



A First Impression Look From a New Pair of Eyes

A Process to Identify Opportunities as Well as Things that Need Work

Over 30 years ago, the University of Wisconsin developed a community evaluation process that has been applied, copied, transformed, and delivered, countless times nationwide. The intent was to invite people unfamiliar with a community to take a thorough look around and deliver their first impression. Unfortunately, many of the efforts ended up just being critical and focused only on deficiencies, providing a very negative view of the future of tourism in many communities.

In reality, the First Impressions process is much more effective when it is turned on its head. Combined with a resource and asset inventory, the process can be employed to effectively identify opportunities, what is right, in addition to what is wrong. There are several ways in which the First Impressions process can be expanded and enhanced to serve as a very valuable tourism tool, with a focus on how the community can present itself as a tourism destination most attractive to visitors.

What should a different approach to First Impressions include? Spending time really exploring an area, more than just a quick one day, in and out. Experience shows the process can also be applied to a county or incorporate several communities instead of focusing on only one small town or rural community. Doing so requires driving the roads, observing the heritage and culture, visiting locations along the routes, eating in local restaurants, staying in local accommodations, browsing in local shops, and strolling around the streets of local towns, looking for what will excite and inspire visitors.

On the other hand, the First Impressions process can effectively be used as it was originally intended. To help communities learn about existing strengths and weaknesses through the eyes of the first-time visitor, to serve as the basis for action to shore up various aspects to deliver a better first impression. The process is also effective to identify places and sites that will benefit from placemaking to make them more attractive and useful to visitors without major infrastructural improvements that will be challenging to fund. Many approaches add attractiveness without a high price tag.

An effective First Impressions process also points out where visitors should not go, since many communities have at least one location that is unattractive and inappropriate for visitors to explore. And, perhaps there is a gateway route to the community that should be promoted over another less attractive route, until placemaking can be implemented to rectify the situation.

Arrival in the Area

After driving in on the route that most visitors arrive on for their first time, the individual reviewing the community must be willing to spend at least 3-4 days exploring the entire subject region. Even if all the results of the First Impressions process are not good, it's best to have them pointed out, so they can be dealt with as time and money permit to always be delivering improvements. This approach contributes to development of the best visitor experience possible from what already exists, while working on a plan to improve what needs work. Delivering both the positive and the negative enables tourism to move ahead without getting stuck on what's not there, and instead making the most of what the area does have.

An Expanded First Impressions Process

The information below is somewhat based on the University of Wisconsin First Impressions process, although enhanced and expanded to take into account present conditions and concerns, especially the electronic changes that have occurred since the original assessment was developed. The assessment suggested below is also confined to tourism issues, rather than attempting to evaluate the quality of housing, health care facilities and so on, which visitors considering becoming residents will certainly assess, but does not generally occur in tourism efforts.

Research Before the Visit

It is very important to engage in thorough research before arriving since the more prepared, the most useful the results will be. Begin by doing exactly what potential visitors do, Google the area. Record the initial list of results and determine if the “official” website of the location appears on the list (assuming there is one). Record up to ten of the other entries that come up in the search results and click into each to see what information about the community is offered. Look at what attractions are being featured and the attributes of the area that are being promoted.

In many instances there will be information about a location that is completely incorrect. A look into this situation along a long Byway in California revealed 48 websites with outdated information, mis-information, downright ugly images, incorrect details, and more. That collection had to gradually be worked through to present a better impression of the area online.

From there, move to the community’s tourism website, if one exists. Many smaller communities have only a city or municipality website with a smattering of tourism

information. If that is the case, record the attractions and other attributes they are promoting, in order to determine how they compare to reality. Moving on then to the community's tourism website, determine whether they have listed only a portion of the restaurants, accommodations, and attractions, likely limiting their promotion to only pay-to-play members. Even though this approach is very out of date, many DMMOs still operate in this mode. Print a list of the attractions on offer to compare it with the collection of attractions that actually exist.

Note if there is information that would have been helpful, but was not available online. If there is an electronic visitor guide available, print it and review it from end to end. If it is not available electronically, order a guide to determine how long it takes to arrive. Also, determine if there are pre-designed itineraries, trails, tours, and other offerings that facilitate a visit. Print all available brochures about the collection of offerings and any individual locations. And review the categories and quality of the available dining, accommodations, and shopping to prepare for a knowledgeable visit.

Then tackle the area's social media. Many communities are only on Facebook, although more with tourism offices are on several platforms, Instagram being the most popular beyond Facebook. Check the recency of the posts and what is being promoted. Check the level of intensity of the posts, for example, daily, three times a week, or weekly. Access the social media of major attractions to determine if they are marketing the area as well as their own facility. Check into the website of the Chamber of Commerce if there is a separate one, to determine if they are promoting tourism, what they are posting on their social media and do the same for Economic Development. Going into this level of detail will enable formation of a

well-rounded picture of what the community is presenting to the world. It is important to record impressions of the accuracy, usefulness, and credibility of the information discovered on the website, as well as the overall appearance. This approach will enable a comparison of the information on the website with the situation in the community and how realistically it is portrayed online.

Continue by contacting the tourism office. Send a message through the website form, if there is one, and see if it's answered. Call the office on the phone and if you only reach voice mail, leave a message. Record how long it takes for the call to be returned, if it is. If it isn't returned within a day or two, leave another message. When you do reach a person, record an impression of the helpfulness and friendliness of the staff. Ask a question about something in the visitor guide and sense whether the staff person knows the area well enough to provide a prompt answer.

It is also important to learn at least an overview of the history and heritage of the area, so the presentation of this material in the community can be evaluated.

What is the impression of the community revealed in all the collected material? What is expected to be seen and experienced on the ground? What does the online promotion want visitors to believe they will experience? Is it somewhere one would want to visit, have their family and friends visit? Does the community appear welcoming? Why or why not?

An itinerary for travel through the community should also be prepared in advance in order to travel a variety of roads. Include surrounding communities in the

itinerary and if the community is in a rural area tour enough of the surroundings to get a good flavor of the countryside.

10 Minute Impression

Upon arrival in the core community, enter the community through the designated route and take a 10-minute drive without stopping at any location. Pull over somewhere safe and write down the impression of the community on this first pass through. Does it coincide with the expectation of how it was going to look and feel? Does it look like what the website portrayed?

Community Entrances

Reverse course and approach the community from each of the major entrances, or if evaluating a larger area, each of the major approaches from the major highways. Take a photo of each entrance and if there are other entrances such as a train station, airport, or bike trail, take a photo of each of those entrances as well.

Central Downtown

It's important to take a first pass all the way through each central downtown to get a first impression, since that is exactly what visitors are going to see on their first pass through. Does the community appear unkempt? Conversely, is it freshly painted and clean? Are there trees? Sidewalks? Interesting looking shops? Unique locations not seen elsewhere?

Record an initial impression in as descriptive language as possible, so someone who has not visited will understand the description. Record impressions of the overall

appearance of the buildings, window displays, available signage, and the streetscape in general. Take photos of all of the areas that could benefit from placemaking efforts.

Overall Tourism

What are the particularly unique features in the community?

Is there a intelligible brand?

Does the brand on the website match the experience in the community?

Does the community appear to understand it is in the tourism and experience business?

What is the level of available attractions?

Are there additional locations that could be developed into tourism assets?

What is the overall appearance and quality of existing tourism attractions?

What is the availability, variety, and quality of overnight accommodations?

Are the accommodations located in convenient areas?

Are any accommodations convenient to or adjacent to downtown?

In any accommodations you interacted with, what was the level of front desk service experienced?

Are there any facilities to accommodate meetings, conferences, weddings and/or groups?

Is there nightlife and entertainment locations?

The Final First Impressions Report

As a part of what is reported:

List and describe the main community of focus, or if a county, a description of the county.

Articulate answers to all the above questions and record all impressions.

Describe other communities traveled through.

List all attractions visited and toured.

Review all accommodations stayed in and visited.

Describe all shops visited.

Review all restaurants dined in and visited.

Make recommendations that will enhance the visitor experience.

Point out all opportunities for increased tourism offerings.

A Delightful Impression of LaGrange County, Indiana

In fall of 2023, National Travel Center had the pleasure of doing a First Impressions visit to LaGrange, Indiana, staying in Shipshewana. Even though the County is 79% farmland, there are plenty of resources to generate more tourism offerings to increase the attractiveness of the County to additional visitor markets. Even though LaGrange County is third in Amish population it is the most “Amish” area in the United States with the Amish much more integrated into daily life than in other locations.

Maximizing the Value of the Agricultural Heritage

The upshot of the visit was that there was a tremendous opportunity to utilize the agricultural nature of the County, to develop a Agricultural Heritage Trail to bring economic development throughout the county and An Amish Barn Quilt Byway to feature the very authentic nature of the timeless Amish culture in the area. Further development of an outdoor recreation effort will depend on the availability of outfitters, guides and more, to increase the attractiveness of these experiences to visitors who will not bring their own boats or equipment, who also, on average spend more when they visit. All in all, a terrific win-win for a very serene place, where life is based on farming and the land.

