

THE DATA-BACKED GUIDE TO UTILIZING PUBLIC SERVICE ANNOUNCEMENTS (PSAs)

WINTER/SPRING 2021



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As the world stopped and countries and whole continents went on lockdown due to the COVID-19 health pandemic, not even parts of the media industry were immune from the economic slowdown. While the news was saturated with COVID-19 stories, the advertising (paid media) industry was flooded with unsold inventory as brands cut back or put a halt to their plans. Fortunately, for those nonprofit brands with public service advertising efforts underway or plans to launch new efforts, primetime supply was now, and still, available to PSAs. In 2020 we saw unprecedented support for public service messages, COVID-19 or health-related or not.

Our ninth annual Public Service Director survey launched at the beginning of the pandemic in March 2020, so we wanted to check back in before the year came to a close. We love data of all sorts, but we really dug into what these stats mean for your PSA campaigns now and planning for the future. We boiled it down to our top ten takeaways and actionable next steps. We know there will continue to be uncertain times, so for nonprofits like yours, it's even more critical to leverage all of your unpaid options to earn awareness, understanding, and engagement in your important message.

This 10th annual PSA Preference Survey was distributed to approximately 2,248 TV and radio stations nationwide from our proprietary PSA database in November 2020.

If you want to dig in more with us, send us a [message](#). We're happy to share answers with you and your fellow nonprofit communications professionals who may be wondering the same thing.



SUMMARY OF TAKEAWAYS

1. Expect half as much PSA inventory in the months leading up to a Presidential election.
2. Inventory will always fluctuate – think of PSA support as a long-term play for your brand.
3. Be ready to pivot with your PSA strategy based on COVID-19.
4. Create a mini-marketing plan to release and promote your PSA.
5. Don't delay your PSA efforts.
6. PSAs have a shorter shelf-life than ever.
7. Even in the charity and causes world, there is competition.
8. Make sure your creative, message, and packaging make your cause stand out.
9. It's all about your pitch.
10. Having a local angle and timely message is even more important this year.

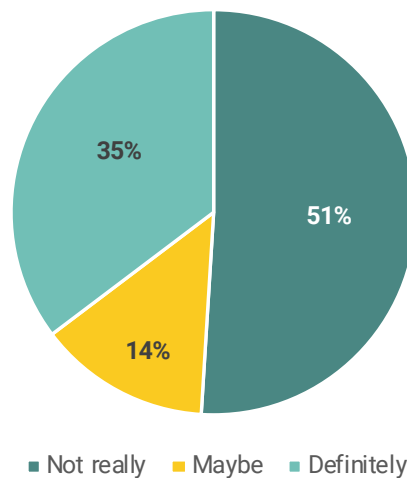
TAKEAWAY 1

You can expect half as much PSA inventory in the months leading up to a Presidential election. Before both the 2016 and 2020 elections, 50% of stations said they expected to have less inventory. Post-election, 40% of stations said they had less inventory than expected.

It obviously feels premature to be talking about 2024. Still, suppose you're aligning your marketing with your three or five-year strategic plan. In that case, it's crucial to take into consideration the "lull" in PSA coverage you'll expect in August-November before your year-end giving window opens up. This is definitely worth a pre-planned marketing pivot!

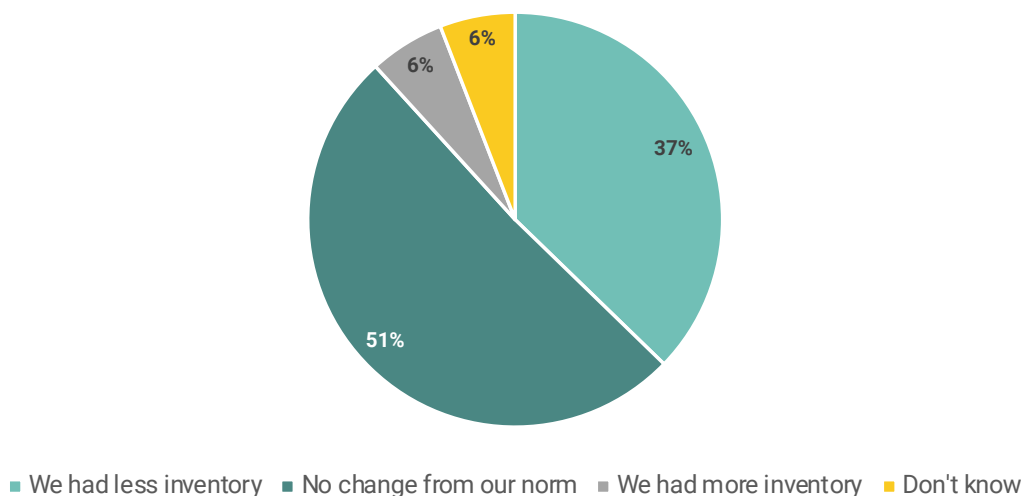
Expectations

Do you expect your station to have less inventory due to the 2020 elections?



Actuals

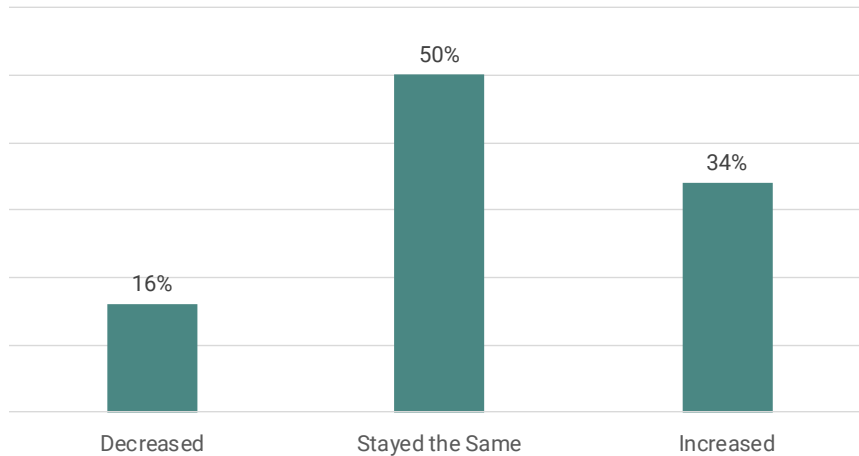
What were avails for the PSA like on your station/network pre-election?



TAKEAWAY 2

Inventory will always fluctuate – think of PSA support as a long-term play for your brand. In a “normal” year, inventory fluctuates with the economy and generally stays consistent with the retail calendar and events like elections. But 2020 changed the advertising industry, maybe forever. It’s no surprise that PSA Directors indicated their inventory increased this past year; this was good for PSAs. When the economy does get on an upswing, it may mean that there will be less inventory. But this doesn’t mean your PSA won’t air: it just means your airings may vary more than usual month to month.

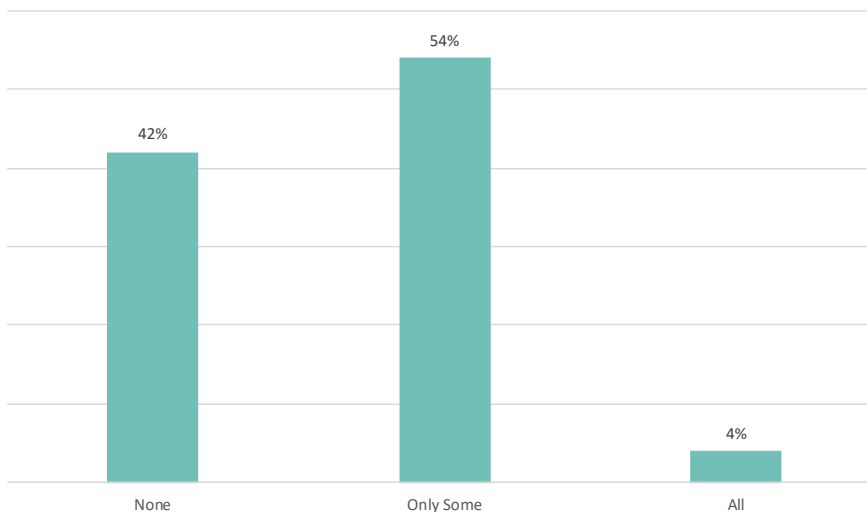
Has PSA inventory been affected by COVID-19?



TAKEAWAY 3

Be ready to pivot with your PSA strategy based on COVID-19. Even as the country is heading toward vaccination and another new normal, expect COVID-19 messaging to still take precedence. About half of stations said they paused current PSA efforts to focus on COVID-19 PSAs. If you are releasing a PSA during this time, be ready for disruption, but don’t be discouraged. PSA Directors are committed to getting as many worthy messages on air as possible, so we’ve seen the “pause” only last a few months.

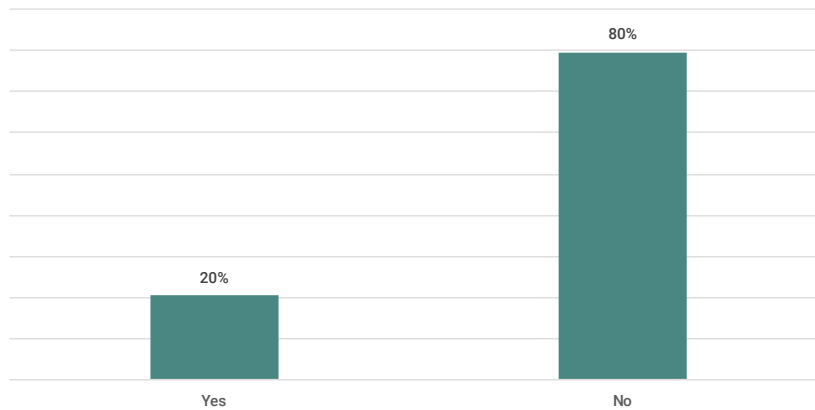
Has your station put other PSAs on pause to focus on COVID-19 messages?



TAKEAWAY 4

Create a mini-marketing plan to release and promote your PSA. When determining the timing of your release, or simply promoting your PSA, plan on doing that during the season or time of year when your need/message is greatest. The majority (80%) of PSA Directors indicated that they would not be changing up their area of focus/interest in 2021, so you will need to make your case for airing and make it relevant to the themes of the day/month/year to earn airtime.

Will the type of PSAs you feature this year be different from the specific areas of interest last year?

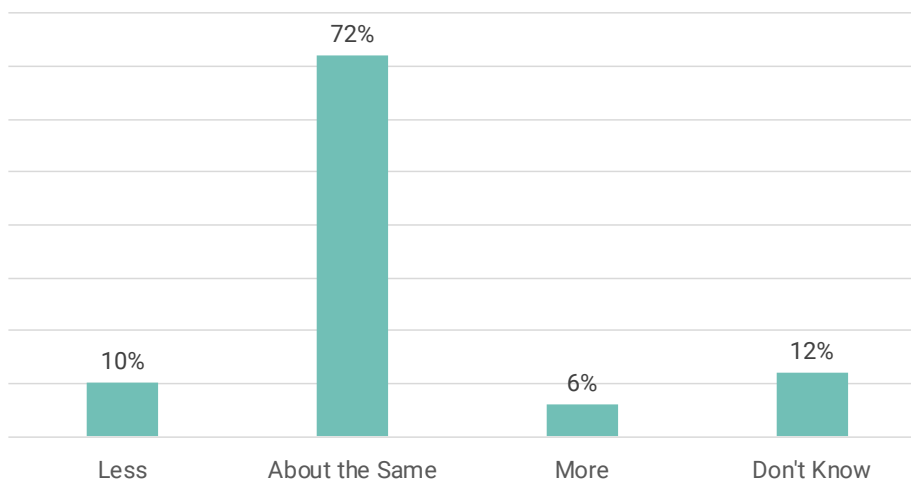


TAKEAWAY 5

Don't delay your PSA efforts. We all wish for a crystal ball to advise us about how to plan our marketing activities in the coming year. (Let us know if you find one!) So, we went directly to the source to help predict the ROI of a PSA campaign in 2021. The majority (72%) of PSA Directors anticipate available PSA inventory to be about the same in 2021.

If you're on the fence about whether or not to launch a PSA campaign effort to anchor your communications and marketing efforts in 2021, we're here to say, put on the gas pedal!

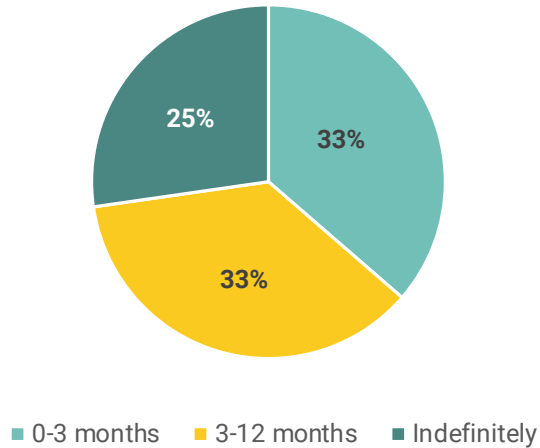
Do you anticipate more or less PSA inventory available this year vs. last year?



TAKEAWAY 6

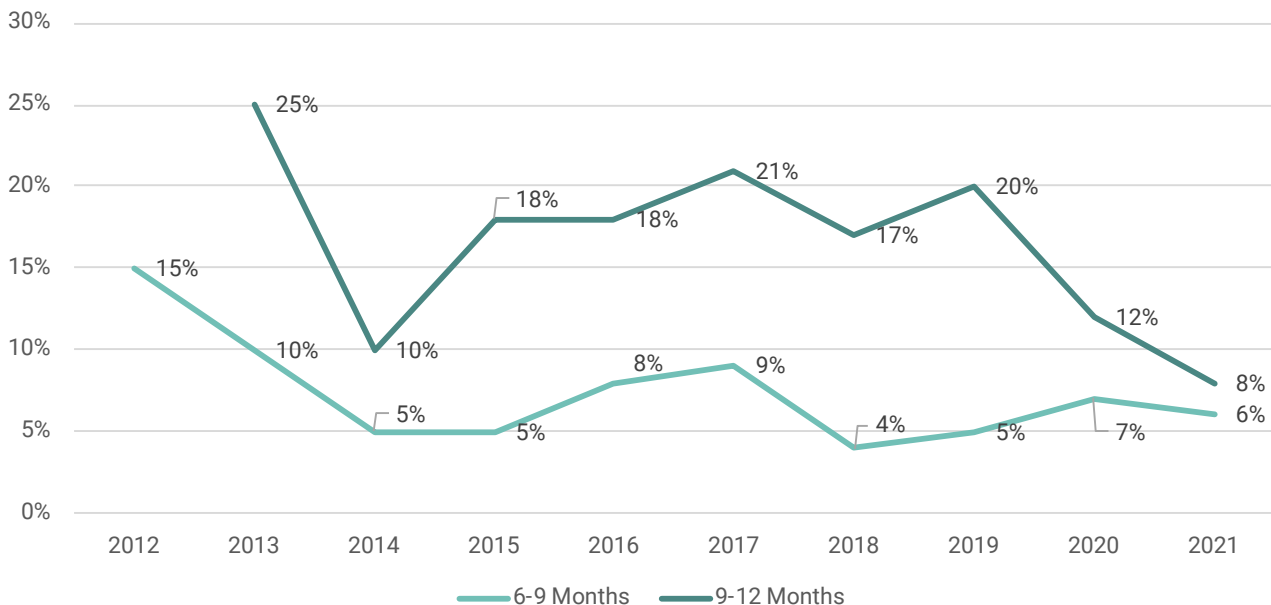
PSAs have a shorter shelf-life than ever. Evergreen campaigns are ideal as you have the potential to get more airtime out of your marketing investment. But taking into account the media's tendency to run PSAs parallel to relevant news/times of year, and the trend of PSA Directors putting campaigns on the air for LESS time than in the past (check out the graph below), you should factor that potential longevity into your planning.

How long will you/can you keep a PSA into rotation?



We've noticed a serious downtrend in the length of time PSA Directors will keep campaigns on air. In 2012, 15% of PSA Directors said they would keep a PSA in rotation 6-9 months, while in 2021, only 6% said they would keep on air 6-9 months. This means that existing or new creative needs to be redistributed more frequently. Before you invest heavily in production or tracking/reporting, consider your desired payoff.

How long will you/can you keep a PSA into rotation?

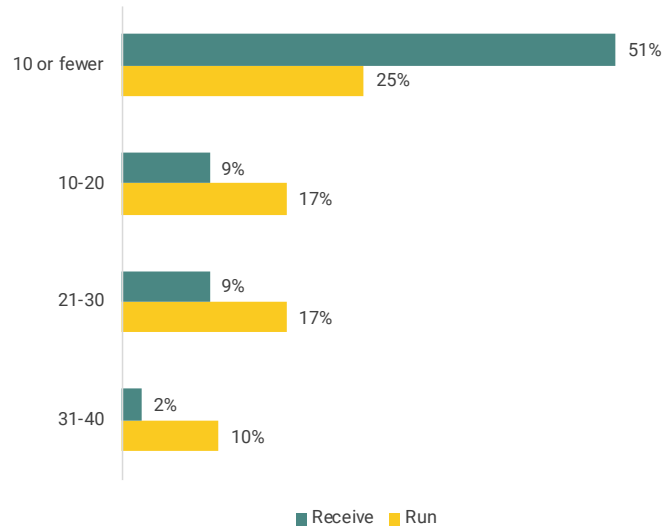


TAKEAWAY 7

Even in the charity and causes world, there is competition. We hate to say it because we have no favorites, but PSA Directors receive on average 56 PSAs per month! How do they choose?

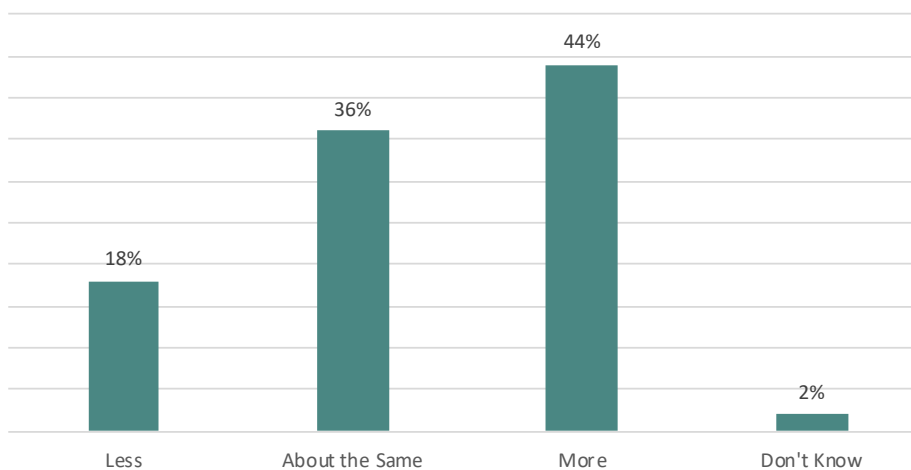
Well, the reality is that they don't like to choose. We know this because we talk to the PSA Directors regularly, and they reveal the tug and pull on their hearts when it comes to all the worthy causes that ask for airtime. But, they have to make decisions.

If they receive ten PSA requests per week, they say they are only running about 25% of those requests.



And this year, almost half of PSA Directors are saying that they are receiving more PSAs than last year. The economic effect of COVID-19 certainly had an effect on the nonprofit sector, and more brands are asking for time to make sure their cause is top of mind for potential donors.

Have you received more or less PSAs this year, during COVID-19?



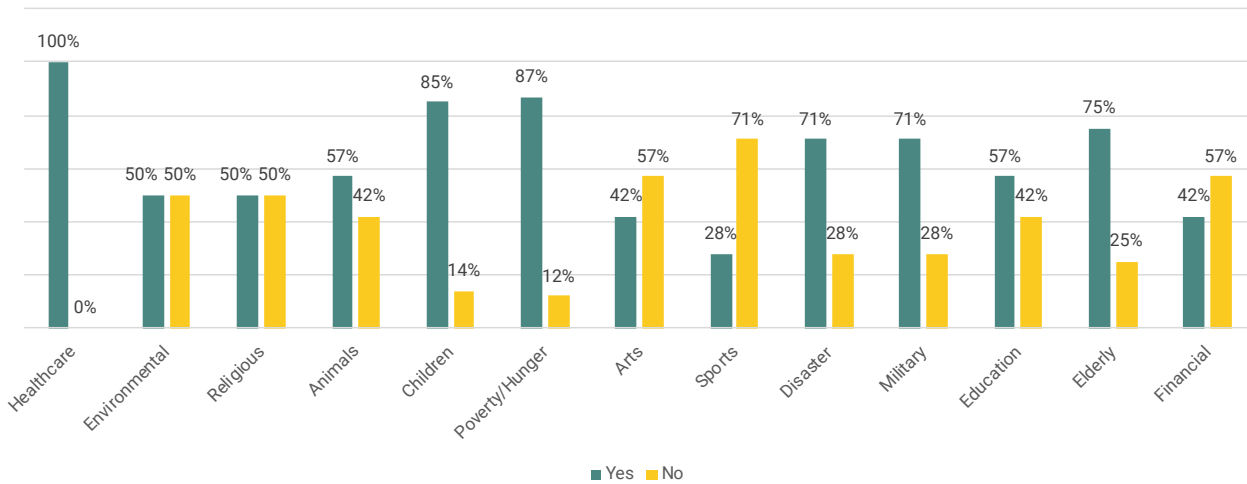
So, let's talk about your pitch. Do you have a good story to tell? And why is it relevant now? The same filters a news reporter would use to determine what story to develop for press are the same that PSA Directors use for deciding which to put on air. If something happens in your geographic service area, no matter how small or large, be ready to send out a request for airtime.

TAKEAWAY 8

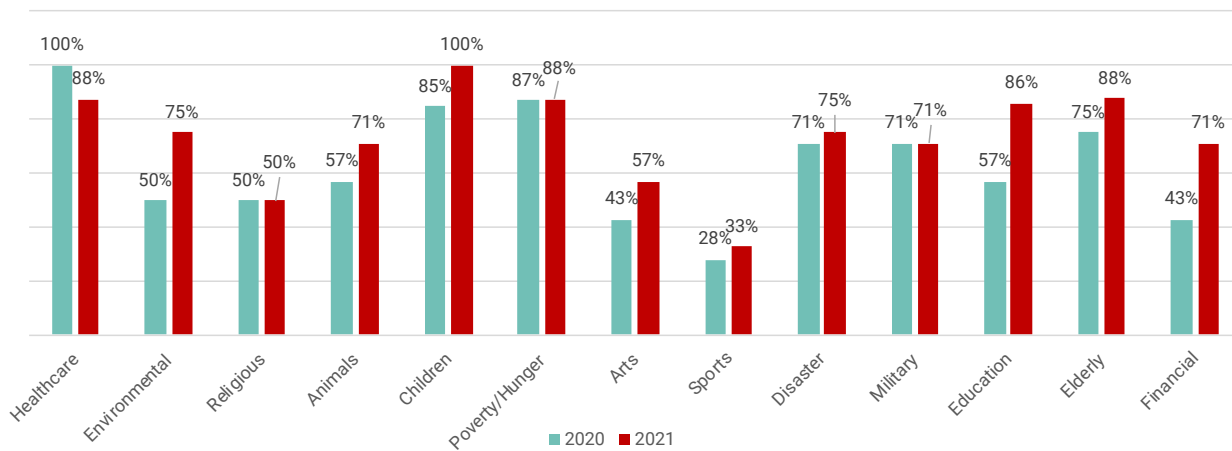
Make sure your creative, message, and packaging make your cause stand out. Each PSA Director will sometimes offer airtime to PSAs that are particularly relevant to their station mission, their personal preference, or what is of interest to their viewers. In 2020, healthcare messages took precedence (no surprise there!), and the rest were almost evenly split among other themes. This data is consistent with our [2020 Donor Outreach Survey](#).

We know that we might sound like a broken record here, but the data shows us preferences are strong but vary across the board. The only way to combat that is to carefully make a case for your PSA to earn its way onto air. Simply producing beautiful, moving creative will only get you so far.

What PSA themes did you focus on last year?



What PSA themes did you focus on last year vs. this year?



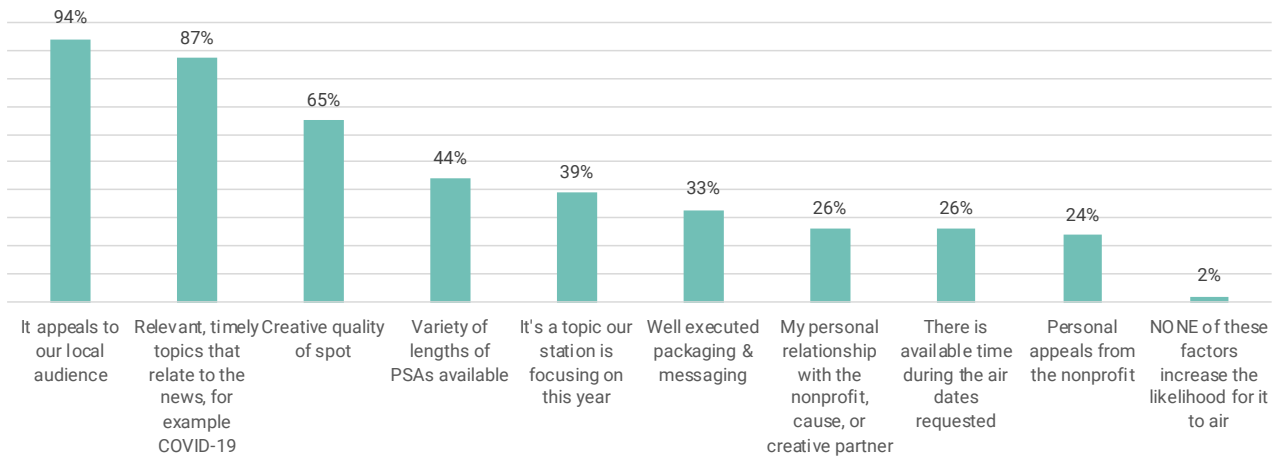
TAKEAWAY 9

It's all about your pitch. This question sums up all the factors we've talked about in our takeaways that increase the chance for your PSA to secure airtime. The top three factors:

- 1) It appeals to our local audience
- 2) Relevant, timely topics that relate to the news (like COVID-19)
- 3) The creative quality of the spot

Find ways to answer #1 and #2 above, and you will be setting up your PSA for success in 2021.

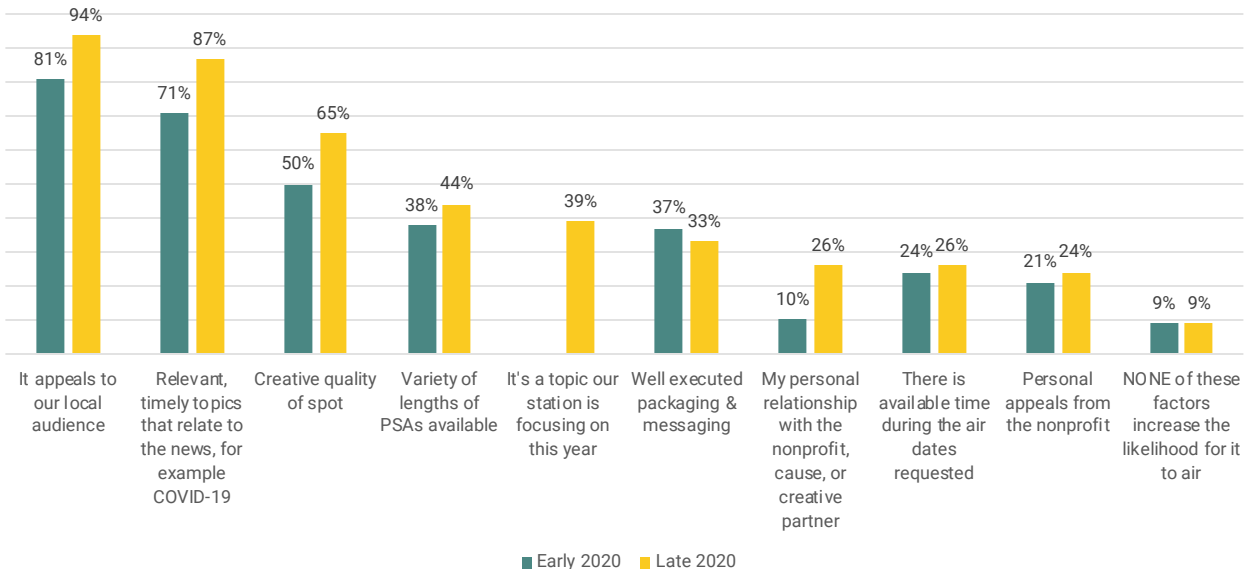
Do any of these factors increase the chance for a PSA to make it on air?



TAKEAWAY 10

Having a local angle and timely message is even more important this year. Both of these factors shot up in importance by +12-15% from before COVID-19 and after COVID-19. This means to make sure you're asking for airtime because their viewers will care! And don't pitch if there are constant headlines covering a hot news item (i.e., COVID-19, elections, disasters, etc.).

Do any of these factors increase the chance for a PSA to make it on air?



For more information on marketing to nonprofits, visit williamswhittle.com.

About Julia McDowell

As Williams Whittle's PSA Specialist, Julia McDowell is a nonprofit marketing specialist with nearly 16 years of experience launching successful PSA campaigns nationwide for brands such as the American Red Cross, USO, SCORE, United Way, The U.S. Postal Inspection Service, The Mission Continues, and many others.

About Williams Whittle

Williams Whittle Associates Inc. is a 54-year-old full-service advertising agency based in Alexandria, Virginia that works with nonprofits and forward-thinking companies in the Washington D.C. area. Our team provides a full range of services unique to nonprofits including [Strategy](#), [Creative & Branding](#), [Media & Digital](#), and [PSA Campaigns](#).

WW was named Marketer of the Year by the American Marketing Association for two successive years and has won more EFFIEs for results-based campaigns than any other agency in the region.

