

Center for Community & Economic Development



First Impressions: A Program for Community Assessment & Improvement

The University of Wisconsin – Extension often helps communities assess community development opportunities and to develop strategies for community improvement. *First Impressions* was developed to provide an unbiased and unique perspective of the community prior to beginning any planning for the future. The program also offers a structured opportunity to learn about the strengths and weaknesses of other similar communities. The results from a First Impressions visit can serve as the basis for community action.

All communities have difficulties in viewing their surroundings as others see them (customers, visitors, potential residents, and potential businesses). Our views are skewed by over familiarization, lack of differing perspectives and expectations, and a reluctance to be completely honest with our neighbors when dealing with difficult issues (i.e. the appearance of buildings, customer service, and maintenance of public facilities).

This community improvement program, which emerged over fifteen years ago, was a compilation of ideas, experiences and thoughts of two people (Andy Lewis and James Schneider) who focused on improving the communities of Grant County Wisconsin. Since that time, it has been used by hundreds of communities as a tool for assessing the perceptions of visitors. Print materials for users of the program were updated in 2007.

How Does It Work?

Volunteers from two somewhat similar communities (size, location, county seat, etc.) agree to do unannounced exchange visits and then report on their findings. Participants become “secret shoppers” for the day to discover what they can about their sister city. They follow procedures and reporting guidelines in a fully developed “Exchange Team Members Guide Booklet”, which is copied for each participant. The guide helps insure that the evaluations and reports are thorough and somewhat uniform and minimize the training of volunteers.

Print materials for the program are available on the web for download along with additional resources (see: <http://www.uwex.edu/ces/cced/communities/firstimpressions/usersguide.cfm>).

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