

6 COMMUNICATION AND OUTREACH

This chapter presents the experience of MYSound in setting up and maintaining the communications and outreach component of a marine environmental monitoring program. This component is designed to cultivate interest in the monitoring network with potential partners and stakeholders, make the public aware of the monitoring program and its value, and solicit feedback from users about the usefulness of the program and how it could be improved. Section 6.1 provides tips on developing an outreach plan for the program, with a focus on working with partners, as well as determining target audiences, messages, and outreach tools. Section 6.2 describes the challenge of evaluating the success of the monitoring program.

Supplementary information about designing and implementing a communications program is available in the handbook *Communicators Guide for Federal, State, Regional, and Local Communicators* published by the Federal Communications Network (<http://www.fcn.gov>). Guidance on communications and outreach for environmental projects is available through the EPA training program *Getting In Step—A Guide to Effective Outreach in Your Watershed* (<http://www.epa.gov/watertrain/gettinginstep>). The following Web sites also provide more ideas about how to write clearly and effectively for a general audience:

- The National Partnership for Reinventing Government’s Writing User-Friendly Documents, available at <http://www.plainlanguage.gov>
- The Web site of the American Bar Association has links to online style manuals, and grammar primers at <http://www.abanet.org/lpm/writing/styl.html>

6.1 DEVELOPING A COMMUNICATION AND OUTREACH PROGRAM

Communication is at the heart of MYSound’s mission: to provide the public with real-time information on the water quality in Long Island Sound, and to educate the public about actions they can take to reduce pollution in the Sound. An effective communications and outreach program, therefore, has been key to the project’s success. Some of the approaches and lessons learned in this area are described below.

6.1.1 PARTNERSHIPS IN OUTREACH AND EDUCATION

It can prove valuable in developing an outreach plan to invite other organizations to partner in planning and implementing the outreach effort. Partners can participate in planning, product development and review, and distribution. Partnerships can be valuable mechanisms for leveraging resources while enhancing the quality, credibility, and success of outreach efforts.

MYSound is a case in point. An important strategy in MYSound communications and outreach has been to leverage the communications and outreach activities of key MYSound stakeholders and partners. Key partners have included environmental and health agencies (EPA, Connecticut DEP, New York Department of Environmental Conservation [DEC], Suffolk County Health Department); educational institutions (Bridgeport Regional Vocational Aquaculture School in Bridgeport and The Sound School in New Haven); teaching aquaria (the Maritime Aquarium at Norwalk and the Mystic MarineLife Aquarium); and environmental NGOs (Save the Sound, the Coalition to Save Hempstead Harbor, and Connecticut Coastal Audubon Center). All of these agencies, institutions, and organizations have well-established communications and outreach programs of their own. Throughout the MYSound development process, the project team has integrated MYSound communications and outreach with the activities of these organizations. Some specific examples of these collaborative activities are described in Section 6.1.2.

6.1.2 MYSOUND AUDIENCE, MESSAGE, AND OUTREACH TOOLS

Broadly speaking, the target audience for the MYSound project is the general public, and particularly an environmentally concerned public, that is attempting to understand ecosystem health in Long Island Sound. This encompasses a diverse set of groups that use Long Island Sound for a variety of purposes; therefore, the MYSound message is presented in different formats and levels of technical complexity to reach these groups. (For example, the Web site includes information that is readily accessible to the non-scientist, while technical and scientific issues are addressed in greater depth at conferences for environmental managers and marine educators.) The same will likely be true for similar projects in estuarine waters near urban coastlines.

MYSound's key outreach tool is its Web site, but the project has also undertaken several other communications and outreach initiatives. These initiatives fall into three categories, each targeted to a particular stakeholder group: initiatives focusing on the scientific and technical community (including other EMPACT projects), initiatives focusing on the educational community, and initiatives focusing on interested citizens and the public at large

6.1.2.1 INITIATIVES FOCUSING ON THE SCIENTIFIC AND TECHNICAL COMMUNITY

Outreach initiatives focusing on the scientific and technical community have consisted largely of presentations at workshops and conferences, publication of articles in conference proceedings, and participation in technical working groups dealing with marine water quality monitoring. For instance, the MYSound project team has made presentations on the project at several EMPACT National Conferences in Washington, Baltimore, Minneapolis-St. Paul, and Boston; at the 2000 Long Island Sound (LIS) Research Conference in Stamford; at the Oceans 2000 Conference in Providence; and at the 2001 EMAP Conference in Pensacola. Figure 6.1 shows the MYSound poster presentation used at these conferences. The poster presentation includes the poster itself as well as a laptop presentation of the MYSound Web site (either a real-time or archived presentation). A customized poster presentation on the project was featured at the EPA's National Science Forum in Washington, DC in May 2002. MYSound Project Summaries were also distributed at these conferences. Technical papers and articles on the project have been published in the proceedings of the 2000 Oceans Conference, the 2000 Long Island Sound Research Conference, and the 2001 EMAP Conference. In addition, articles on the project were published in *Sea Technology* magazine, which subsequently led to the project being featured on the cover of the publication (see Figure 6.2), and in the *Marine Technology Reporter* published by the Massachusetts Ocean Technology Network. All of these efforts have given the project significant visibility on a regional and national level, and have facilitated networking activities.



Figure 6.1 MYSound poster presentation with MYSound Web site laptop demonstration and printed outreach material.

The MYSound project team also participated in a two-day workshop on Volunteer Marine Water Quality Monitoring sponsored by EPA and the Ocean Conservancy, and regularly participates in working groups dealing with LIS environmental issues, such as the LIS Water Quality Monitoring Working Group and the Science Advisory Committee of the Connecticut Coastal Audubon Center. This promotes awareness and interaction with local stakeholders and has led to the recruitment of additional project partners.

6.1.2.2 INITIATIVES FOCUSING ON THE EDUCATIONAL COMMUNITY

MYSound has undertaken initiatives focusing on the educational community to support marine science education, particularly at the junior high and high school level. Key educational partners in these efforts include the Bridgeport Regional Vocational Aquaculture School, the Sound School, and the Maritime Aquarium at Norwalk. These institutions are providing feedback on how the project can support marine education, and are assisting in the development of interpretive material targeting educators and students. Other initiatives under consideration include a series of guided Internet explorations that will lead students through marine environmental protection topical Web sites that discuss environmental problems and issues of importance in the Sound. MYSound is also investigating the possibility of developing a series of classroom exercises using Long Island Sound data to demonstrate various scientific concepts.

In addition to providing educational material on the Web site, MYSound has established connections with educators in individual schools throughout the region by participating in the biannual Long Island Sound Educators Conference and the annual New York State Marine Educators Association (NYSMEA) Conference. The project team also helped organize a Marine Science Career Day at the University of Connecticut at Avery Point for students from the Bridgeport Regional Vocational Aquaculture School.

Perhaps the most significant networking initiative with educational stakeholders is the current effort to transfer operating responsibility for the Bridgeport harbor monitoring station, and future stations in New Haven and Norwalk harbor, to the three key educational stakeholders. This will not only provide hands-on experience for teachers and students in marine water quality monitoring, but also promote the future sustainability of these stations.

6.1.2.3 INITIATIVES FOCUSING ON THE GENERAL PUBLIC

In providing the real-time data and interpretive information to the public, MYSound recognizes that not all individuals are aware of the project or have direct access to the Internet. To promote public awareness of the project and provide for wider dissemination of MYSound data, the project has undertaken several citizen-targeted activities. The first is the publication of newspaper and newsletter articles on the project. Newspaper articles on the project, including two full-page feature articles, have been published in the *New London Day*, the *Hartford Courant*, *Connecticut Post* (Bridgeport), *Stamford Advocate*, and *New York Times*. In addition, articles on the project have been published in various regional newsletters such as the *Sound Bites* newsletter published by Save the Sound, *Sound Outlook* published by Connecticut DEP, and *The Nor'easter* published by New England Sea Grant.

MYSound has also developed a poster presentation for display and a brochure for distribution at public events focusing on Long Island Sound. Such events have included the annual Long Island Sound Watershed Alliance Conference and the Long Island Sound Day program held at the Mystic MarineLife Aquarium. The brochure is included in Appendix B.



Figure 6.2 Cover of *Sea Technology* magazine featuring the MYSound monitoring buoy

A third mechanism for reaching the public that was developed and tested as part of the project was a computer-based public access kiosk that allowed public access to the MYSound Web site. Such a kiosk was implemented at the Maritime Aquarium at Norwalk. Although the kiosk did receive some attention by aquarium visitors, it proved somewhat too technical for many of the visitors and was not entirely self-promoting and self-explanatory (see “Lessons Learned” below). Therefore, it was discontinued in 2001 and plans for a similar kiosk at the Mystic MarineLife Aquarium were suspended.

Lessons Learned: MYSound’s Public Access Kiosk

In 1999, MYSound set up a kiosk at Norwalk’s Maritime Aquarium to provide direct public access to the project Web site. In retrospect, MYSound has judged that it was not successful because it lacked the explanation and sequencing that would have made it attractive to the broad audience visiting the aquarium. In addition, it was a stand-alone exhibit not tied to any of the more visible aquarium exhibits. A better approach would have been to offer a simplified exhibit that showed temperature, salinity, and DO from an offshore monitoring station, and that also described how these parameters affect species distribution and vitality. Such a kiosk could be incorporated directly into the Long Island Sound fish species exhibit at the aquarium to emphasize the connection between water quality and species health/diversity. In summary, MYSound learned that kiosk exhibits should be simple and focused on a particular theme or concept to be popular in a public venue.

6.2 PERFORMANCE EVALUATION AND PUBLIC FEEDBACK

Another important aspect of any marine environmental monitoring program is capturing information on the utility and effectiveness of the program and making adjustments and enhancements based on this feedback. In the MYSound project, this is accomplished through the online user survey at the MYSound Web site (See Figure 5.11), and through continuous user feedback through the Web site E-mail connection to the Webmaster.

Figure 6.3 shows the current cumulative results of the MYSound User survey. As of 11/11/02, 495 individuals had responded to the survey. The demographics of the user community and information on how they perceive the usefulness and user-friendliness are shown in the form of percent distribution bar graphs for the number of individuals recording each response. The survey indicates, for instance, that 52% of the responders were accessing the site for the first time. Responders learned of the site through a variety of mechanisms including search engines, friends and colleagues, newspapers and TV, and links from other Web sites. Most responders find the site both understandable and informative, and intend to return to the site. Of those responders indicating a specific occupation, most were educators, researchers, and environmental managers. Most responders live in Connecticut. Most responders are male (71%), and many responders are between the ages of 36 and 55 (44%).

As for E-mail feedback, Appendix C provides a sampling of the comments and suggestions received. Comments on the MYSound Web site have been generally favorable although not always providing great detail. The real-time weather data appears to be a particularly valuable piece of information for many users. The overall value of the Web site can be assessed by the fact that there are immediate inquiries from the public when the stations are off-line for repair.

**FIGURE 6.3 RESULTS OF THE MYSOUND USER FEEDBACK SURVEY
AVAILABLE AT THE MYSOUND WEB SITE**

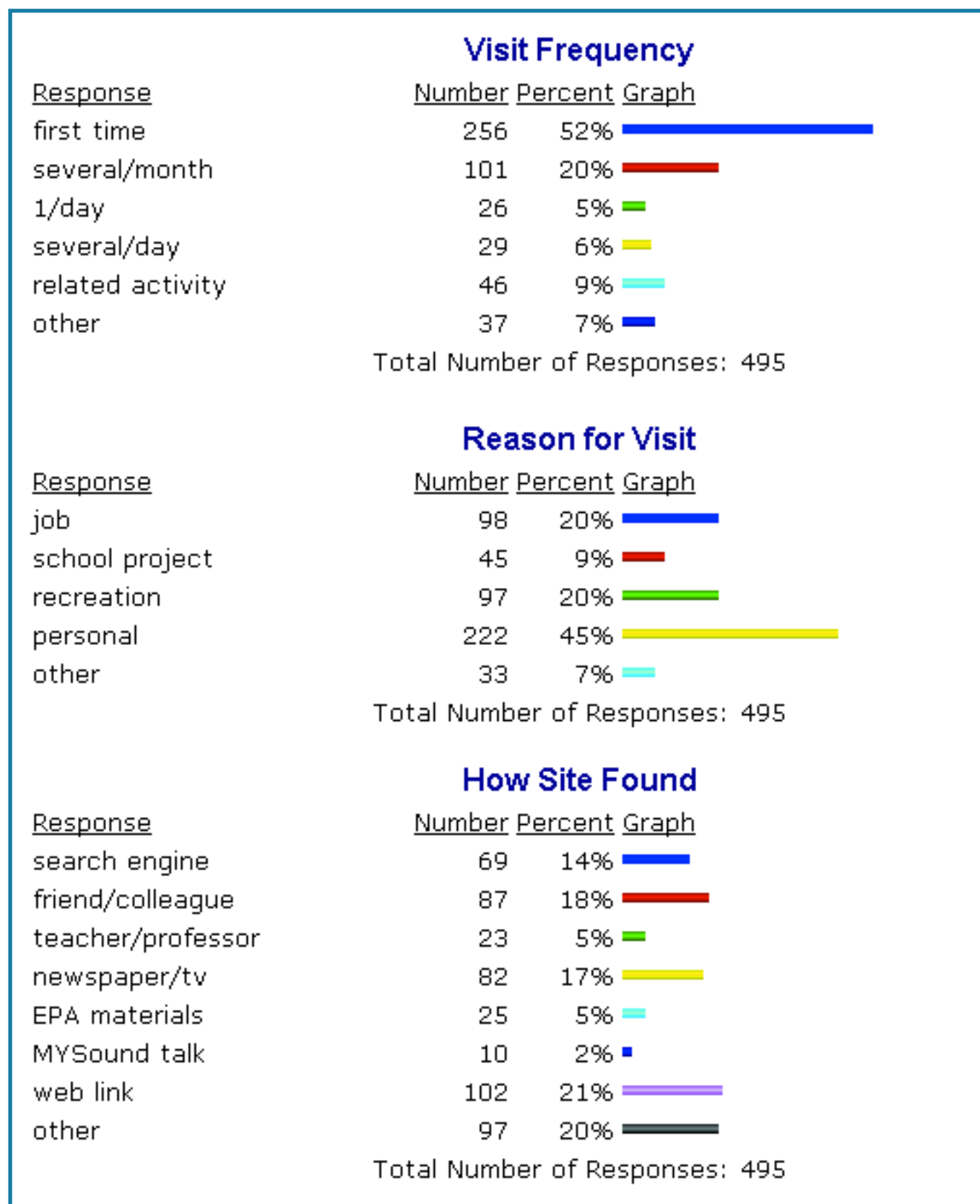










FIGURE 6.3 RESULTS OF THE MYSOUND USER FEEDBACK SURVEY AVAILABLE AT THE MYSOUND WEB SITE (CONTINUED)

Understanding

<u>Response</u>	<u>Number</u>	<u>Percent</u>	<u>Graph</u>
everything	186	38%	
most things	198	40%	
few things	38	8%	
no opinion	73	15%	





Total Number of Responses: 495

Learning

<u>Response</u>	<u>Number</u>	<u>Percent</u>	<u>Graph</u>
a lot	226	46%	
a little	171	35%	
nothing	11	2%	
no opinion	87	18%	

Total Number of Responses: 495

Return Plans

<u>Response</u>	<u>Number</u>	<u>Percent</u>	<u>Graph</u>
many times	215	43%	
occasionally	219	44%	
never	11	2%	
no answer	50	10%	

Total Number of Responses: 495

**FIGURE 6.3 RESULTS OF THE MYSOUND USER FEEDBACK SURVEY
AVAILABLE AT THE MYSOUND WEB SITE (CONTINUED)**

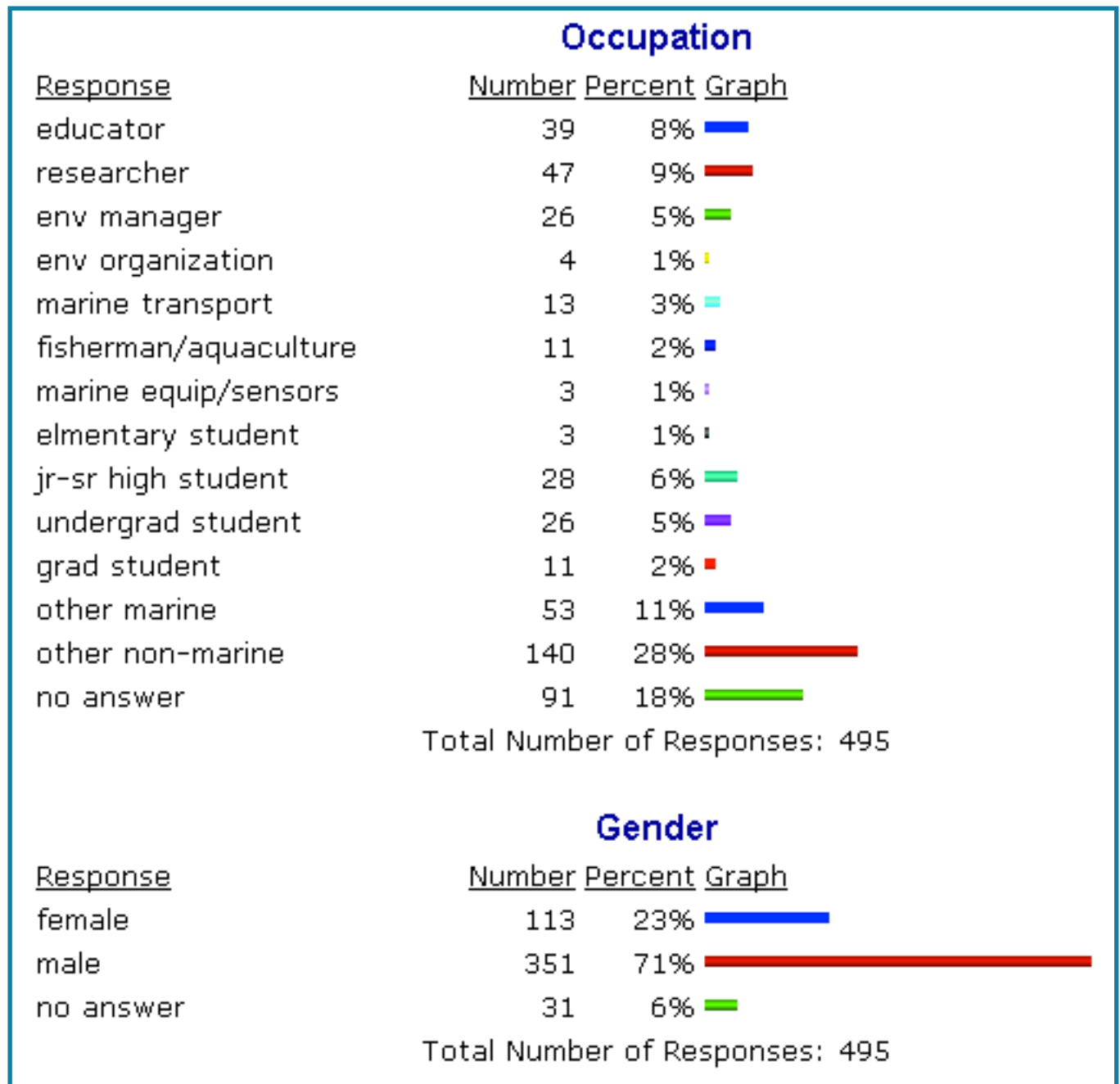
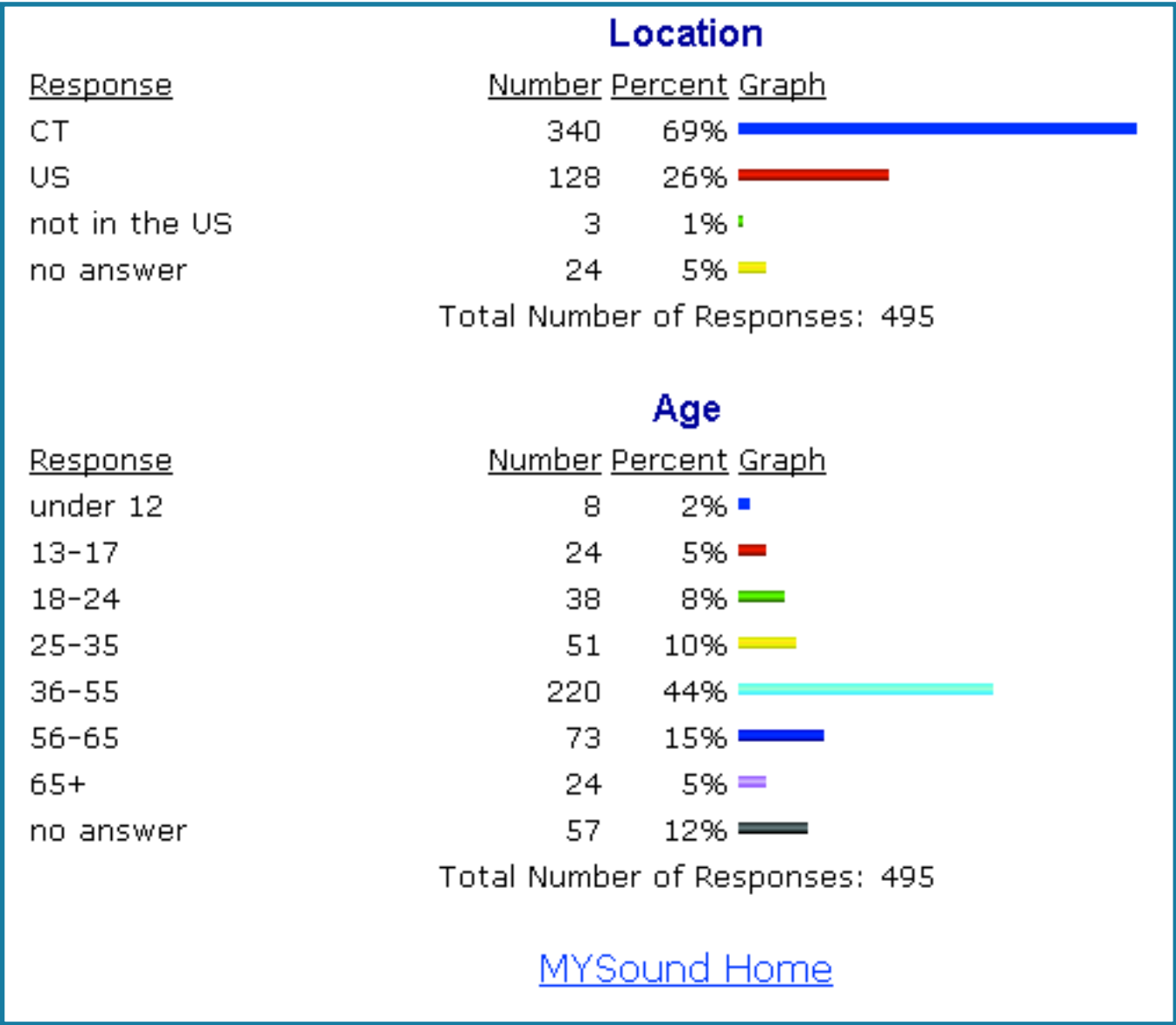


FIGURE 6.3 RESULTS OF THE MYSOUND USER FEEDBACK SURVEY AVAILABLE AT THE MYSOUND WEB SITE (CONTINUED)



Communication and Outreach: Key Points and Lessons Learned

Because of the goals of the EMPACT Program, communication and outreach are at the heart of the MYSound mission: to provide the public with timely information on the water quality in Long Island Sound, and to educate the public about actions they can take to reduce pollution in the Sound. An effective communications and outreach program, therefore, is key to the project's success. In designing a communications and outreach program, several key points must be considered:

- An important strategy in designing and implementing the communications and outreach plan is to leverage against the communications and outreach activities of key stakeholders and partners.
- In formulating a communications and outreach plan for the monitoring program, several important questions must be addressed:
 - *What are the outreach goals?*
 - *Who are the target audiences?*
 - *What are the key messages and types of information to be delivered?*
 - *What outreach tools will be effective?*
- In addition to the monitoring project Web site, a number of communications and outreach tools were used in the MYSound project. These included:
 - Poster presentations at conferences and workshops
 - Hard copy brochures and project summaries
 - Articles on the project in marine environmental and technical periodicals and newsletters
 - Papers submitted to conferences and workshops that were subsequently published in the proceedings
 - Articles in local newspapers and news features on local television stations
 - An Internet-based kiosk at a regional aquarium
- Performance evaluation is a key component of any monitoring program. Two mechanisms successfully employed by MYSound are an online User Survey posted on the Web site, and E-mail feedback provided through the Web site.