First Impressions Program: An Examination of State-to-State Diversity in the Application of Tourism-Based Programming

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This collaboration stems from a 2015 grant from the Northeast Regional Center for Rural Development.
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Purpose

The First Impressions Program aims to help communities learn about existing strengths and weaknesses as seen through the eyes of the first-time visitor. Program based on a “secret shopper” concept.

The results of the First Impressions Program can form the basis for future development.

*Slide content modified from presentation by L. Brown and D. Eades “An Introduction to the First Impressions Program”, May 27, 2015.*
Program Goals & Objectives

Awareness ➔ Dialogue ➔ Community Action

To inform and guide public action by making the community aware of its assets and challenges.

Model Variants

- Community Exchange
- Expert
- Other

*Slide content partially from presentation by L. Brown and D. Eades “An Introduction to the First Impressions Program”, May 27, 2015.
Participating Communities

View at (case-sensitive): https://goo.gl/E6ZtiZ

Add your community by contacting:
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First Impressions
A Program for Community Development

Brattleboro, VT

Summary Report
November 12, 2015

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First Impressions
Part of the Tourism Assessment Program

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Tourism Assessment Program

- 12-18 months process
- Multiple perspectives
- Report suggests actions
- Community implements
- REM Evaluation

- Engages
- Educates
- Motivates
- Informs

Community Tourism Potential
Tourism Assessment Data Collection

LOCAL residents identify local tourism assets by completing inventory and assessment forms.

VISITORS “mystery visitors” use a modified First Impressions tool to provide market perspective.

EXPERTS a team of tourism experts visit community. They use a modified First Impressions tool for assessment, interview locals, and facilitate a community SWOT meeting.
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Downtown Main Streets Assessment

- Community Exchange model in partnership with
- No experts are needed
- Input from regular people from outside the community being assessed
- Guided observation and assessment
Short-term outcomes

• Learn community assets/opportunities or view them in a new light
• Receive valuable feedback from a peer community
• Develop a list of action items for community improvement
• Develop relationships, connections or partnerships with a peer community
• Learn about basic concepts in community place-making and development

Long-term outcomes

• Make improvements to the physical/built environment
• Identify priority action items & integrate into community plans
• Create plans that include input from a diverse range of stakeholders
• Monitor change based on priority actions
• Obtain external funding to address priority issues
• Cooperate or communicate with peer communities
Downtowns & Main Streets

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Downtown Main Streets Assessment

- (1) Community Exchange model; (2) Staff model; & (3) Student model
- Focus on downtowns and main streets
- In future, may expand to meet specific gateway community needs
- Collection of assets (called “characteristics” in New Hampshire) are done in Esri’s Collector app or paper booklet

Specific Outcomes

- Digital main street wayfinding app
- Public piano project
- Façade improvements
- Municipal plan revisions
- Exchange community interaction post assessment
To assess community assets, we have two options:

- The mobile “Esri Collector” app; and
- A paper booklet

- The Collector app allows you to do reviews onsite via your mobile device like you would a Yelp or TripAdvisor review
- You can also take photos and videos of your experience
- Alternatively, a paper booklet is available
FIT communities will:

- Learn about their assets and opportunities from first-time visitors.
- Strengthen an existing cohort of leaders and residents by providing them an opportunity to organize on the basis of valuable feedback about their community.
- Develop a list of action items for community improvement.
- Integrate action items into community plans.
- Take action on community improvements and strengthen their image.
- Improve community well-being and quality of life for residents and visitors.
First Impressions: Assessing your community for tourism (FIT)

Process:
1. Form a community leadership team (CLT) made up of local stakeholders and apply for FIT by visiting nsue.anr.msu.edu and downloading and filling out our application. (Search “First Impressions” first to download application)
2. MSU Extension educators will conduct a FIT orientation and outline next steps with the CLT.
3. A team of FIT visitors will then assess the host community unannounced.
4. The CLT organizes a community report forum (CRF), where MSU Extension educator/FIT assessor will share the assessment results and suggestions with the CLT and the community.
5. MSU Extension educator/FIT leader will provide a written report of results and suggestions to the CLT.
6. The CLT takes the lead in driving action within the host community based on FIT results.
7. MSU Extension conducts follow-up at a later date and offers further assistance.

INTERESTED IN FIT?

Things to know:
1. FIT is designed to meet needs and interests of each community that applies.
2. Applications are accepted and reviewed year round.
3. FIT is ideal for communities with 10,000 people or fewer. Special arrangements can be made for larger communities.
4. On average, the FIT process takes between four and six months per community.
5. Applications can be found by going to nsue.anr.msu.edu and searching “First Impressions” to download the FIT application.
2017 – 7 County Regional Partnerships
• 4 “FIT” Communities

FIT 2018 Updates/Additions:
1. Assess “entrepreneurial-friendliness”
2. Assess Coastal Communities
   • Water access, trails, harbors

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Who is involved...Tourism Specialist

- Organize assessment
- Communicate with destination leadership
- Assemble team(s)
- Plan and coordinate visit
- Orient assessment team(s)
- Collect manuals
- Develop report
- Present report
- Follow-up
Example *short-term* improvements:

- Local restaurant menus in each cabin
- Have begun a recycling program
- More trail signage
- Hosted a hospitality training
- Improvements in visual impact of entrance road

Example *long-term* improvements:

- More & diversified lodging options
- Continued website improvements. Mobile app
- Film sessions on restaurants, shopping, trails etc. for businesses to use during orientation programs
- Striving to make other areas “cool”
- Signage, signage, signage
Follow-up after report presentation

- Further engagement with Leadership
- Focus Groups
- Resident and Visitor Surveys
- Tourism Action Planning
- Hospitality Training
Thanks for Listening!

Additional Resources—
Webinars
http://cred.ext.wvu.edu/community-design/first_impressions/webinar-series

WVU CRED Tourism
http://cred.ext.wvu.edu/tourism

Wisconsin First Impressions
http://cced.ces.uwex.edu/2012/08/04/first- impressions-program-2/

Minnesota Tourism Assessment Program
http://www.extension.umn.edu/community/tourism-development/

Map@Syst
http://www.exgeospatial.org/

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