City of Seattle

Plastic Carryout Bag Ban

Retail business survey and six-month progress report

Seattle Public Utilities

Seattle Public Utilities
Solid Waste Division
January 15, 2013

Groups and stores surveyed:

Stakeholders – e-mail sent to 86 major stores, trade associations and packaging distributors – 20 responses.

Retail store owners and managers – direct mail to 2,235 retail outlets – 74 responses.

80 in-person calls on managers at a representative sample of store types – 75 completed surveys.

Total responses: 169 Response rate = 7% overall; 3.3% by mail.

Survey dates: December 1-16, 2012

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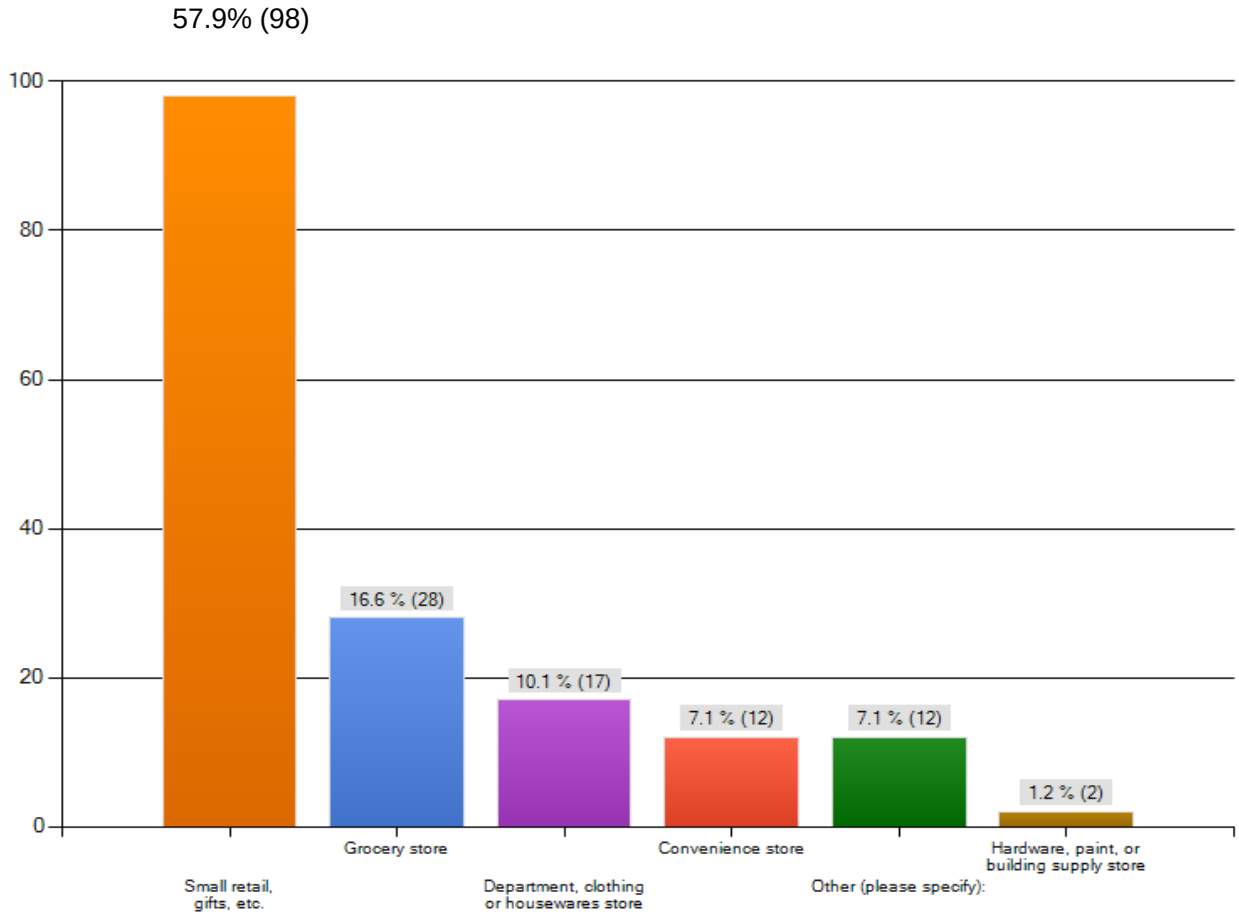
Types of stores responding:



More than 80% said they were "independent," including 60% of grocery stores.

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How store managers learned about the plastic bag ban.

- Almost two-thirds (66.1%) mentioned the letters from the city.
- Next came newspapers (28%);
- Followed by TV (23.8%).
- About one-fourth of grocery (25.9%) and department stores (23.5%) said they also got information from their corporate headquarters.

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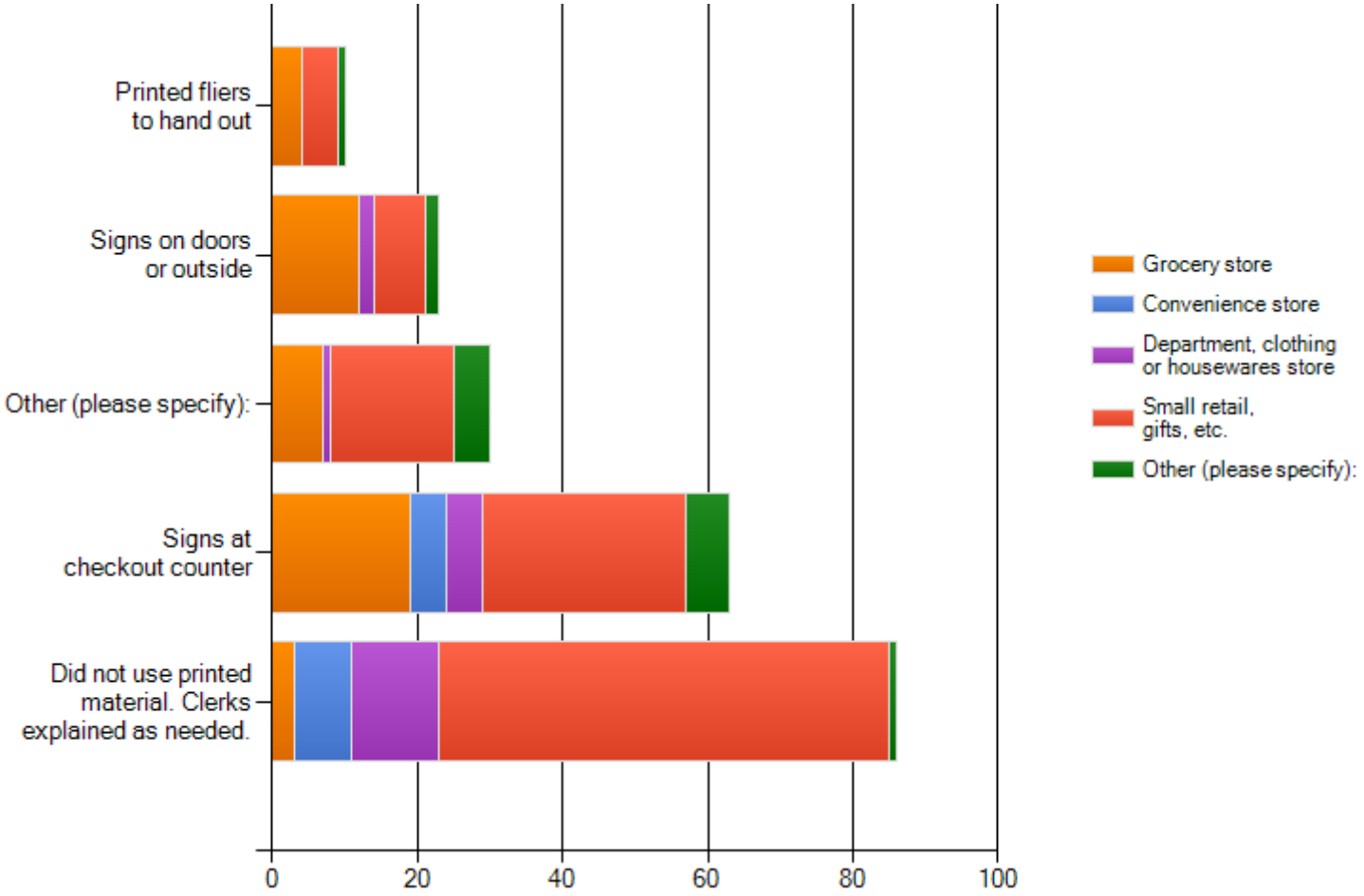
How they got the word out:



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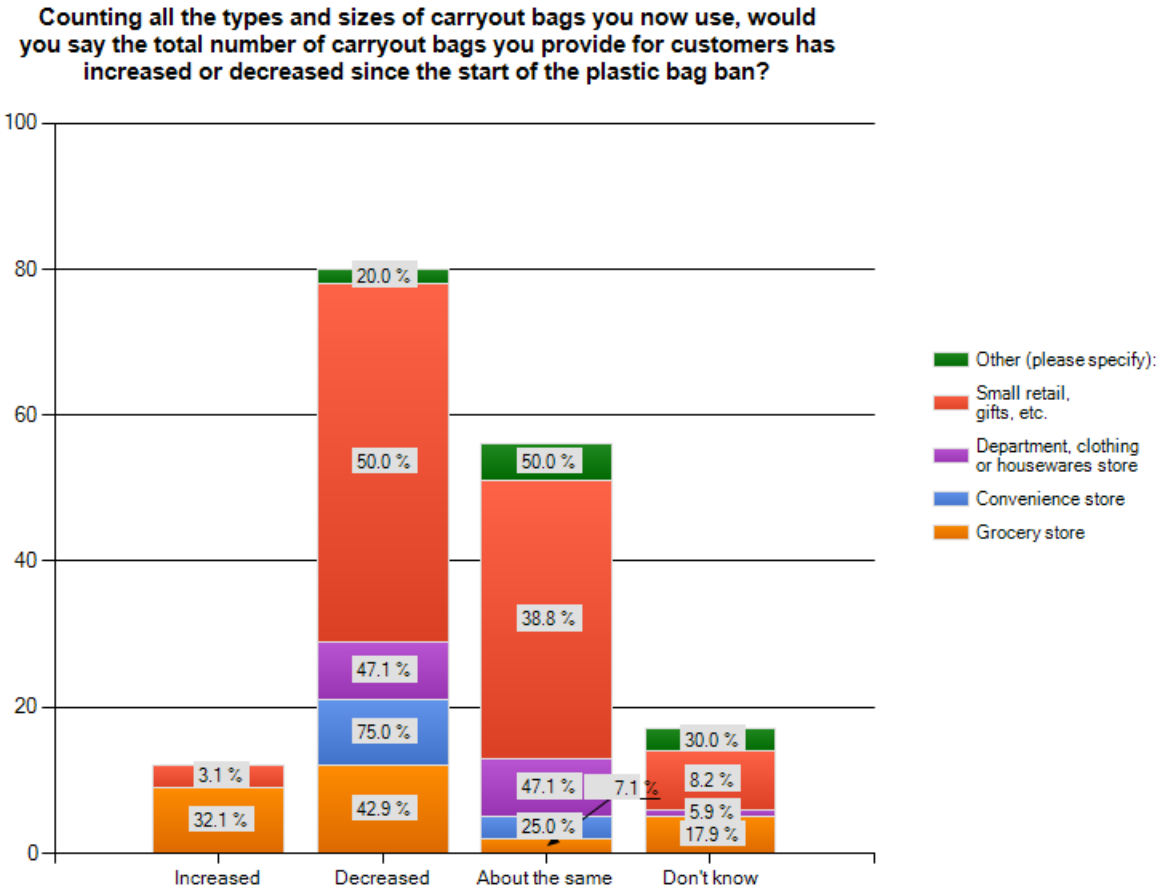
Carryout bag use went down.



More than 80% reported that use was about the same (33.9%) or dropped (48.5%).

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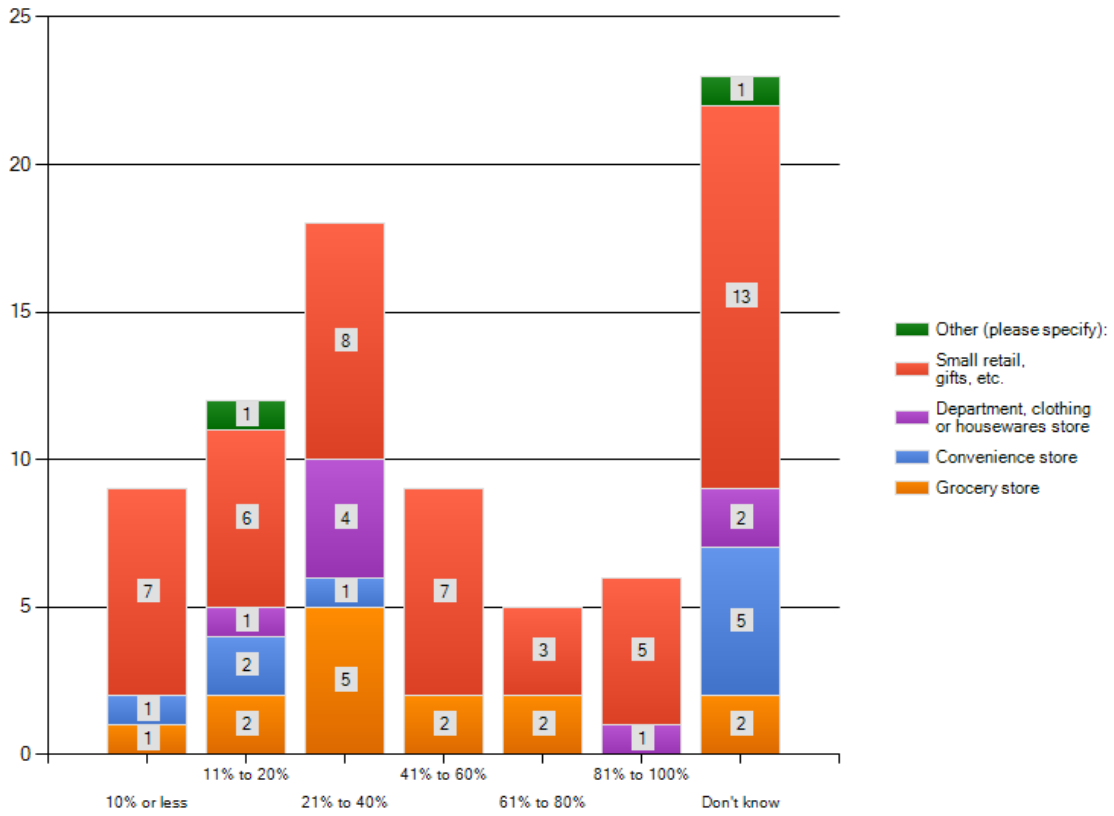
Estimates by store managers who said bag use dropped:



Sample includes 12 grocery stores reporting drops in total bags given out.

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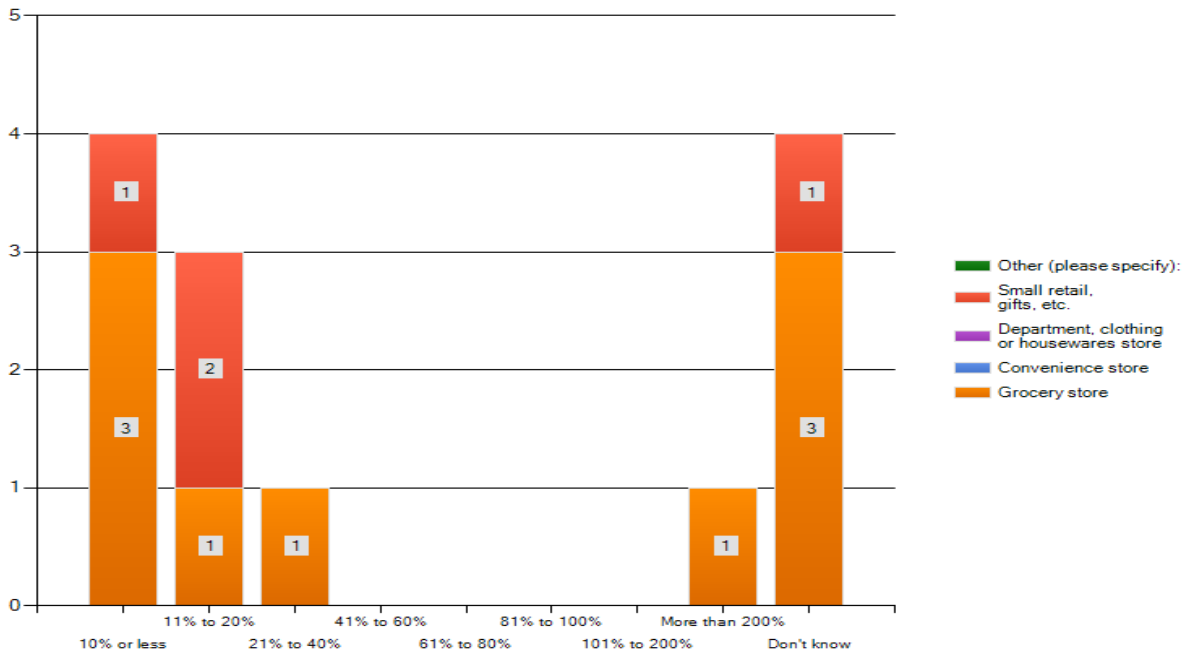
Estimates by store managers who said bag use increased:



Of small sample, including 5 grocery stores, most said increase was less than 20%.

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Samples of the quantities:

Four grocery stores provided estimates:

Their combined bag use dropped almost 15,000 per month.

Nine small retail stores provided estimates:

Typically, they reported monthly bag use drops of 50 to 200 per month each.

(We can't generalize from these numbers. The sample is too small and store types don't correspond to business license data.)

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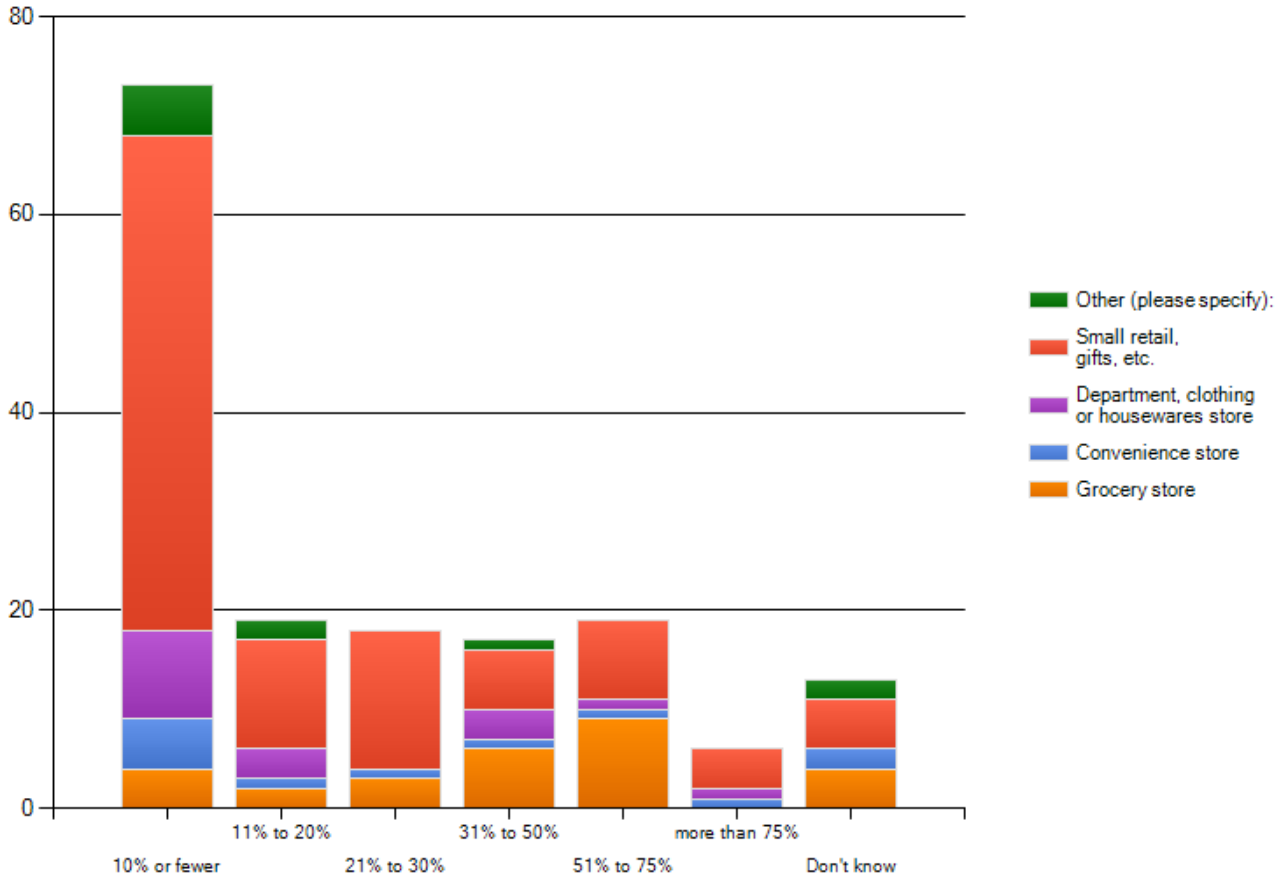
Shoppers bring reusable bags.

More than half (53.5%) of grocery stores say 31% to 75% of their customers bring their own bags. (Shown in columns 4 and 5.)



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The number of stores selling reusable carryout bags has remained constant.

- About one-third of stores sold reusable bags before the ban (32.9%).
- About one-third of stores do now (35.3%).
- But two-thirds of grocery stores sold bags before the ban and those stores still sell them (66.7%).

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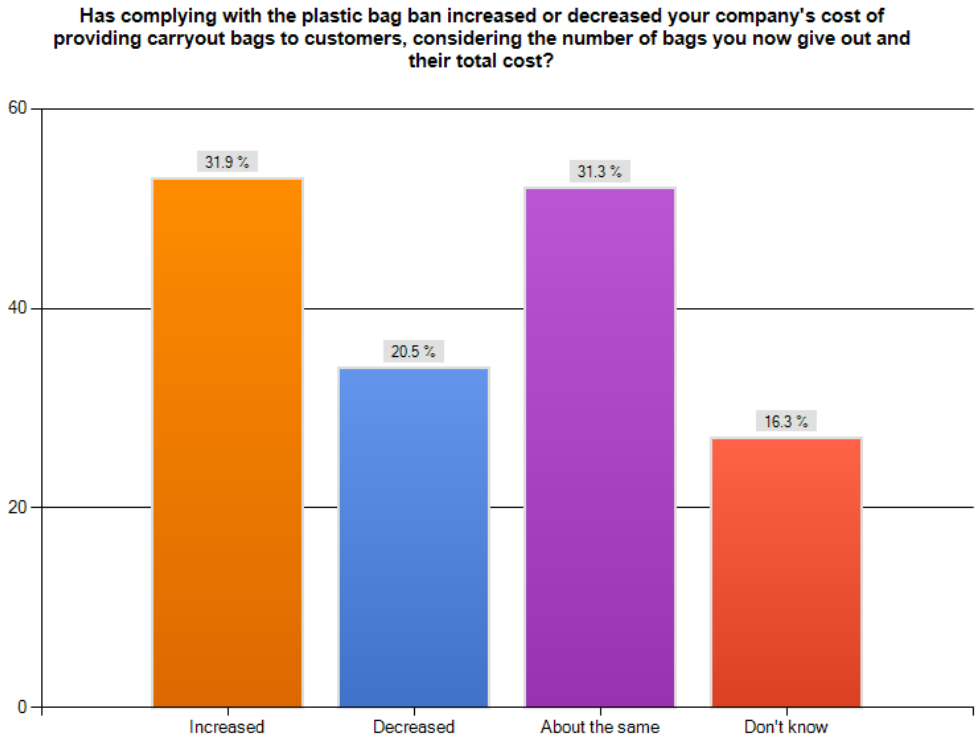
More stores report bag cost increases than decreases.



About one-third (31.9%) say bag costs are up, one-third about the same (31.3%) and one-fifth (20.5%) say costs are down.

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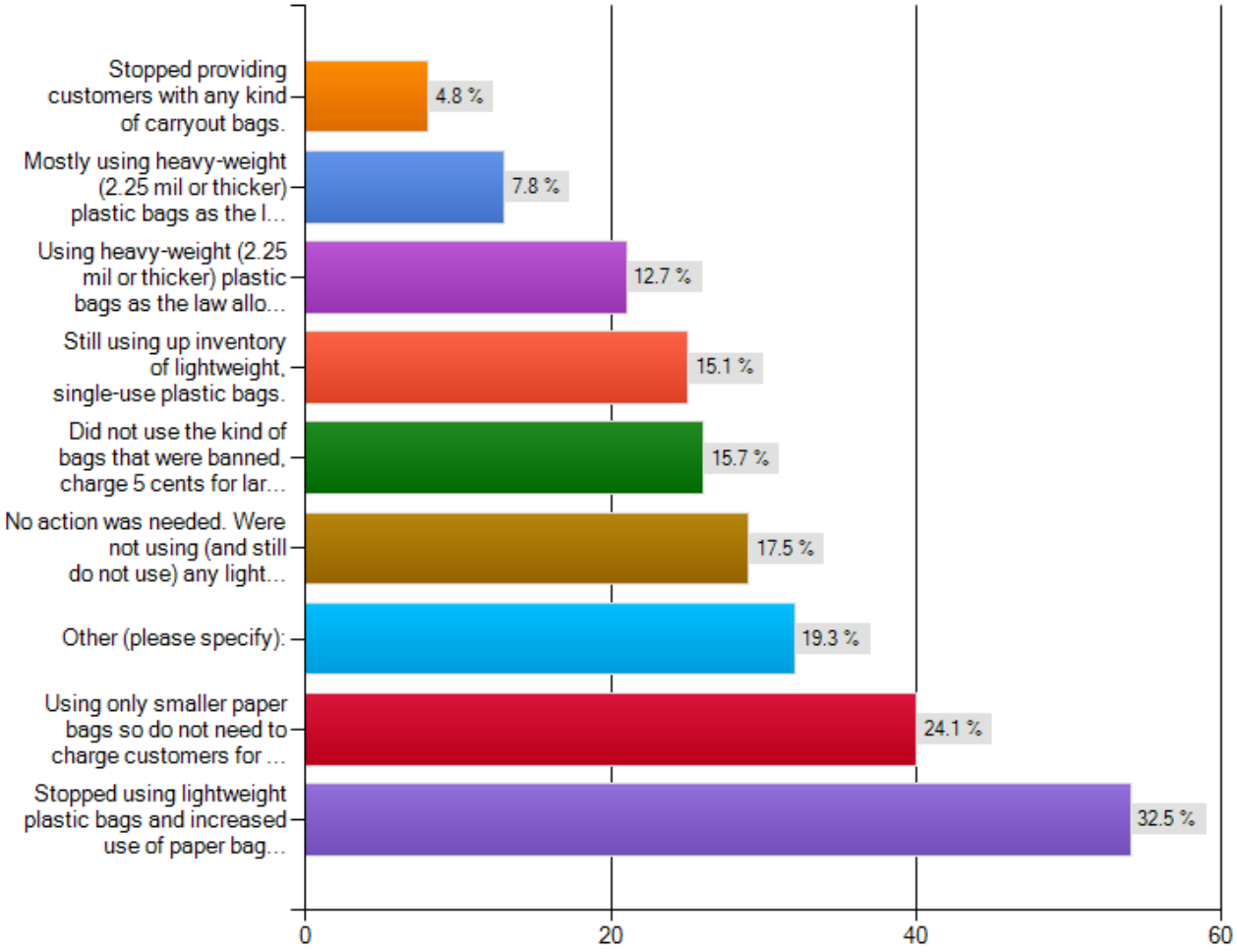
Compliance strategies:



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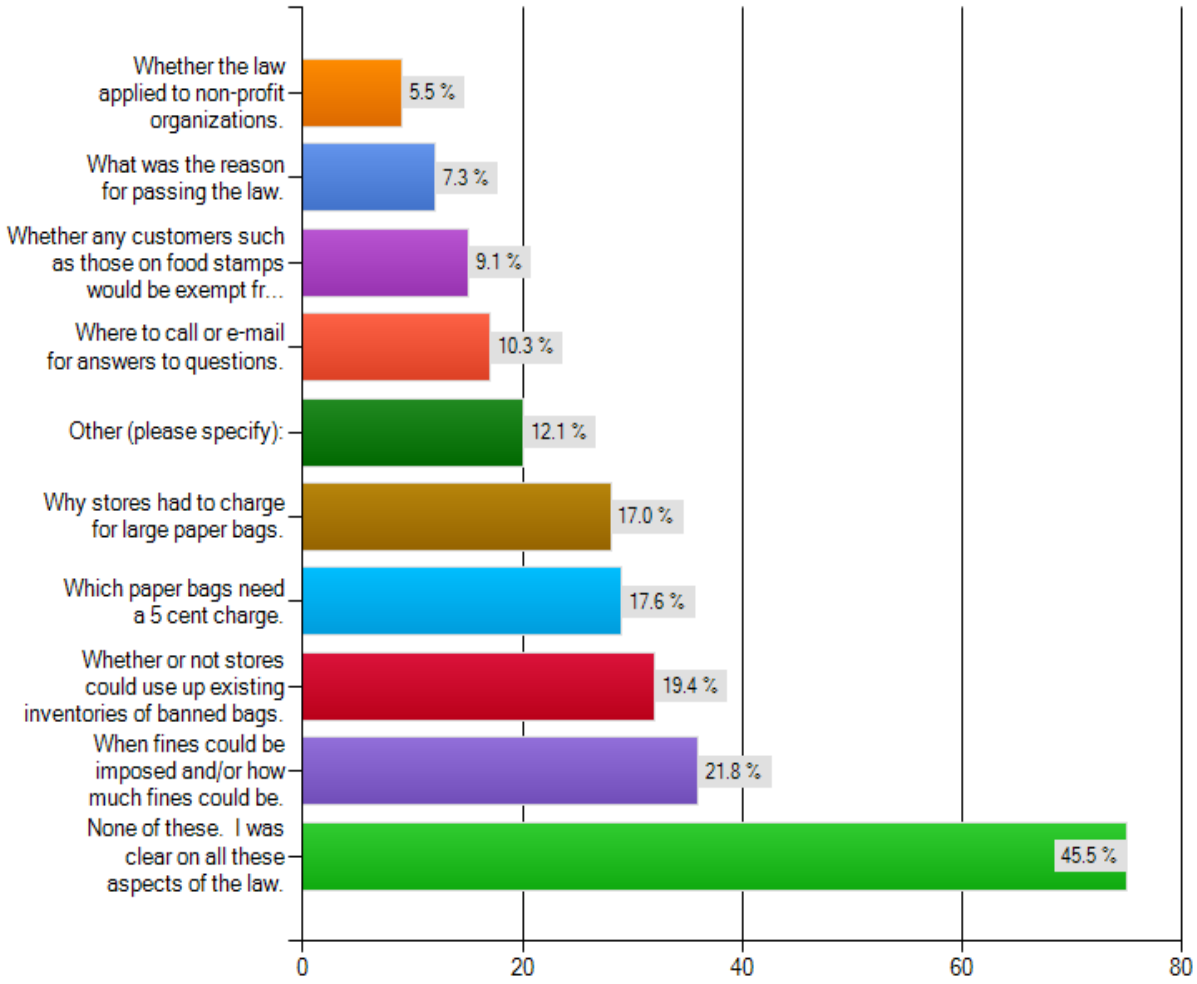
Questions managers had before the ban took effect.



Almost half fully understood the new law.

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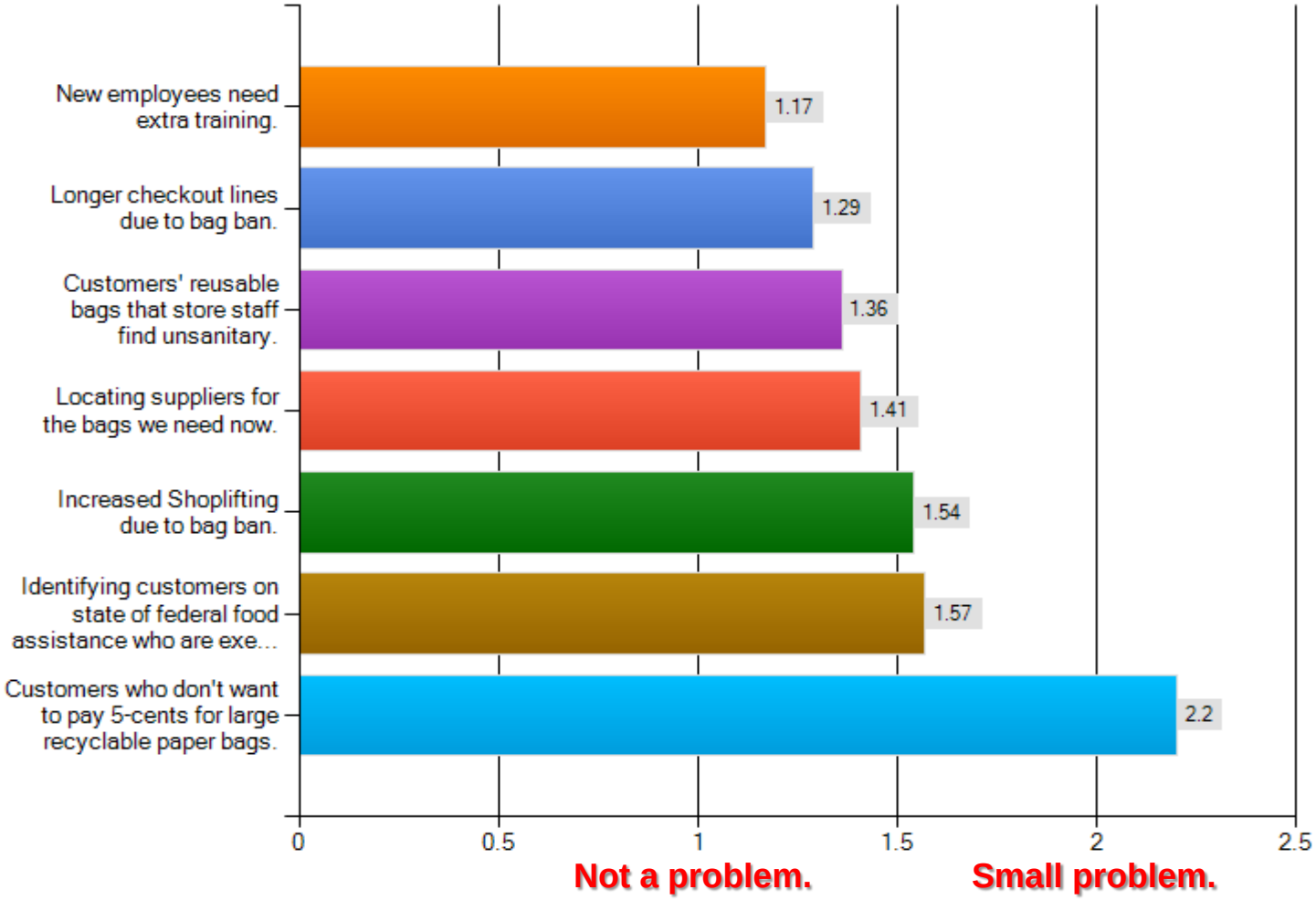
Problems stores encountered:

(On a scale of 1 to 4 from "Not a problem" to "Big problem."



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33 of 169 added comments,
26 of them from small retail stores.

- 12 – bad idea
- 12 – charge discourages customers
- 8 – total cost of bags higher
- 8 – paper bags don't protect from rain
- 6 – problem for tourists
- 5 – good idea

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Other findings:

- Grocery stores are almost alone in giving credit (usually 5 cents) when customers bring their own bags.
- Quite a few stores are using 2.25 mil or thicker plastic bags, often charging 5 or 10 cents for bags of this type.
- Almost one-fifth (18.7%) of all stores charge for one kind of bag or another.
- We get calls and talk to shoppers who complain that stores are charging for all bags, blaming the City. (The legislation requires a 5-cent pass-through charge only for large-grocery size bags.)

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Where we are so far:

Lightweight plastic carryout bags have been almost completely eliminated from the larger stores.

(Grocery, convenience and drug stores generate 70% of bags.)

One-third of stores report cost increases; one fifth report costs dropped.

A significant percentage of shoppers, particularly at grocery stores, are bringing their own reusable bags.

Smaller businesses continue to use up inventory; this is gradually ending.

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