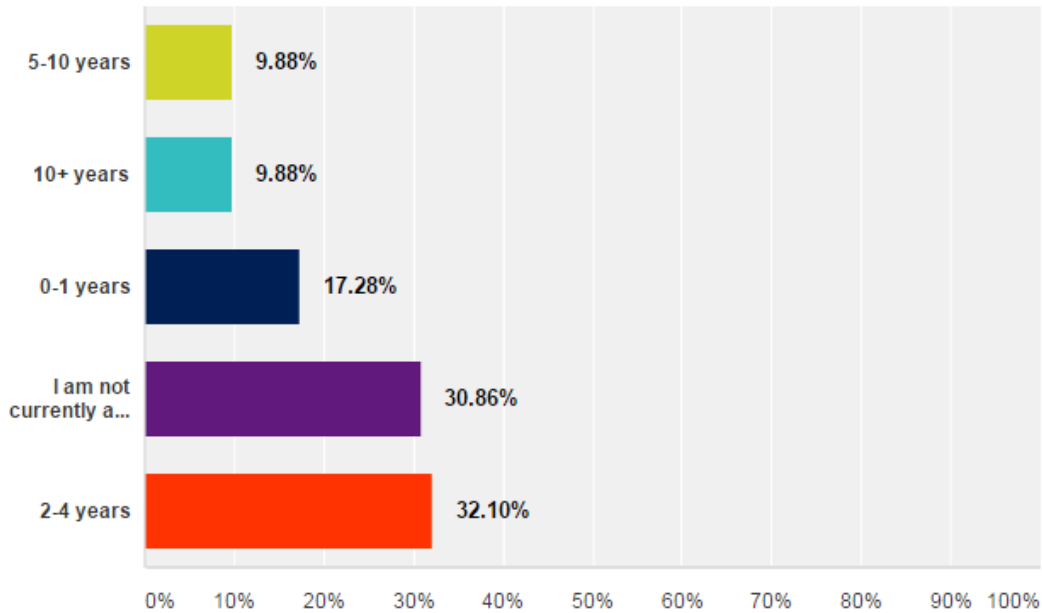


It would be beneficial to keep the website updated with current information about public health – particularly, but not exclusively, information pertaining to the Commonwealth. Prior to recent material being added to the website such as the membership survey and the 2015 VAPHA Annual Meeting, **VAPHA News** had not been updated since September 2014; under the **Policy & Advocacy** tab, the last entry for *Action Alerts* was dated June 2014 and *Policy Statements* has not been updated since June 2013; under **Careers in Public Health**, *Awards and Scholarships* and *Calls for Abstracts & Proposals* have not been updated since 2014. Notifications such as these are crucial and beneficial. The website is essential for members and nonmembers alike who want and need to be kept current. Keeping outdated information on the website for too long gives the impression that the organization is stagnant ... that no one is “minding the store.” Adding an archive tab would direct viewers to information that is still pertinent, but not necessarily current.

One member’s open-end response provided concrete purposes for joining VAPHA:

To have a foundation from which to propose, promote, advocate for improvements in Virginia’s public health; that would include an advocacy position for or against Virginia Department of Health, Virginia Department of Behavioral Health, and other agencies responsible for aspects of Virginia’s public health.

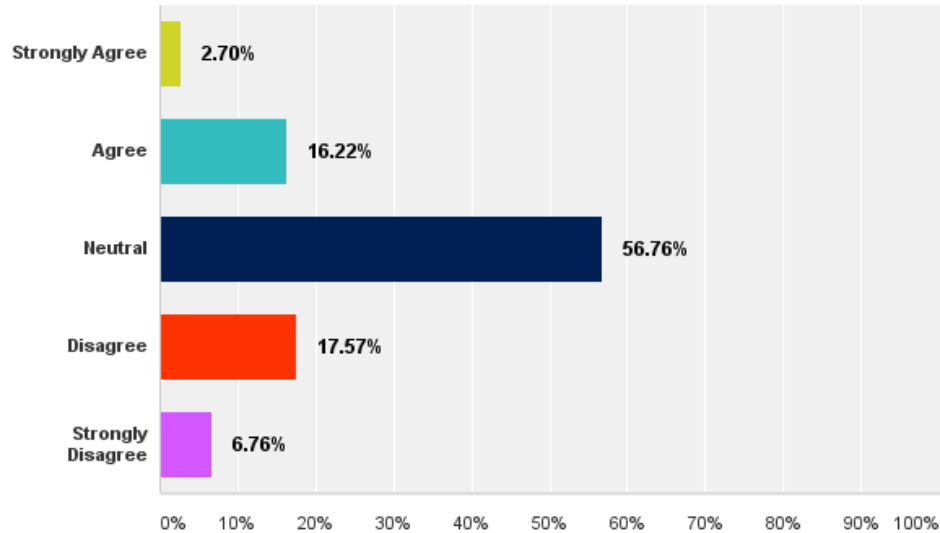
The VAPHA website should be a hub that members and the general public alike can rely on to keep them informed and active on behalf of public health in the Commonwealth of Virginia. Not only will the website play a central role in retaining current members, but could also draw new members since the website is a benefit to the public which is evident by the 30% participants who said they are currently not members.



2. Communication is Vital

One participant responded to the survey’s question, “What can VAPHA do to improve its membership benefits?,” with “Lead public health initiatives that will advance the practice of public health in VA as well as the health of all Virginians.” If and when initiatives *are* being developed and implemented, this should be communicated to members. Whatever stage they are in, relay those developments through emails and newsletters. Also, emails and newsletters will keep the lines of communication open between the organization and its members. Invite members to give input. If a blog is feasible, set up one on the website. Utilize social media by having links to Facebook, Twitter, and other sites where members can connect as well as an email icon where information from the website can be forwarded. Drip emails are ones that are not elaborate, but leave members with a sense that someone is indeed “minding the store.” For example, save-the-date announcement emails for meetings, gatherings, speakers, and conferences.

Another necessity for updated website information and maintaining open communication and dialogue with members is to announce volunteer opportunities. When asked if VAPHA has done a good job of promoting volunteer opportunities for members, the top three responses were comprised of 56.76% (neutral), 17.57% (disagree), and 16.22% who agreed the VAPHA has done a good job.



However, participants who elaborated through open-end responses, provided clearer insight into what members want:

- “I am not sure what opportunities are available due to the lack of promotion. Not sure why I even received this email [for the survey] ... have not heard much about or been invited to VAPHA programs/events.”
- “Send out opportunities by email. I don’t usually visit the website but I read the emails.”
- “I’ve never seen any.”
- “I rarely ever see volunteering opportunities or maybe not enough of it.”
- “I didn’t even know there were volunteer opportunities.”
- “Specifically indicate where and when volunteers are needed via email and website.”

The common thread that runs through their comments is that they want to be kept informed – whether by email or the website, they want frequent communication and they want to participate. They *want* to utilize the organization and they want the organization to use them. One participant suggested, “It would be nice to get to know other members by perhaps having a VAPHA volunteer weekend or opening it up so members could come together and volunteer at a place of their choosing. It doesn’t have to be often maybe 2-3 times a year would work just as well.” As opportunities become available, I would suggest not only listing them on the website, but also sending out an email. It is evident by the 67.61% who chose email as their preference for receiving updates and other messages followed by 36.62% wanting to obtain their updates from the website, and 35.21% needing messages for special events only. My recommendation is substantiated by the participant who wrote: “... a monthly brief update – in an email newsletter format – that sends to the website for full stories, related stories, to find other info, etc.”

3. Increasing Membership

In order to increase membership, it is necessary to have in place opportunities that will peak potential members' interest and retain them. For example, as online undergraduate and graduate degrees have become more mainstream, developing and offering internships/practicums where students can fulfill their requirements would be most helpful. Online students can be quite a distance away from their learning institution yet still have the same expectation as on-campus students to work in an environment that would give them hands-on experience. Some institutions have memorandums of agreement with the Virginia Department of Health, but if they do not, on their website VDH instructs students how to request a collaboration between their school and VDH. Opening doors such as these could increase the student membership population of VAPHA. I would recommend this approach because a student member could eventually become a regular member.

Other recommendations provided by participants include:

- “Connect with school nurses”
- “Consider mutual memberships with other ... related health provider associations, e.g., nursing associations ... including some that may not be obvious (e.g., Virginia chapters of National Association of Social Workers and Virginia Association of Community Service Boards, etc.”
- “Tap into secondary education institutions that offer career technical education programming in healthcare”
- “Offer opportunities for networking, provide information related to relevant public hearings, policies, and regulatory changes.”
- “Consider recruiting broader groups, transportation, CBO, FBO, over 60 special interest groups.” (I assume the respondent is referring to community based organizations (CBO) and faith based organizations (FBO).)

5. Improving on Serving the Needs of Members

Based on participants' open-end responses, recommendations for improving on serving the needs of members include:

- Reach out and communicate with members and respond to them
- Increase visibility of VAPHA with members and in communities
- Provide more opportunities to get involved with the organization
- Increase continuing education and job announcements
- Connect members to information on the website through links in the emails
- Be more active in education, advocacy, workforce development
- Provide member benefits and engage members to further the mission of VAPHA or that of APHA
- Leverage the talent of its members to improve the quality and outcomes of public health programs in VA
- Make volunteer opportunities more visible
- Organize fun, energizing events

Other recommendations:

- Make changes based on survey responses to let members know VAPHA “hears them” and then broadcast the changes to current members. They will not only be impressed that their concerns were addressed, but they will spread the word to non-members.
- New members, those within their first year of membership, are at the greatest risk for drop-off. For these members, develop a “drip email campaign” that will touch these members several times within the first year and show concern for their satisfaction as members of the organization.
- Consider shutting off certain parts of the website to the public such as volunteer and job opportunities. It does not seem fair to paying members that the public is able to access benefits that should be exclusive to paying members.

There were 23 responses of names and email addresses of those who want to communicate with someone from VAPHA about opportunities to become involved. My suggestion is to start with those and “brainstorm” via email on ways to not only get involved, but improve in areas where VAPHA is lacking. Whatever issues have been hindrances for VAPHA (lack of funding, inadequate staffing), this would be a chance to let that be known with the few who are willing to become involved.

There is strong interest in volunteering, there is strong interest in advocating for public health, and there is strong interest in mentoring students. Members are employed in areas that would be beneficial to VAPHA such as school health, health security, workforce Wellness, military mental health, leadership roles within American Public Health Association, Partnership for People with Disabilities, community/seniors, public health consulting, psychology, health advocacy and writing, advocacy consultant, and United Network of Organ Sharing. There is a wealth of experience and knowledge among these members ... and connections to organizations and new members. “Mine” them and use them. This is how current members will be retained and, hopefully, new members will be interested in joining. The VAPHA has to step up and make itself essential to its members and the general public.

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