ABSTRACT

With downturn in the economy and subsequent budget cuts to WSU Extension and Whitman County, postage funds were no longer available for mailing information to 4-H leaders and families. One low cost and effective solution for the dissemination of information includes the usage of electronic media, email, websites and internet. The question came up: Are email, websites and internet appropriate methods for communicating and transferring information to the 4-H audience?

In cooperation with the WSU Center for Civic Engagement and Communication Studies 475, a group of students volunteered to survey leaders as a class project. The survey was written and field tested by a few willing volunteers. Modifications were made and then it was distributed through the leader email list; hardcopies were shared at the Annual 4-H Achievement Program and available in the Extension office for those who preferred this format. After the second reminder, we had a 40% response rate. With support from WSU Division of Governmental Studies data from the survey were analyzed and shared with the students. The survey concluded that a well designed website is an effective method to communicate and disseminate information to the 4-H audience. However, it is important to note that many 4-H families are on dial up therefore the website should be simple in format and easy to navigate. Due to age demographics and lack of web access, information should continue to be mailed to the small percentage of families that request it.

METHODOLOGY and ACTIVITIES

The WSU Center for Civic Engagement recruited WSU Whitman County Extension 4-H to be a partner for Fall 2009 classes. A presentation was made to the Communication Studies 475 Class - Diffusion of Innovation regarding conducting a survey of 4-H volunteers to determine if internet and websites are useful tools to disseminate information. The following are steps in the survey process:

► Four students selected this as their class project.
► Meetings were held to refine the scope of the project.
► Students developed the survey.
► Survey was pilot tested.
► Survey was conducted over email.
► Hard copies of the survey were available in Extension Office.
► Hard copies of the survey were available at Achievement Night.
► Results of the survey were prepared by WSU DGSS.
► Students presented their findings in verbal and oral formats.

Parameters for evaluating the website and developing survey questions included:
• Relative advantage.
• Complexity.
• Compatibility.
• Trialability.
• Observability.

RECOMMENDATIONS and CONCLUSIONS

The students summarized the results of the survey and made the following recommendations to enhance the adoption of this technology:
► Demonstrate how to navigate the website at a club meeting or leader meeting.
► Create an opportunity at Palouse Empire Fair for people to access the website.
► Create a step-by-step tutorial on how to use the website.
► Facilitate interactive communication by creating chat rooms or forums.
► Connect with Murrow College to get a student intern to work on the website.
► Create a Whitman County 4-H Facebook to increase interactive communication.

In conclusion, a well designed website is an effective method to communicate and disseminate information to the 4-H audience in Whitman County. Due to the availability and usage of high speed internet, 80% or more of the volunteers will be able to adopt and use the features of the website. This group will be able to easily access information on the website. The remaining 20% who either are on dial-up or do not use internet will need to receive newsletters and other information in the mail. As the website is re-designed, it will need to be simple and easy to access to accommodate the needs of mature audiences and those with dial-up access.