

California Local Governments' Use of Technology for Public Engagement

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In May 2013, the Institute for Local Government partnered on the release of a research report prepared by Public Agenda and sponsored by The James Irvine Foundation. A detailed survey was conducted with 900 officials from California city and county governments about practices and attitudes about public participation in local government decision-making. A section of the questionnaire asked local officials about the online and social media communications practices of their public agency. Here are highlights:

1 - Local government websites and email are the most commonly used mode of electronic communication with the public.

- Close to three quarters of city officials (74%) report using their website and/or email “a lot” for communication and outreach with the public. This compares to two-thirds (66%) for county officials.
- Suburban jurisdictions were the most likely to use these tools (77%), closely followed by urban local governments (72%). Just about half (51%) of rural governments reported using these tools “a lot.”

<i>How much do you or your office currently use email and official websites for communication and outreach with the broad public?</i>							
	County	All City	City Staff	City Elected	Urban	Suburban	Rural
A LOT	66%	69%	74%	63%	72%	77%	51%
A LITTLE	30%	28%	25%	33%	26%	21%	42%
NOT AT ALL	4%	3%	1%	5%	2%	1%	7%

2 – Most local governments are less likely to report using social media (e.g., Facebook, Twitter and blogs) than websites or email for public outreach. While many electeds and staff may personally use these tools, at the agency level more are at the stage of using social media “a little” versus “a lot.”

- 49% of counties and 42% of cities said they had used social media tools “a little.”
- Almost a quarter of cities (24%) reported using social media “a lot” for public outreach, twice as likely as counties (12% reporting “a lot”).
- In the survey, 48% of rural governments in California shared they had not used social media at all, compared to 27% of urban governments that had yet to start.

<i>How much do you or your office currently use social media (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, blogs) for communication and outreach with the broad public?</i>							
	County	All City	City Staff	City Elected	Urban	Suburban	Rural
A LOT	12%	24%	26%	22%	25%	26%	14%
A LITTLE	49%	42%	42%	43%	49%	43%	38%
NOT AT ALL	39%	34%	32%	36%	27%	31%	48%

3 – Online public engagement forums are also in the early stages of adoption.

- Defined as “an online engagement forum that featured interaction between residents and public officials on community issues,” 19% of county officials reported participating compared to 11% of city officials.
- There was little difference in participation between officials from urban (10%), suburban (12%) and rural (13%) governments.

<i>In the past year, have you participated in an online public engagement forum that featured interaction between residents and public officials on community issues?</i>							
	County	All City	City Staff	City Elected	Urban	Suburban	Rural
YES	19%	11%	9%	13%	10%	12%	13%

4 – Officials were asked about their overall attitudes towards websites and social media. Their answers reflected the emerging familiarity of these tools.

- Electronic communications tools were more likely to be seen as helpful in “communicating with many segments of the public” (73% for counties and 60% for cities) than for reaching “hard to reach” segments of the public (43% for counties and 38% for cities).
- City staff members were significantly more likely to report finding these tools helpful for communicating with the public than elected city representatives (66% versus 52%). Suburban jurisdictions were more likely to agree with this (67%) than rural ones (52%).
- There was a widespread sense that “it is difficult to gauge effectiveness of these tools” with two thirds (67%) of cities and 62% of counties agreeing with this statement.

The entire research report can be accessed at this link: <http://www.ca-ilg.org/post/public-participation-local-government-decision-making>. There is also a companion study of 500 leaders of civic organizations in California and their views on the state of public participation in local decision-making.

<i>Local Officials Attitudes about Digital Outreach to the Public (Email, website and social media)</i>							
	County	All City	City Staff	City Elected	Urban	Suburban	Rural
<i>Helpful in communicating with many segments of the public</i>	73%	60%	66%	53%	56%	67%	52%

<i>....Enable me to reach hard to reach segments of the public</i>	43%	38%	41%	35%	39%	42%	28%
<i>It's difficult to gauge how effective they are</i>	67%	62%	68%	55%	62%	64%	60%
<i>Find that social media can generate misinformation and confusion</i>	27%	30%	28%	32%	27%	30%	33%