



Communities South and West of Lansing Cultural and Recreational Focus Group Findings and Recommendations

Grand Ledge | Delta Charter Township | Olivet | Sunfield | Roxand |
Mulliken | Oneida | Vermontville | *Chester* | Benton | *Potterville* |
Windsor | Dimondale | Kalamo | *Charlotte* | Carmel | Eaton | **EATON**
RAPIDS | Bellevue | Brookfield | *Hamlin* | Nashville



Purpose of This Discussion

- Communities on the west side of Lansing have excellent programs, activities, facilities and businesses
- Residents and visitors have limited awareness, so there is limited utilization. There are lost opportunities for activity and growth
- Attracting more residents and visitors to the area will strengthen the region's economy and quality of life:
 - Consider the financial benefit of one family coming into one of the county communities: They pay average taxes of \$3,000; two kids bring additional school revenue of \$16,000; economic impact of an average income of \$50,000 produces \$150,000 in economic stimulus as dollars are spent and re-spent across the region
- By coordinating and cross-promoting activity and outreach efforts, individual organizations can attract more families and customers with minimal cost

How This Started

- Initial Research Questions:
 - How to increase regional use of AL!VE, Charlotte Performing Arts Center, and the Charlotte Aquatic Center?
 - How do we improve community marketing efforts?
 - How do we enhance regional outreach?
- Conducted 4 focus groups in late August
 - Two groups Charlotte residents
 - Two groups non-Charlotte, Eaton County residents
- Follow up convenience survey of 328 county residents to test focus group findings
 - 35% live outside the 48813 ZIP Code

Cobalt Community Research is a nonprofit research coalition created to help governments, local schools and other nonprofit organizations measure, benchmark and manage their efforts through high-quality affordable surveys, focus groups and facilitated meetings. Cobalt is headquartered in Lansing, Michigan

Bottom Line

- Perception was very positive for those who are aware of the programs and services available in the area
- Level of program awareness was often low, especially outside of Charlotte
- Outreach efforts by the various organizations have the opportunity to be strengthened, especially using direct and online communication channels
- Detail for Charlotte Performing Arts Center, Aquatic Center and AL!VE was captured in the full report available at:
www.CobaltCommunityResearch.org/GOWESTSIDE (all caps)

Barriers to Overcome

- Awareness of what the region offers
- Events and activities are not well coordinated, have limited outreach resources, and compete for the same time slots and volunteers
- Communities and most organizations do not manage volunteer programs as effectively as possible
- Communities and most organizations do not manage communication efforts as effectively as possible

Overarching Recommendations

1. Develop a regional brand and cooperative “system” with defined outreach inputs and outputs to maximize effectiveness and efficiency while minimizing resource use
 - Something like a “Westside Visitor and Events Council”
 - Consider a regional passport with coupons, passes, advertising, regional guide, etc.
 - Example: “Be a Tourist” type marketing
 - Example: Area guide for realtors to help them attract residents and businesses

Overarching Recommendations

2. Expand cooperation in marketing to promote across organizations and communities
 - Create a centralized email/contact repository that includes the ability to identify interests of individuals involved
 - Shift main focus to non-broadcast promotion efforts
 - Develop rules and oversight to ensure appropriate use

Overarching Recommendations

3. Focus on a festival/expo strategy to bring new visitors into the area, capture additional contacts for marketing, enhance visibility, and increase sponsorship opportunities
 - Side benefit of attracting businesses and new, active residents
 - Good learning opportunity for regional cooperation and integrating the preferences expressed by residents in the focus groups and survey
 - Helps people to try businesses and programs that they may not normally try if they were not in the area

Overarching Recommendations

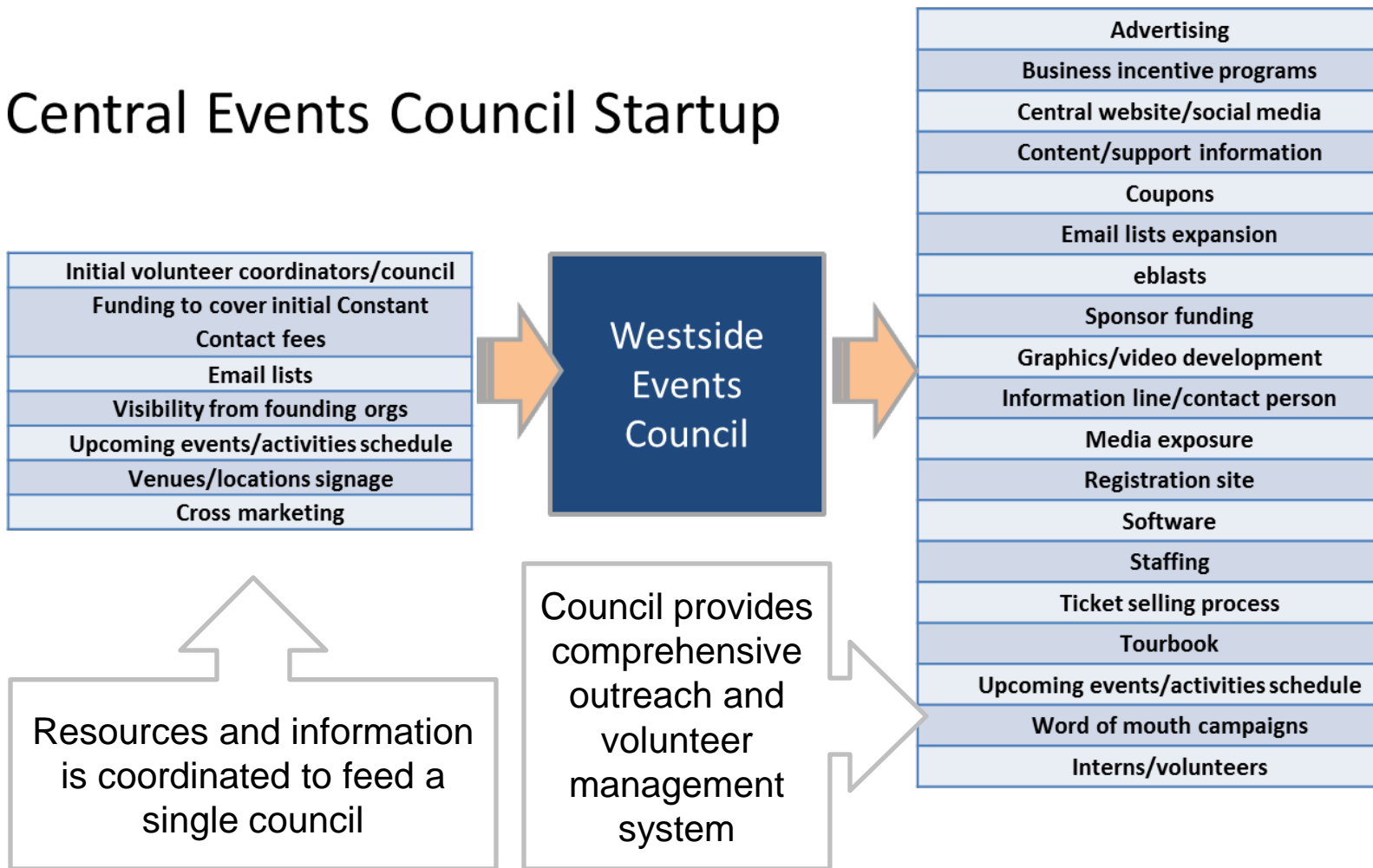
1. Develop a regional brand and cooperative “system” with defined outreach inputs and outputs to maximize effectiveness and efficiency while minimizing resource use

Regional Advantages

- Regional branding creates more visibility, which creates more volunteer and sponsorship support
 - Nonprofit organizations often lack the financial and human resources to implement significant enhancements to their programs, offerings and outreach. Motivated individuals and sponsorship contributions are key inputs to developing an effective outreach organization.
- This organization could be established as a standalone 501c3 and be able to apply for grants and tax-deductible donations, or it could be a division (separately branded) of an existing tax-exempt organization. The regional focus would make it more appealing to grant-making organizations.

Startup Inputs and Outputs

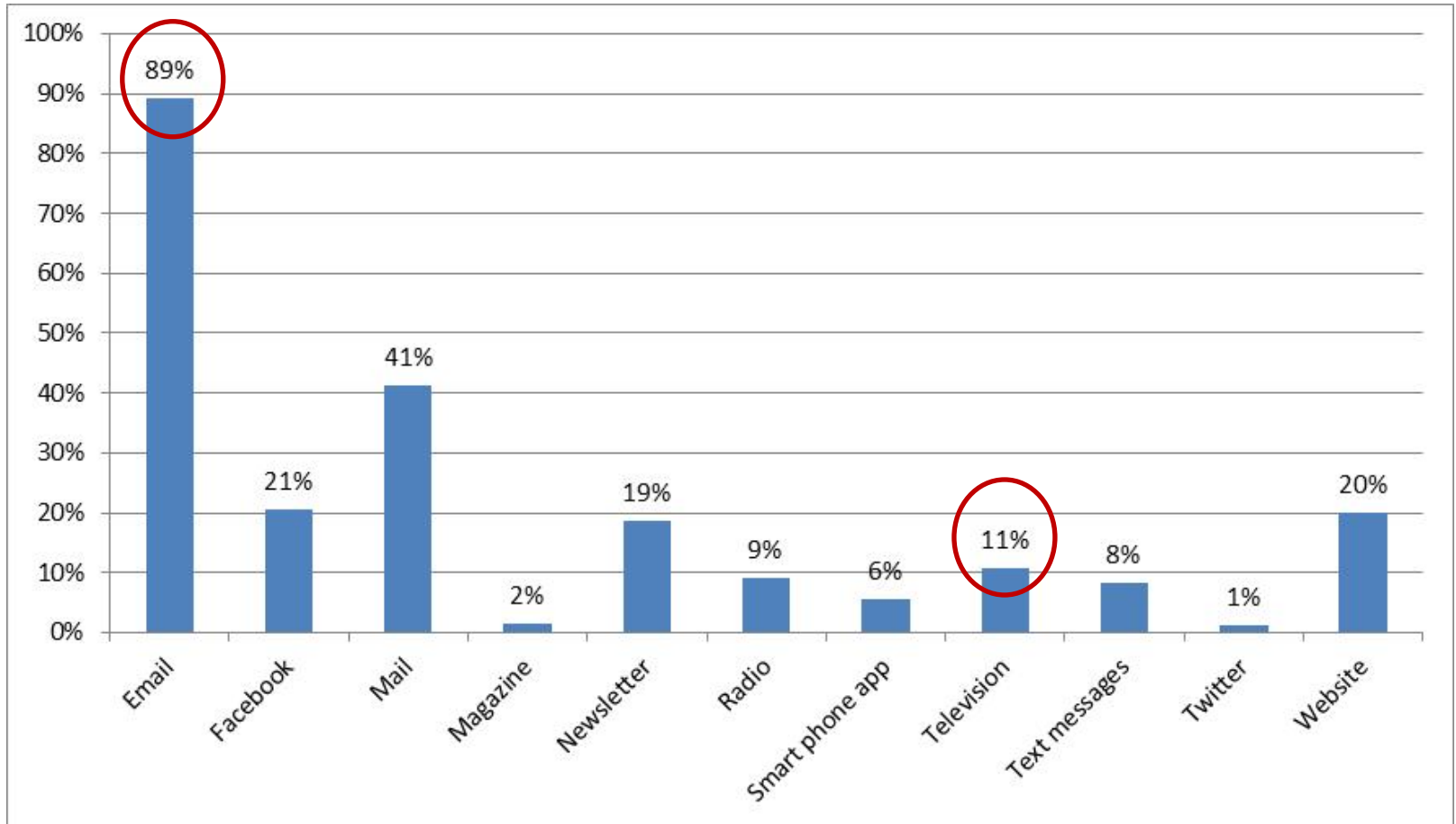
Central Events Council Startup



Overarching Recommendations

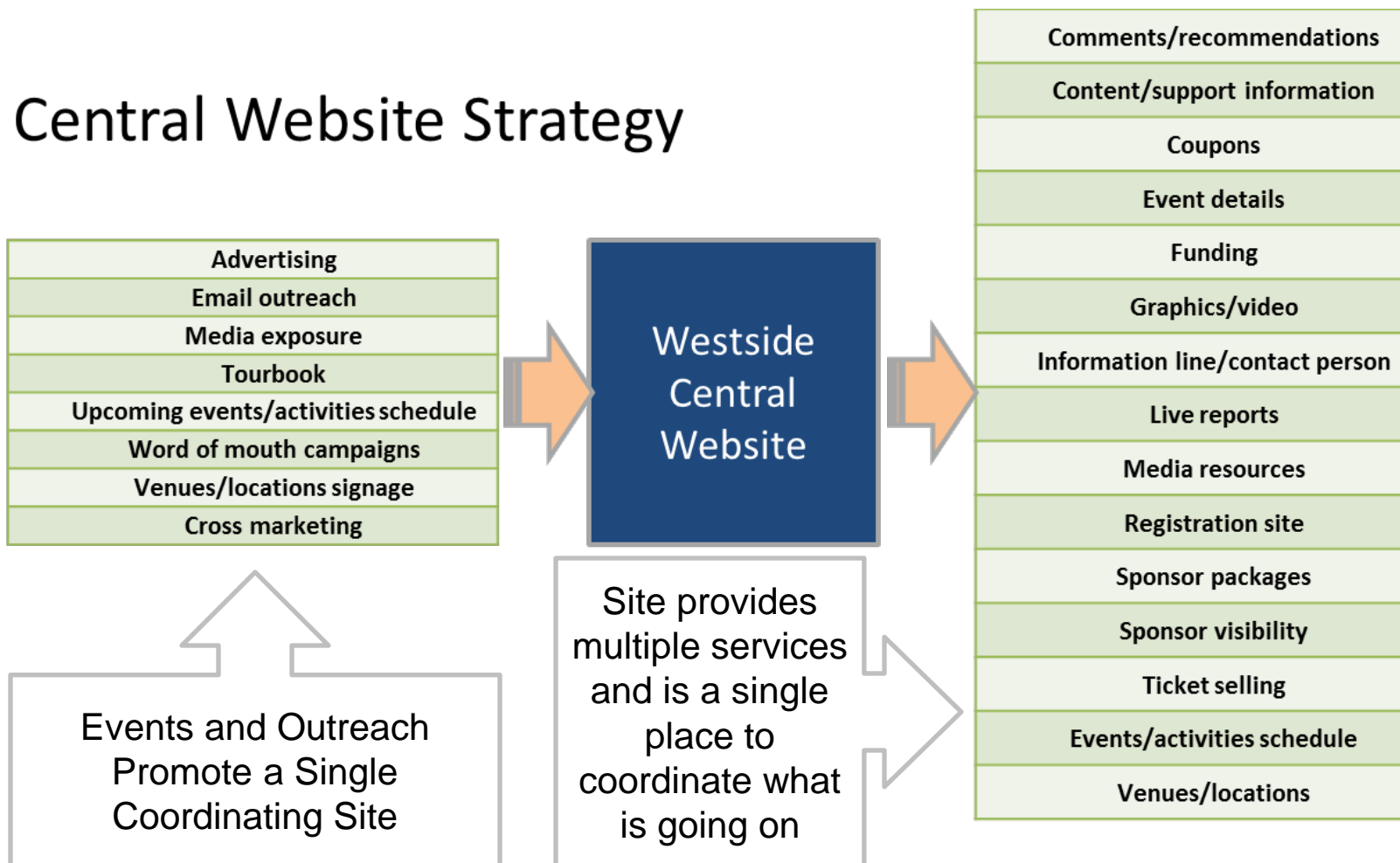
2. Expand cooperation in marketing to promote across organizations and communities

Communication Preferences



Most Outreach Efforts Use Single Process: “www.GoWestSide.org”

Central Website Strategy



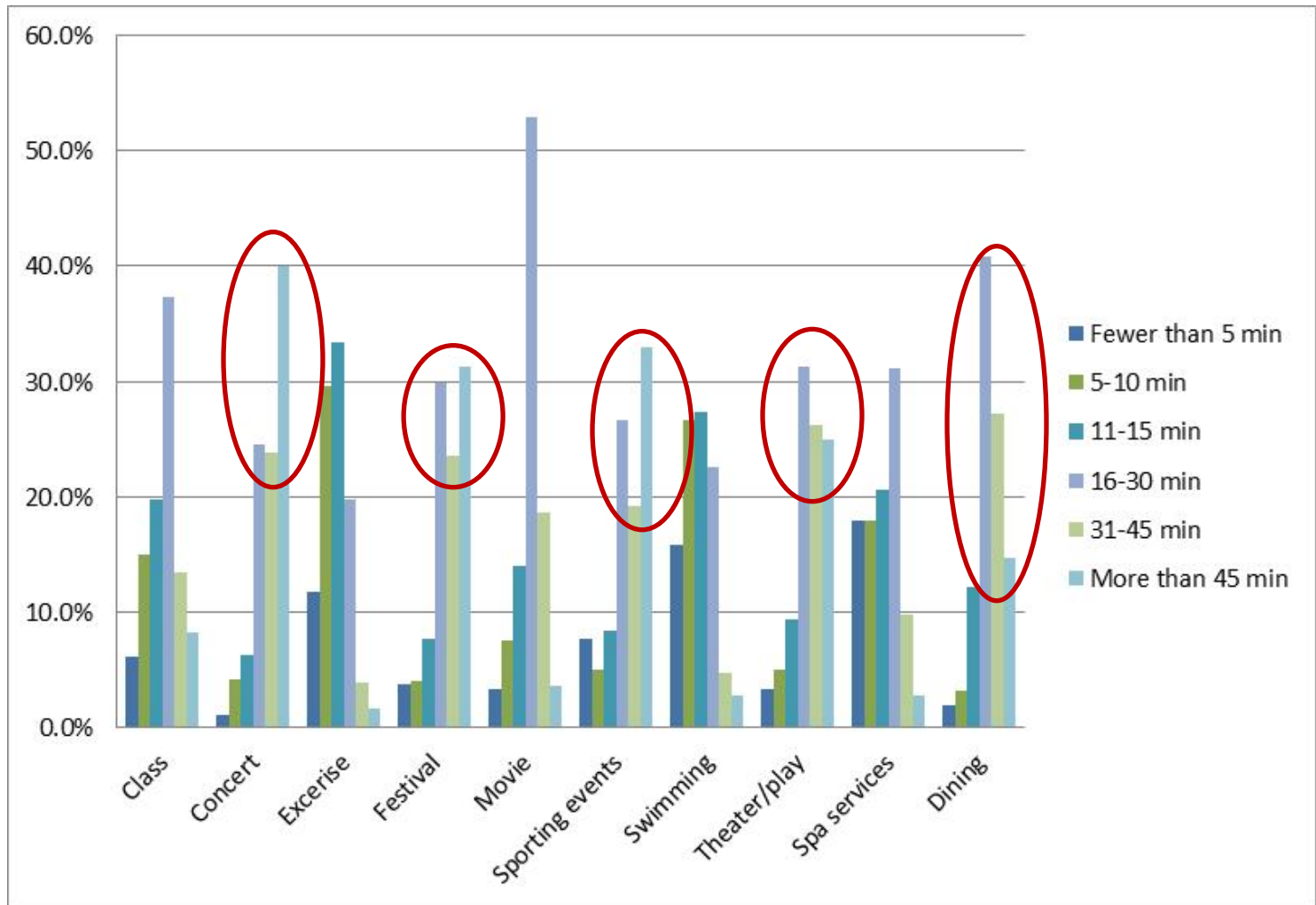
Overarching Recommendations

3. To help the organization begin to find its legs, focus on a festival/expo strategy to bring new visitors into the area, capture additional contacts for marketing, enhance visibility, and increase sponsorship opportunities

Festival Events and Expos

- Generate significant PR and visibility, especially those with thematic ties
- Creates a virtuous cycle by increasing visibility, sponsorships, marketing lists, volunteerism, and energy
- People are willing to travel to festivals and concerts
- Provides an opportunity for smaller events to leverage broader outreach efforts and attendance by people who traveled in for the bigger events
- Reduces the cost for people to “try” programs offered by different community organizations and businesses
- Highly engaging for people both inside and outside the community
- Good for business and economic health

Travel Time Limits Based on Activity



Recipe to build attendance: Blend concerts, festival, sporting events, theater and food/drink



Example: Westside Ice Fest

- Viking/Nordic theme for a winter festival in February
- Ice sculpting classes and contest across all downtown areas
- Charity night 5k with torches and glow sticks
- Cardboard long ship sled building (team prizes for design, longest run, etc.)
- Twilight electric parades
- Mead Hall Pub Crawl (scavenger hunt/stamps at regional restaurants and bars)
- Soup/bread cook off in heated tents
- Winter-themed prize competitions 50/50 for charity
 - Ultimate snowball fight
 - Cross county ski race
 - Snow shoe race
 - Human dog sled race





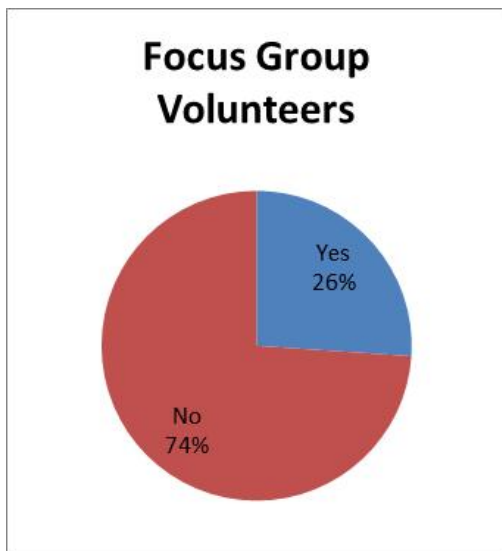
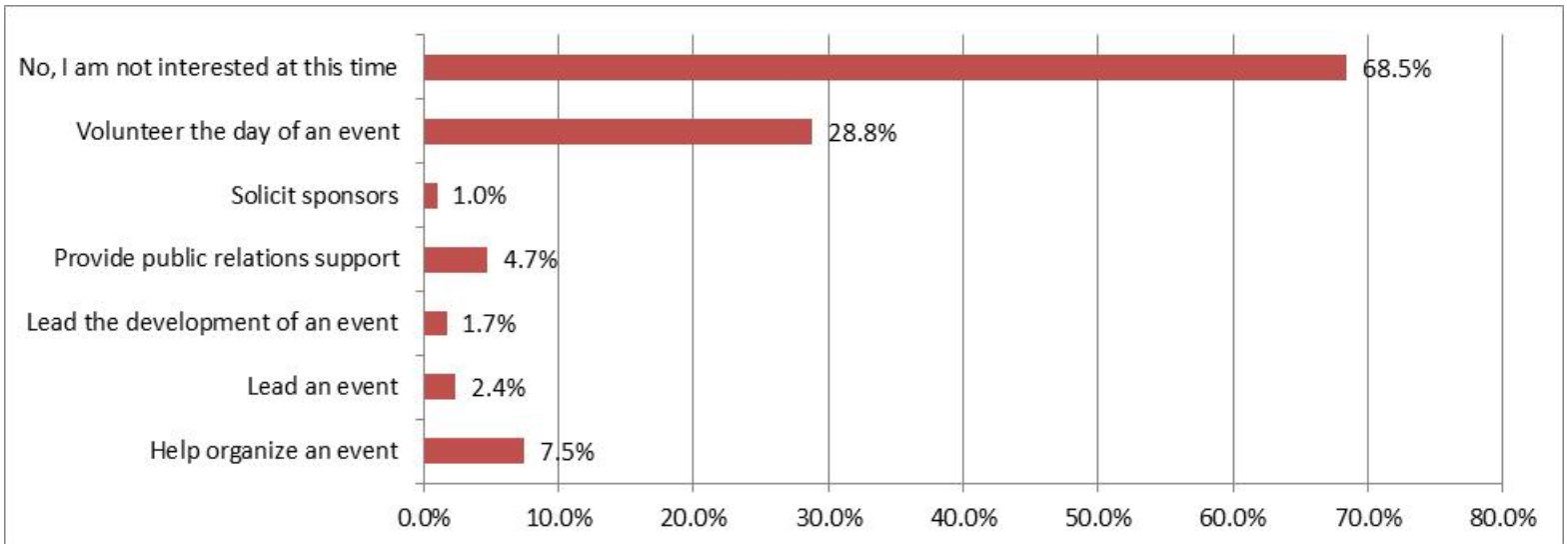
Example: Ice Fest

- **Performing Arts Center**
 - Coordinate actors in costume do a flash mob at the capitol to hand out fliers, coupons and build media interest (think of the Capital One commercial)
 - Weekend thematic performances (Beowulf, Nordic music/visual arts/photography)
 - Daytime screenings of “How to Train Your Dragon”
- **Aquatic Center**
 - Blizzard Beach with intercommunity paddle competition, water volleyball tournament, kids activities, beach party set up in gym, etc.
 - Host “kid’s night” with pizza, pool, gym time and movie so parents can enjoy evening events at the festival
- **ALIVE**
 - Offer classes leading up to competitions and activities such as snow shoeing, cross county skiing, Scandinavian arts/crafts/beer, etc.
 - Indoor 5k and other tournaments such as dodge ball
 - Also host “kid’s night” with different activities so parents can enjoy evening events at the festival

Other Festival/Expo Ideas

- Taste of Italy in May
 - Pizza Wars, wine tasting, intercommunity “gladiatorial games,” Italian music and plays, etc.
- Highland Fling in November
 - Pumpkin-chunkin’, Celtic dance and music, Great Lakes Microbrew tasting in partnership with associations, old world crafts expo at CPAC, Irish dance lessons, etc.
 - 50/50 charity competitions such as costumed obstacle 5K (call it “I Might Be Kilt!), bag-pipe play offs, fencing tournament, hammer throw, archery tournament
- Pirate Invasion in July
 - Caribbean themed performances and food, pirate skill seminars, black powder demonstrations, Great Lakes Beer and Brats, wine tasting, BBQ cook off, pub crawl, various associated classes and performances, Jolly Rodger flags on street posts
 - Pirate Triathlon: paddle, swim, run on low ropes and water obstacle course
- Other Festival Ideas
 - Arabian Nights, Safari Fest, Orient Adventure, Cinco-de-Mayo Fiesta, Music Festival, Casino Royale, Polka-Palooza

People are Willing to Volunteer



In which ways would you be interested in volunteering to support the events and activities you selected in the questions above? (Mark all that apply.)

Activity	Count	Percentage
Help organize an event	22	7.5%
Lead an event	7	2.4%
Lead the development of an event	5	1.7%
Provide public relations support	14	4.7%
Solicit sponsors	3	1.0%
Volunteer the day of an event	85	28.8%
No, I am not interested at this time	202	68.5%
Volunteer for focus groups	79	26.0%

* Please refer to the Volunteer Excel spreadsheets for additional contact information

Additional Recommendations

- Develop effective cross-promoting materials that direct interested residents to a central regional event organization
- Develop regional passport books that include coupons, passes, advertising, and volunteer opportunities
- Develop “sampler” programs to expose residents to services and programs at low cost and at convenient locations – especially during festivals
- Develop corporate membership programs to give corporate employees a “perk” discount or pass and increases visibility – engages companies in marketing to employees
- Develop the communities’ own billboard spaces to build visibility of the central outreach website utilizing the sides of buildings and empty store fronts and sidewalks

Additional Recommendations

- Develop stronger partnership with area realtors to help spread outreach messages and provide welcome packets
- Develop clearly marked and mapped trails and paths from each venue in the region
- Develop pedestrian maps/kiosks across the region to highlight local attractions, festival schedules, upcoming events, local business directory, bike/pedestrian trails and routes, restaurants, etc. Develop versions for direct mail, web and email.
- Strengthen curb appeal: downtown businesses could use gentle reminders to paint window trim, replace rotted awnings, edge along sidewalks, fresh paint, etc. Consider potential appearance guidelines/zoning for new businesses
- Develop and consistently use check list of key topics in all communications (parking, weather contingencies, group accommodation, child care, “fun factors,” central information website, etc.)

Next Steps

- Community leaders' decision to create a regional visitor and event council and name it something interesting
- Establishment of Board and duties (guidelines in full focus group report)
- Recruitment of volunteers
- Solicitation of seed funds
- Create committee to organize 2014 or 2015 festival (recommend Ice Fest or Taste of Italy)
- Consider random sample survey of residents in fall 2014 to enhance validity of data, refine decision making and expand volunteer pool
- What are the steps to start building momentum?

