

Engaging Senior Level PR Professionals:

*Strategic communications
recommendations for increasing their
participation in PRSA Charlotte*

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Executive Summary

The Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) is the preeminent professional organization for public relations professionals in the nation. For some time, the organization has reported declining participation by senior practitioners with more than 15 years of experience in the field. These members tend to retain strong affiliation with PRSA and ascribe value in membership. Additionally, they exhibit high levels of community involvement outside of the organization.

Robert Putnam, the renowned political scientist at Harvard University, has written extensively about the declining levels of civic engagement in modern society and their negative implications. He focused on social capital, or connections among individuals that form networks of both formal and informal relationships. These connections help engender broad senses of reciprocity, trust and tolerance, which ultimately lead to stronger communities.

Putnam's work, particularly the concepts of bonding and bridging capital, provide a theoretical framework for designing strategy to increase participation by senior PRSA members in more substantive and sustainable ways. An intentional effort to build community both internally and externally should enable PRSA Charlotte to re-energize and re-engage this senior level group, which would benefit its individual members, the chapter and community at large.

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Preeminent Public Relations Organization

The Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) is the world's largest organization of and for public relations practitioners. Its stated mission is as follows:

With the vision to unify, strengthen and advance the public relations profession, PRSA helps to build value and demand for, and global understanding of, public relations. PRSA also helps to advance public relations professionals by offering professional development opportunities through continuing education programs, information exchange forums, and research projects conducted on the national and local levels.

The major functional areas of PRSA are organized to meet the needs and expectations of its 22,000 members, as indicated in regular surveying and other research. Members consistently rate networking as the top reason for affiliating with PRSA. In response, the organization maintains a robust contact database of its membership which is accessible to any member in good standing. This resource is helpful for career development, generating referrals, and for other professional needs. Professional interest sections such as health care, hospitality and tourism, and consumer products, enable members in common industry sectors to connect. More than 100 local PRSA chapters in cities and regions across the country offer myriad opportunities for public relations professionals to meet and network with peers in their home markets.

Beyond its networking capabilities, PRSA offers many other benefits for members. It manages a diverse portfolio of professional development offerings such as programs, conferences and teleseminars. The organization administers a prestigious accreditation program, unique in the public relations field, designed to "recognize practitioners who have mastered the knowledge, skills and abilities needed to develop and deliver strategic communications." Additionally, PRSA's offerings include awards programs to recognize individual achievement and excellence in PR programs, campaigns and tactics; a wide array of periodicals and other communications channels; databases of academic research regarding public relations practice; a Public Relations Student Society of America to support and encourage college students seeking degrees in public relations; and career services such as mentoring, job postings, salary surveys and related resources.

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A Significant Challenge

PRSA is a preeminent professional organization that has experienced consistent growth in membership as the popularity of the public relations field has increased. Yet it faces a significant challenge. For some time, the national organization and local chapters have struggled to engage senior practitioners, or those with more than 15 years of experience in the field. This cohort represents one out of every five members in the Charlotte, NC chapter. Although these professionals consistently maintain their membership, they attend programs and events relatively infrequently and rarely volunteer.

The Charlotte, N.C. chapter has made some effort to engage senior practitioners. A small group of these members organized under the title “SRPR” (an acronym that loosely stands for Senior PR professionals) and held periodic, informal meetings to discuss local and national issues confronting their profession and to socialize. More recently, teams of senior practitioners offered strategic counseling sessions for local non-profit organizations as a pro bono community service project. Both activities experienced limited success in terms of inconsistent participation. However, according to former president and current board members of the chapter, Charlotte is the only one among the ten chapters that comprise PRSA’s Southeast District to take intentional steps to address the problem of disengagement by senior practitioners.

Examining Social Capital

Robert Putnam is a renowned political scientist at Harvard University who has written extensively about the declining levels of civic engagement in modern society and their negative implications. A best-selling book titled *Bowling Alone* (1993) is perhaps Putnam’s most prominent work about the subject, where he used the example of bowling in American culture to illustrate this trend. Putnam cited statistics to show that Americans today increasingly bowl by themselves and sporadically, in contrast to past generations when bowling was a highly communal, team-oriented and a regular activity. This phenomenon, Putnam argued, symbolizes a growing disengagement from community life and “disintegration of civic tradition in America.”¹

Putnam’s work in this area focused on the concept of social capital, or connections among individuals that form networks of both formal and informal relationships. These connections help inspire broad senses of reciprocity, trust and tolerance, which in turn engender

¹ Ihlen, Ø., van Ruler, B., & Fredriksson, M. (2009), *Public relations and social theory: key figures and concepts*. New York: Routledge, p 233.

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collaboration and strengthen community.² He was certainly not the first to explore the concept of social capital, but Putnam did popularize the application of theories regarding social capital to explain the fraying of societal fabric resulting from increasing influences of technology, mass media, a polarized electorate and other factors.

While Putnam explored “the big picture” in terms of how entire societies function, he and other theorists believed that social capital was fundamentally about relationships among individuals. He wrote that “(t)he key is to get people involved with each other on a smaller scale... These grassroots level experiences of working together are the building blocks of trust in society at large.”³ Such connections are the foundation of community, and when they are weak or non-existent, groups, organizations and ultimately society can not thrive.

Putnam described two different types of social capital: *bonding* capital is internally facing and builds group cohesion, while *bridging* capital is externally facing and builds relationships and connections outside the group. Bonding capital is needed for sustaining internal relations and creating community within an organization. Associations and civic groups provide such senses of loyalty and satisfaction in belonging.⁴ Bridging social capital promotes connectivity, understanding, sharing of resources and information, and other beneficial bonds externally.

Figuratively speaking, bonding social capital is the glue that holds an organization together, while bridging capital is the oil that makes interactions among groups and societies run more smoothly.⁵ Putnam maintained that both forms of capital are vital to encouraging senses of collaboration and trust, and together they reflect an organization in balance. Moreover, an organization must build from the inside out, i.e. bonding social capital must be created before bridging social capital can be.⁶

Putnam believed that communication generally plays a vital role in creating social capital and building community: “It is communication that creates belongingness, whether it is a matter of joining a club or going bowling, and it is communication that keeps the relationship strong over time... Community does not happen by accident and neither does it prosper where it is not cultivated.”⁷

² p. 234.

³ Putnam et al., 1993, cited by Ihlen, 2009, p. 234.

⁴ Ihlen, 2009, p. 240

⁵ p. 235.

⁶ p. 245.

⁷ Putnam et al., cited by Ihlen, 2009, p. 238.

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Knowing the Audience

Putnam's work regarding social capital provides a theoretical framework for designing strategy to increase participation by senior PRSA members in more substantive and sustainable ways. Developing these approaches first requires a better understanding of the target audience and its capacity and inclination for engaging in social capital.

To glean this insight, an online survey of the so-called "SRPR" cohort in the PRSA Charlotte chapter was conducted October 17-21, 2015. The study was designed to analyze these members' participation in PRSA and other professional and community activities. Subjects were members who had joined the organization on or before 2000 and been members in good standing continuously since then. Of 330 Charlotte chapter members, 65 met the study's criteria, and 27, or 42%, completed the survey.

Validating the decline in participation, 37% of subjects said they had not attended a PRSA program in the past year, and another 37% said they attended three or fewer. The most prevalent factors cited that prevented more regular attendance were logistical in nature, such as inconvenient venue, scheduling conflicts, and travel distance. This finding was in contrast to a widely held perception within the chapter that the biggest reason for senior members' lack of participation was the programming, which they found too elementary or otherwise not stimulating.

The overall results reflected high levels of past participation in PRSA; 85% of respondents had served on the board, a committee or in another volunteer role for the chapter. There was also evidence of strong, ongoing commitment to the public relations profession. At 77%, the top rated reason for being a member was "sustaining the PR profession" followed by networking (63%) and professional development (59%).

Beyond PRSA, respondents reported a high degree of civic participation. More than half were members of other professional associations. Nearly nine out of ten were engaged with non-profit organizations as board members, committee members, volunteers or donors. Perhaps most impressively, 81% participated in "other activities to connect with people in your community" such as book clubs, athletic leagues or dinner clubs. Emblematic of the reasoning for such participation was one subject's comment: "(It is) important to be engaged in the community and help make it better, and also enjoy good relationships with my friends and neighbors."

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Strategic Recommendations

The findings from the online survey suggest that the SRPR cohort, in spirit and practice, amply represent the principles necessary for building social capital. These members have a sincere desire to remain engaged in the chapter, primarily to sustain their profession and their respective professional profiles. Moreover, they are committed to strengthening their communities, as demonstrated by broad social engagement outside of PRSA.

Thus, application of Putnam's theories on social capital would be an appropriate method for developing strategic communications to enhance engagement among senior PR practitioners. More specifically, the Charlotte chapter should deploy communications designed to help facilitate internal and external connections by these members, or the bonding and bridging forms of social capital that Putnam described. Following are recommendations in both categories:

BONDING CAPITAL, designed to engender group cohesion, and connect senior professionals with the broader membership in the chapter and perhaps the district and national organization:

1. Establish a quarterly electronic newsletter for senior practitioners, developed explicitly to appeal to their professional needs and expectations. Create an editorial team of SRPR members to manage content, and consider creating paid internships for public relations and communications majors at local universities to assist with production and distribution.
2. Hold quarterly professional development events for SRPR members with higher-level speakers or programs.
3. Offer periodic social events, such as breakfasts or after-work receptions.
4. Provide specialized professional development offerings such as webinars, workshops or certificate programs developed in consultation with local academics.
5. Hold a SRPR-themed luncheon program annually for the entire chapter, featuring a topic of relevance and interest to veteran practitioners such as the College of Fellows, PRSA Foundation, or intriguing academic research in the public relations field. Recognize SRPR members at the event.
6. Create a "reverse mentoring" program for SRPR members and young professionals, designed to encourage members of each group to share their respective expertise and wisdom with the other.
7. Establish an SRPR advisory board to provide advice to the chapter's governing board on policy, programming and other matters.

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BRIDGING CAPITAL, designed to connect the chapter to outside interests in community:

1. Continue the SRPR's **pro bono consulting** sessions.
2. Consider expanding the consulting effort to include funding for a **grant program** to assist the non-profit "clients" with implementing the counsel they receive from the senior practitioners.
3. Another expansion option for the consulting would be to reprise the **annual luncheon workshop for local non-profits** that the chapter used to present, except hosted and led by SRPR members.
4. Create a **database of SRPR practitioners** who are willing to volunteer or take on special high-level assignments for community and civic organizations. Promote this resource list to board chairs, development committees, volunteer coordinators, or other leadership.
5. Enlist SRPR members to serve on a **task team charged with promoting PRSA** to other professional and civic organizations, and exploring potential programmatic, joint marketing and other appropriate collaborations.
6. Recruit SRPR members to **write columns** about salient business and civic issues for publication in regional business and general news media.

(Note: To address member feedback about convenience and accessibility, consideration should be given to presenting recommended programs and events in different locations around the city and at varying times of day.)

Implementation

It would not be practical to implement all of the recommended communications activities, nor was that the intent of this plan. Rather, these ideas are meant to represent a variety of options to explore in order to increase participation among senior members. The only mandates would be to begin with activities in the bonding category, and seek to balance choices between bonding and bridging activities, since this approach would be consistent with Putnam's theories regarding social capital.

The PRSA Charlotte board should begin by reviewing and discussing this plan in its entirety. If it is deemed to be consistent with the chapter's mission and to have strategic merit, the board should create a task team comprised of SRPR members and directors, to evaluate and prioritize the recommendations for implementation. This process would include developing supporting budget estimates and timetables for each activity which the board can use for broader budget and programmatic planning for the chapter.

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Conclusion

The practice of public relations plays an integral role in creating social capital as Putnam defined it. According to PRSA National, the modern definition of public relations is “a strategic communication process that builds mutually beneficial relationships between organizations and their publics.” Putnam would argue that such relationships are among the building blocks needed to construct a vibrant and high functioning society, and thus are examples of social capital.

Public relations practitioners instinctively understand the complimentary nature of their profession and principles of social capital theory, and they routinely apply the latter in their work and personal lives. Practitioners understand the importance of making connections and engaging. They are skilled at compelling participation by shaping perceptions. They are intellectually curious and gregarious. This convergence makes social capital theory appropriate and promising for use in designing effective strategic communications to influence a public relations cohort.

Senior members remain solidly supportive of PRSA, see value in their membership, and want to strengthen and sustain their profession for the future. In other words, the evidence suggests that the emotional foundation is solid and relatively minor logistical factors are hindering their participation. An intentional effort to build community both internally and externally should enable PRSA Charlotte to re-energize and re-engage this senior level group, which would benefit its individual members, the chapter and community at large.

Appendix:

Complete survey results

To view the survey online, [click here](#).

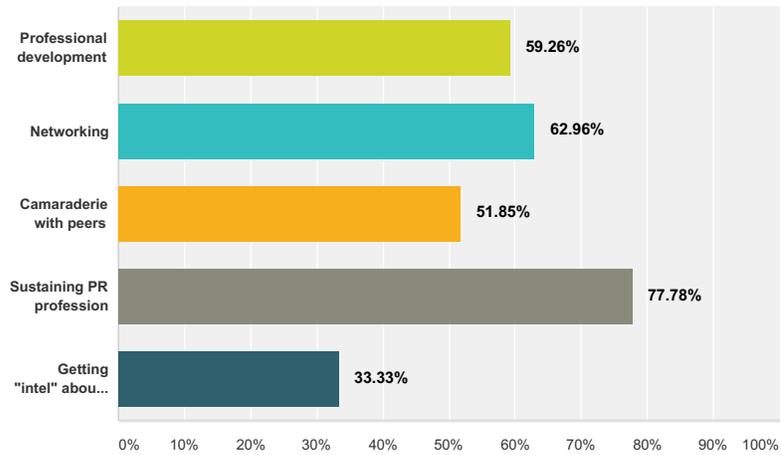
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Senior Level PRSA Members

SurveyMonkey

Q1 Why are you a member of PRSA Charlotte? (Check all that apply.)

Answered: 27 Skipped: 0



Answer Choices	Responses
Professional development	59.26% 16
Networking	62.96% 17
Camaraderie with peers	51.85% 14
Sustaining PR profession	77.78% 21
Getting "intel" about what's happening locally	33.33% 9
Total Respondents: 27	

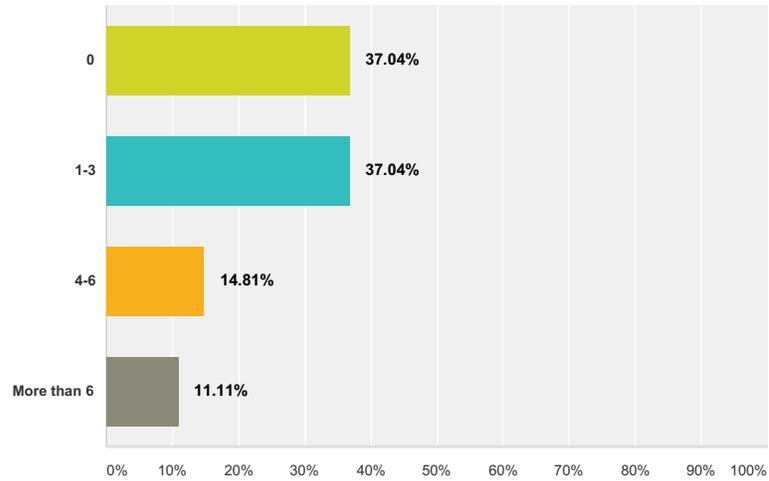
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Senior Level PRSA Members

SurveyMonkey

Q2 How many PRSA Charlotte meetings, programs and/or events did you attend in the past 12 months?

Answered: 27 Skipped: 0



Answer Choices	Responses	Count
0	37.04%	10
1-3	37.04%	10
4-6	14.81%	4
More than 6	11.11%	3
Total		27

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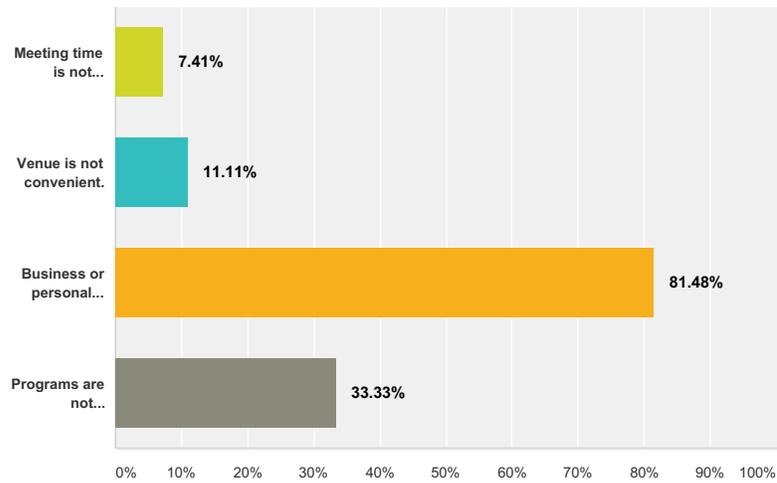
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Senior Level PRSA Members

SurveyMonkey

Q3 Please indicate the reason(s) why you have not attended more regularly.

Answered: 27 Skipped: 0



Answer Choices	Responses
Meeting time is not convenient.	7.41% 2
Venue is not convenient.	11.11% 3
Business or personal scheduling conflicts	81.48% 22
Programs are not interesting.	33.33% 9
Total Respondents: 27	

#	Other (please specify)	Date
1	Also, the food is not very good, I always end up starving a few hours later	10/19/2015 4:16 PM
2	The main reason is that I am phasing out of PR gradually over a 3-4 year period. The second reason is that the broad areas I have been responsible for more recently in the nonprofit family of organizations I have been working with have not required me to have the social media focus and other marketing focuses that are often in these meetings.	10/19/2015 2:38 PM
3	Don't know many members any longer because I haven't been involved and have attended only sporadically. I've started my own communication consulting business and hope to become more engaged in the chapter in the future to network and benefit from programs, professional development.	10/19/2015 11:41 AM
4	Relatively new to town, but plan to participate on a more frequent basis in the future.	10/19/2015 11:32 AM
5	The activities of the local chapter of PRSA seem to be aimed at practitioners with far less experience than I. I'm more active with PRSA internationally.	10/19/2015 10:47 AM
6	Located two-hour round trip away. Difficult to work into schedule.	10/18/2015 5:07 PM
7	Fairly extensive travel (3+ days/week).	10/18/2015 12:11 PM
8	None	10/18/2015 9:49 AM
9	I am retired and living 90 miles from Charlotte.	10/18/2015 8:54 AM

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Senior Level PRSA Members

SurveyMonkey

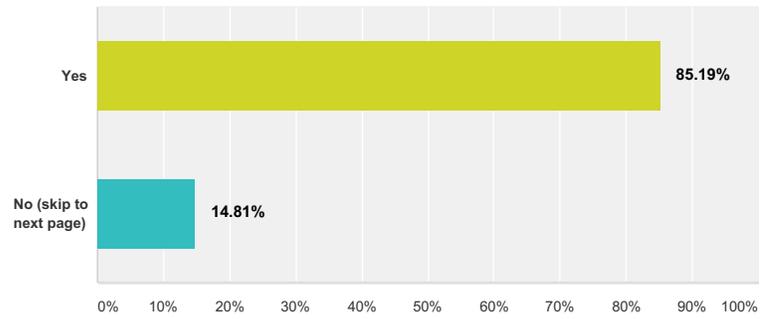
Q4 Please complete the sentence: "I might attend PRSA meetings or programs more often if ..."

Answered: 23 Skipped: 4

#	Responses	Date
1	they were limited to senior level colleagues.	10/20/2015 2:54 PM
2	the program was so compelling I would want to switch previous appointments around to make the date.	10/19/2015 5:07 PM
3	My work schedule permitted and the food were better (more healthy/vegetarian options)	10/19/2015 4:16 PM
4	They were germane to my current assignment.	10/19/2015 2:38 PM
5	the dates coordinated better with my schedule and the topics/speakers were too enticing to miss.	10/19/2015 1:58 PM
6	Programming was a bit more 'elevated' and subject matter tied more closely to the revenue line. How does what we do directly impact and improve a company's position.	10/19/2015 11:54 AM
7	More senior-level practitioners are involved and programs and professional development opportunities meet my needs as a new business owner.	10/19/2015 11:43 AM
8	my schedule allows.	10/19/2015 11:32 AM
9	I were involved in a public service project for the organization.	10/19/2015 10:48 AM
10	If other obligations didn't interfere.	10/19/2015 10:41 AM
11	I could clear my schedule more often.	10/19/2015 10:33 AM
12	meeting dates suited my schedule.	10/19/2015 9:58 AM
13	The meetings were held in uptown (closer to my North Charlotte location).	10/19/2015 9:32 AM
14	Parking was easier at Byron's	10/19/2015 8:59 AM
15	There were more panel discussions with senior practitioners about challenges we have in the profession	10/19/2015 7:10 AM
16	I lived and/or worked closer.	10/18/2015 5:08 PM
17	I get myself back in the swing of things -- business and personal reasons have kept me away.	10/18/2015 1:05 PM
18	There was a greater mix of agency and corporate practitioners, including senior people. Overall desire to support the institution, yet the content and intra-industry networking (i.e., no prospect relations) makes it hard for me to make time to attend.	10/18/2015 12:12 PM
19	I were to move back into the city.	10/18/2015 10:35 AM
20	No response. I attend every meeting.	10/18/2015 9:49 AM
21	I lived closer to Charlotte and the programs were strategic thinking rather than tactical 'how-tos.'	10/18/2015 8:55 AM
22	Included more senior-level topics of interest.	10/18/2015 7:32 AM
23	I always attend as I am able.	10/18/2015 6:49 AM

Q5 Have you ever served as a volunteer for PRSA Charlotte or another PRSA chapter?

Answered: 27 Skipped: 0



Answer Choices	Responses
Yes	85.19% 23
No (skip to next page)	14.81% 4
Total	27

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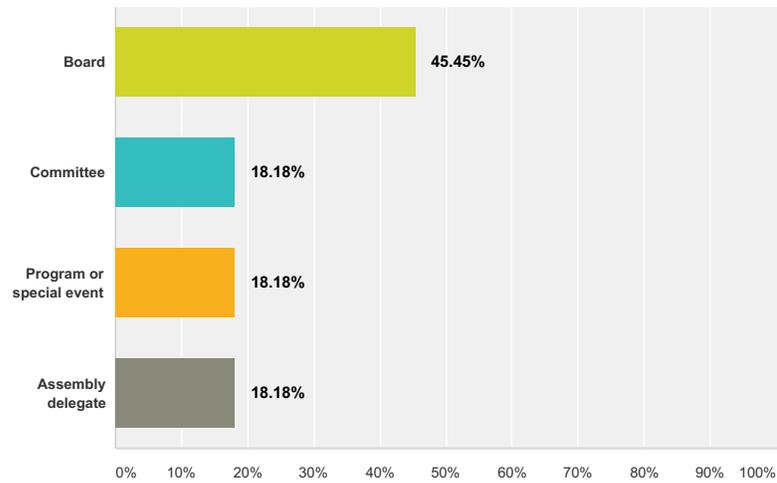
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Senior Level PRSA Members

SurveyMonkey

Q6 If you answered yes, please indicate the volunteer roles you held in the box below.

Answered: 11 Skipped: 16



Answer Choices	Responses
Board	45.45% 5
Committee	18.18% 2
Program or special event	18.18% 2
Assembly delegate	18.18% 2
Total	11

#	VOLUNTEER ROLES	Date
1	Chapter President, Treasurer, Publicity, Sponsorship Program, Secretary, Special Events	10/19/2015 5:08 PM
2	on various committees	10/19/2015 4:16 PM
3	Pegasus award committee.	10/19/2015 2:38 PM
4	Secretary, Treasurer, APR panelist, APR readiness review team	10/19/2015 11:55 AM
5	President, Vice President, Program Chairman, Treasurer, Ethics Committee Chair	10/19/2015 11:54 AM
6	I haven't been active recently. I was past president, board member and chair of lots of different committees while a member of the predecessor Charlotte Public Relations Society in the 1980s and 1990s.	10/19/2015 11:47 AM
7	Board member, committee member and committee chair at multiple chapters.	10/19/2015 11:33 AM
8	Board member, Assembly delegate	10/19/2015 11:14 AM
9	Awards committees	10/19/2015 10:42 AM
10	Helped plan award events and produce videos. Served as keynote speaker. Taught APR prep courses. Served on APR review panels.	10/19/2015 10:34 AM
11	speaker, chapter officer including president, board, assembly delegate and SE District chair	10/19/2015 9:58 AM

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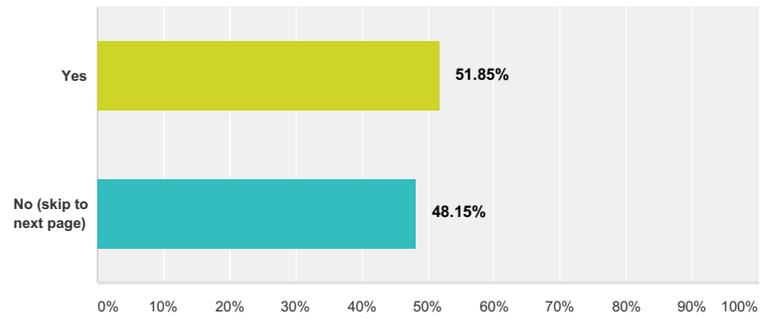
Senior Level PRSA Members

SurveyMonkey

12	All of the above	10/18/2015 9:50 AM
13	past president, could not check all that apply.	10/18/2015 8:56 AM
14	President	10/18/2015 7:32 AM
15	This question is not allowing multiple answers; I have done all of the above.	10/18/2015 6:50 AM

Q7 Are you an active member of other professional associations?

Answered: 27 Skipped: 0



Answer Choices	Responses
Yes	51.85% 14
No (skip to next page)	48.15% 13
Total	27

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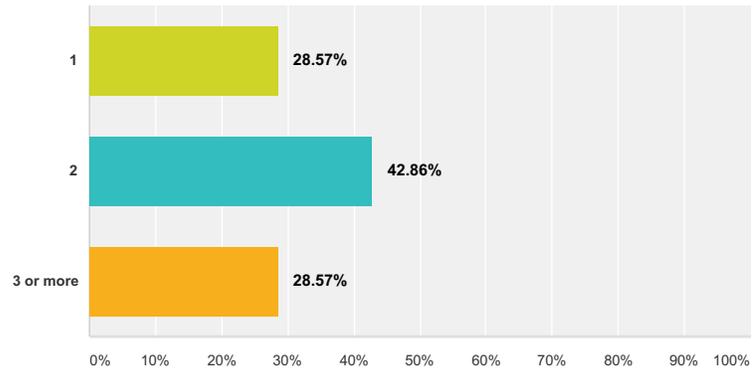
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Senior Level PRSA Members

SurveyMonkey

Q8 If yes, how many?

Answered: 14 Skipped: 13



Answer Choices	Responses
1	28.57% 4
2	42.86% 6
3 or more	28.57% 4
Total	14

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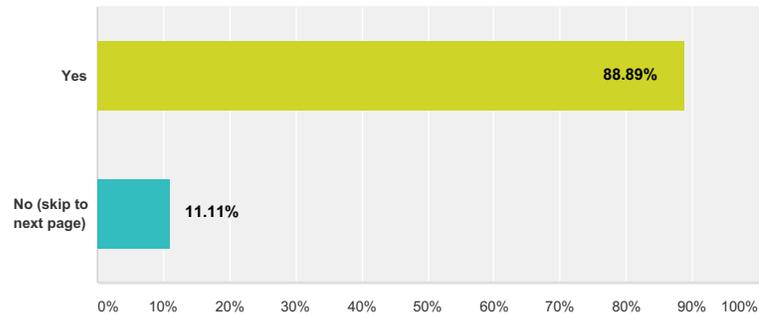
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Senior Level PRSA Members

SurveyMonkey

Q9 Are you engaged with non-profit organizations in the broader community?

Answered: 27 Skipped: 0



Answer Choices	Responses
Yes	88.89% 24
No (skip to next page)	11.11% 3
Total	27

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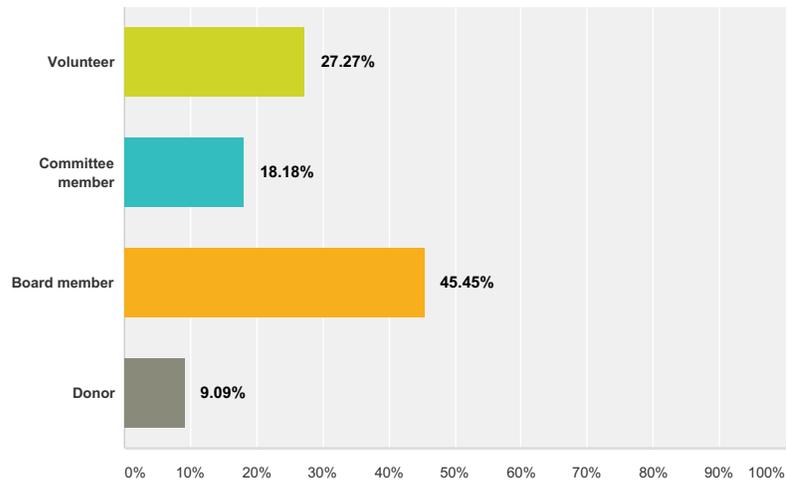
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Senior Level PRSA Members

SurveyMonkey

Q10 If yes, in what capacity? (Check all that apply.)

Answered: 22 Skipped: 5



Answer Choices	Responses
Volunteer	27.27% 6
Committee member	18.18% 4
Board member	45.45% 10
Donor	9.09% 2
Total	22

#	Other (please specify)	Date
1	Board, Committee member, donor - above clicking doesn't work	10/19/2015 5:09 PM
2	Have had several past involements on commiteees aand boards and as a donor. Won't allow me to click on two.	10/19/2015 2:40 PM
3	donor, volunteer	10/19/2015 11:54 AM
4	I'm involved in all of these capacities for several Fort Mill area nonprofits	10/19/2015 11:48 AM
5	Employee	10/19/2015 10:42 AM
6	On-line survey did not permit entering more than one choice or I would have checked them all.	10/19/2015 10:35 AM
7	donor, board member, committee member, officer	10/19/2015 9:59 AM
8	Will only let me check one: volunteer, donor, executive advisor, committee	10/18/2015 5:09 PM
9	Also committee member, donor, volunteer, yet could only check one.	10/18/2015 12:13 PM
10	All four should be checked, but program would not permit it.	10/18/2015 8:56 AM
11	It wouldn't let me select multiple answers. All of the above.	10/18/2015 6:29 AM

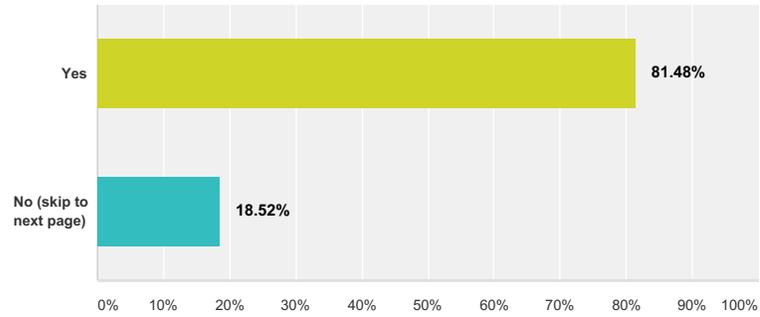
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Senior Level PRSA Members

SurveyMonkey

**Q11 Do you participate in other activities to connect with people in your community?
(Examples: book club, athletic league, dinner club, etc.)**

Answered: 27 Skipped: 0



Answer Choices	Responses
Yes	81.48% 22
No (skip to next page)	18.52% 5
Total	27

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Senior Level PRSA Members

SurveyMonkey

Q12 If so, why are such communal activities important to you?

Answered: 19 Skipped: 8

#	Responses	Date
1	it's about connecting and community	10/20/2015 2:56 PM
2	Social, Networking, Build on ties in community	10/19/2015 5:10 PM
3	Meeting new people, sharing ideas, developing personal/professional networks	10/19/2015 4:17 PM
4	Was a ten year Rotarian. Currently I volunteer at a museum as a docent.	10/19/2015 2:41 PM
5	connect local community members	10/19/2015 11:55 AM
6	Important to be engaged in the community and help make it better, and also enjoy good relationships with my friends and neighbors	10/19/2015 11:50 AM
7	Social opportunities	10/19/2015 11:34 AM
8	Social and intellectual stimulation.	10/19/2015 10:49 AM
9	connected to the community; fun	10/19/2015 10:43 AM
10	I feel we all have an obligation to strengthen our communities by contributing our time and effort.	10/19/2015 10:36 AM
11	essential to give back to your community; important to keep in touch with your community	10/19/2015 9:59 AM
12	They stimulate my thinking, provide me with new information.	10/19/2015 9:35 AM
13	Get to know people, talk to adults about non-work related topics	10/19/2015 7:11 AM
14	sense of community; intellectual stimulation; getting to know others or "building a tribe."	10/18/2015 1:06 PM
15	To have a social outlet and connect with others.	10/18/2015 12:13 PM
16	They keep me connected to friends.	10/18/2015 10:37 AM
17	How else can one understand the community?	10/18/2015 8:57 AM
18	Different perspectives; mentoring and accountability	10/18/2015 7:33 AM
19	Networking, professional and personal relationships	10/18/2015 6:30 AM