

FIRST IMPRESSIONS: A TOOL FOR COMMUNITY ASSESSMENT & IMPROVEMENT

[Andrew Lewis](#), [Center for Community & Economic Development](#), [University of Wisconsin Extension](#)

The Challenge

Every local economic development practitioner wants his city to be as attractive and beautiful as possible, for the benefit of both his own citizens and others from the outside. The trouble is that the practitioners have seen their city every day for years, and they are not sure how the city looks to others from the outside or even to their neighbors. How can they get a fresh, more objective “eye” to help to see how their city really looks?

The First Impressions Tool

First Impressions is a tool to help communities learn about their existing strengths and weaknesses as seen through the eyes of the first time visitor. It applies the “secret shopper” concept capturing a visitor’s perspective of a community based on a short visit. The program also provides 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. The final report and photographs can also be used as a means of documenting change within the community over time. Communities often change slowly and that change often goes unrecognized by local residents. The final reports with images help communities take stock of that change.

Too often communities attempt to make improvements with little outside evaluation. This approach often overlooks real problems and opportunities. First Impressions is a simple and fun assessment tool that can be used to gain an accurate and honest picture of the present before a community moves on to plan its future. This is a peer learning tool that relies on teams of volunteers from two communities who evaluate each other. Years of success with this tool have shown that communities are more likely to accept and act on constructive criticism coming from their peers rather than so called “experts”.

This tool is particularly useful because just as a matter of human nature, all communities have difficulties in viewing their surroundings as others see them (customers, visitors, potential residents, and potential businesses). Views of residents are skewed by over-familiarization. They lack of differing perspectives and expectations, and there is a natural reluctance to be completely honest when dealing with difficult issues (i.e. the appearance of buildings, customer service, and maintenance of public facilities).

How Does the Tool Work?

Volunteers from two somewhat similar communities agree to do unannounced exchange visits and then present their findings with a final report with pictures. Results from the visit are typically shared with the host community at a community forum or “town meeting”.

Visiting team members become “secret shoppers” for the day to discover what they can about their sister city. They follow procedures and reporting guidelines developed in advance. The guidelines help insure that evaluations and reports are thorough and somewhat uniform. The guide booklet is used to record thoughts and observations and is a checklist divided into the following sections (See [Appendix A](#) for a sample section):

In general, the members of the visitation teams will prepare for their visit and will consider several categories of city characteristics during their time in the sister city. [Appendix B](#) to the tool sets forth a series of questions that can help a visiting team learn about the sister city’s characteristics. The questions concern the following information that a visiting team will want to learn about the sister city. As you read through these questions, you will get a good feeling for what cities should wish to be able to offer a visitor. Here are the categories of information that the team will gather:

- Information that can be obtained prior to your visit (requesting information ahead of time)
- The Five Minute Impression
- Community Entrances
- Housing and Residential Areas
- Education, Health, Social and Emergency Services
- Local Economy
- Government/Public Services
- Recreation, Faith, Culture and Heritage
- General Observations
- Information from Community Residents
- Wrap-up

Organizing the Tool:

Site Coordinator. In order to use the First Impression tool, there must be a person identified as the coordinator of the tool. This individual must be willing to organize the exchange with the sister city, gather the visitation team and coordinate their orientation and activities, and make sure the final report is compiled, delivered, and presented to the community by an agreed upon date.

Realistically, the time commitment for the site coordinator will be about four or five days. The site coordinator will need to:

- Recruit a “sister city” willing to do an exchange. It is better to sign a formal protocol or a letter of intension with the city officials to solidify a commitment to a time line for completing the exchange.
- Recruit a team of 5-6 community volunteers who are willing to conduct a community visit (suggestions on recruitment appear below).
- Develop or modify the Guide Booklet with a list of questions to be asked during the visit (See [Appendices A](#) and [B](#) for the samples).
- Provide an orientation meeting for visitation team members.
- Participate in the community visit.
- Collect comments and photos from team members, and compile the final report.
- Coordinate presentation of the visitation team’s findings to the sister community. Ideally, this could be done as a “Town Meeting” using a PowerPoint presentation with key photos and comments.
- Agree with community leaders on how to use the visitation report by the sister city team. For instance, the comments of the sister city visitation team might be evaluated in public meetings that will lead to action plans for bettering the community.

Selecting the exchange team volunteers: The site coordinator will need to recruit 5-6 people (or more) from the community who are willing to commit a day to conducting a community visit. They should plan to make the visit together as a group (car pool). It makes for a more enjoyable experience and helps to ensure a better end result. The coordinator should be clear about the expectations when recruiting volunteers:

- They will be asked to commit a day to conduct the visit. They should know where they will be going and the approximate time frame for completing the visit as a team.
- They will be expected to keep detailed notes in a guide provided to them. Their comments will be collected at the end of the day and will provide the content for the final report. At least two team members will need to bring a camera (preferably a digital camera).
- It should be clear about who will be responsible for providing transportation. If volunteers will be expected to pay for their own gas, meals and purchases, the coordinator should communicate this. Obviously, it would be easier to recruit volunteers if pocket expenses are covered, and perhaps the community will be able to meet these expenses. Alternatively, a community sponsor can be found, and a small amount of cash for shopping to facilitate the visitation of businesses might be provided.
- It is good to try for as much diversity in the visitation team as possible. The coordinator should work for a mix in terms of the typical diversity issues: age,

MUNICIPAL ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT TOOL KIT

occupation, sex, income, and the number of years as a community resident. A youth member should be included if at all possible.

Orientation Meeting before Visit: The volunteer visitation team members will need to participate in a brief orientation session prior to their visit. At this meeting, the site coordinator should hand out the Guide Booklet to each team member and review the Guide Booklet with all members of the team. The site coordinator should also go over the list of sights to visit and questions to be asked (see [Appendix B](#) for questions that might be asked). Different team members will be assigned different places to look at. These could be, for example, City Hall, downtown, residential buildings, shopping places or factories. The whole team should also review any materials received from the sister community during the site coordinator's discussions with the sister city, and should ask any related questions. In addition the site coordinator should provide the visitation team with an overview of how the visit will be conducted, and clarify who will be requesting information from the community ahead of time, who will be compiling the final report (this is likely to be the site coordinator), and who will be making a public presentation of the report to the community visited. Also, the site coordinator will provide instructions on how team members are to record their thoughts and observations in the Guide Booklet (see Appendix A for an example of the forms team members should fill out). There should also be a decision about who will be taking pictures during the visit, and multiple cameras are of course better.

Finally, at this orientation meeting, team members will also be given pre-assigned roles that they will be playing as a means of explaining their visit to people they interact with. Roles might include: a person trying to locate property in the area, a person interviewing for a job in a neighboring community, or someone just traveling through that decided to explore the community (i.e. "looking for a reason to vacation here next summer"). This play-acting is needed to insure that visitors are not treated any differently than the real individuals coming to the community. The roles will determine some of the places visited and questions asked. The questions might include:

- I'm on my way to a conference and have never been here before. What is there to do for recreation?
- Are there any good restaurants in this town? Where would be a good place for lunch?
- I might bring my family here on our way to a wedding next month. Are there any good places to stay?
- I am considering moving to this area. Are the schools good here? Where is the best place to look for housing?
- Where can I get information on commercial space to buy or lease in this community?

The Visit: The visit itself is usually straightforward. The visitation team typically arrives in the exchange community in the morning. Team members divide up into pairs and take turns driving and walking within the community. Team members will need to ask questions, so they need to be sociable and cannot be shy. While visits are typically conducted in a day, some communities choose to include an overnight visit. This tool, however, is not intended to produce an exhaustive evaluation of the community but rather the evaluation of an outsider, who may be just driving through or spending a short amount of time in the community.

The Follow-up: Performing the First Impressions visits and exchanging reports with the sister community is the correct first step. But without more, the First Impressions tool will have little impact. Follow-up, where the results of the report are shared with the broader community, is required. While there are numerous ways to do this, communities seem to have good success with sharing results at “town meetings.” This typically means sharing what the visitation team saw as well as the impressions of the visiting team. This can be done as a presentation with images that illustrate observations made in the final report.

After the community is familiar with the report, it is desirable to carry out some type of action planning – getting groups of individuals to commit some time to address specific issues raised in the report. This is best handled by obtaining the commitment of local officials and other community leaders from the very outset of planning the First Impression exercise. Involvement of the local media is also an excellent way to motivate good actions as a result of the report.

Further Resources:

All print materials as well as additional resources and materials related to the First Impressions program (in English) can be found on the web at:

<http://www.uwex.edu/ces/cced/communities/firstimpressions/index.cfm>

The web site includes some short videos and a sample PowerPoint presentation providing an overview of the program.

The author encourages users of the First Impression program to share their comments or experiences, please forward them to him. He would also ask that you send him copies of any final reports should you choose to use this instrument. All final reports will be posted in a section of the Center for Community and Economic Development web site at: <http://www.uwex.edu/ces/cced/communities/firstimpressions/index.cfm>

Appendix A
Sample Section of the Guide Booklet¹

Community Entrances

Approach the community from the major entrances. Rate and comment on each entrance. While there may be an obvious main entrance to the community there are typically multiple ways to enter the community. In some communities there are entrances for other modes of transportation. Comment on other community entry points like airports, bike trails, water access (boat landings), and train stations (page 11).

ENTRANCE #1 (Road name and direction):

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Poor	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	Excellent

Observations:

¹ For a copy of the complete guide, see:
<http://www.uwex.edu/ces/cced/communities/firstimpressions/usersguide.cfm>

Appendix B

Questions for the Guide Booklet

- **Prior to your visit (requesting information ahead of time)**

- If you were thinking about moving to a new community, visiting a community as a tourist, or doing business in that community, what would you likely do before visiting? Request information from the appropriate organizations prior to your visit through a direct mail request, phone call and web search. You might want to consider calling the village/city hall, the Chamber of Commerce, Economic Development Corporation, as well as some of the state agencies that should be able to provide contact information.
- How easy was it to get information by mail and telephone about the community you are visiting? Are you satisfied with the quality of information received? Did the information arrive in a timely fashion? Please comment on the community's online web materials and information. Could you find information on this community on state and regional tourism web sites? What is your impression of the community before your upcoming visit? What are you expecting to see? Please comment on what you know about this community.

- **The Five Minute Impression**

After taking a five-minute drive through the community without stopping, what was your first impression? As you exit the community, pull over to the side of the road and write down what you felt about the community based on this quick drive through. For larger communities, this may take more time.

- **Community Entrances**

Approach the community from the major entrances. Comment on each entrance. While there may be an obvious main entrance to the community there are typically multiple ways to enter the community. In some communities there are entrances for other modes of transportation. Comment on other community entry points like airports, bike trails, water access (boat landings), and train stations

- **Housing and Residential Areas**

- Drive through as many neighborhoods as possible, including the Downtown. How would you rate the overall **quality**, **affordability**, and **availability** of housing in the community? You may consider separately Existing/Older Homes; New Homes; Housing for Seniors; Apartments/Rental Housing; Vacant lots for new homes.

- What are the most appealing and least appealing features of the housing in this community for different population sub-groups (e.g., Single Young Adults; Senior Citizen; Young Families; Upscale/ Professional; Middle Income)? Please comment on the quality and availability of residential infrastructure (e.g., roads, sidewalks, lighting, public transportation, bike trails/lanes, and green space, street trees, yards).
- **Education, Health, Social and Emergency Services**
 - Comment on the availability and appearance of schools and universities. What do residents (young and old) think about the quality and availability of their local schools? Overall, how would you rate the adequacy of schools for a community of this size?
 - Comment on the availability and apparent quality of healthcare facilities. Overall, how would you rate the adequacy of health care services for a community of this size?
 - What social services (e.g., day care, senior center, counseling, etc.) are available in the community? Overall, how would you rate the level of social services for a community of this size?
 - Are there a variety of not-for-profit organizations and clubs within the community?
 - Overall, how would you rate the police, fire, ambulance, and emergency medical service facilities? How do local residents feel about these services?
- **Local Economy**
 - What is your impression of the health of the local economy?
 - **Downtown:** Explore and visit as many businesses as possible. Could you locate the downtown easily? If not, why did you have difficulty finding it? Comment on the overall appearance of the downtown (buildings, displays, signage, streetscape). Comment on the customer service you received in the downtown. Comment on the window displays in the downtown. Comment on the mix of facilities and services in the downtown (housing, professional services, retail, recreation, accommodation and food, industry, parks, etc.). Comment on the quality and availability of parking in the downtown. Comment on the quality (appearance, adequacy, etc.) of lighting in the downtown. Does the downtown play a role in tourism? Is there potential for the downtown to play a greater role? Describe the residential housing mix in the downtown (apartment, single detached). Would you find the downtown to be a desirable place to live? Please comment. Were there any government or nonprofit organization activities that are serving as traffic generators for the downtown (city hall, post office, stadium)?

- **General Information About Overall Retail:** Describe the mix of retail shopping available (malls, specialty shops, strip malls, big box stores). What retail goods do local residents appear to need to travel to surrounding communities for? What stores or services were missing that you would expect to find? What retail stores or services did you find that were unusual or unexpected for a town of this size? What store(s) in this community would you travel a distance of more than 30 miles to patronize? If applicable, explore other retail shopping areas outside of the downtown business district and visit as many businesses as possible.
- **Local Industries:** Consider industries only within or adjacent to the community. What are the major industrial sectors in the community (e.g., manufacturing, construction, transportation)? Who do you think are the major employers in the community? What are the major types of manufacturing in the community? What are the major types of primary industry in the community (e.g. agriculture, mining, forestry or fishing)? Is the community noticeably dependent on any one type of industry? If so please comment. Is there a well defined industrial park or improved land where industries could locate or expand? Are the industrial facilities well maintained? Would this community be an attractive location for industrial development? Why or why not?
- **Commercial Services:** What types of commercial businesses serve the local community (high-speed internet provider, print shops, etc.)? What commercial services appear to be missing in the community?
- **Professional Services:** Are banks and ATMs conveniently located? Do the banks have convenient hours of service? How would you rate the adequacy of financial services for a community of this size? What other professional services are available (accounting, insurance, legal, etc.)? Are there any apparent gaps?
- **Tourism:** Does the community have a strong tourism sector? Does the community have a slogan/brand? Is the community well known for an attraction or event? What have you seen that could be developed into a tourist attraction (natural or man-made)? Comment on the quality and appearance of existing tourist attractions. Do you consider any of the attractions to be underdeveloped? Are there any community events that could be expanded/ developed to be a tourist attraction? Comment on the availability and selection of overnight accommodations in the community (hotels, motels, campgrounds). Are there facilities to accommodate a conference and/or a large number of visitors? Is there a Visitor's Center, Chamber of Commerce office, or other facility serving the needs of tourists? Please comment on staff, facilities, signage, marketing material, maps, etc. Comment on the quality of restaurants. What do local residents recommend on where to stay, eat, and visit? What local restaurant, specialty shop or attraction would bring you back to this community in the near future?

- **Government/Public Services**

- **Local Government Information:** Are municipal offices conveniently located? How would you rate the availability and quality of the information provided by the municipal government (brochure/guide, business directory, community profile (including business and industrial sites))? If applicable, were you able to find adequate information to make informed retail, commercial and/or industrial business investment decisions? How would you rate the helpfulness of government employees?
- **Public Infrastructure:** Comment on each of the following for quality, accessibility, or availability where relevant: public transportation, sidewalks, streets, landscaping, street trees, public restrooms, street signage, pay phones, drinking fountains, benches, public Internet access points, etc.
- **Planning:** Do you see conflicting land uses in the community (e.g., a residential subdivision next to a pulp mill)? Are all land uses appropriate (commercial, residential, green space etc.)? Specify where land uses are not appropriate. Did you experience traffic congestion anywhere? Are community facilities and infrastructure generally accessible for people with disabilities? Does the community appear to be pedestrian/bike friendly?

- **Recreation, Faith, Culture and Heritage**

- **Recreation:** Comment on the availability & appearance of the recreational facilities such as parks, playgrounds, beaches, amusement parks, museums, etc. Based on your impression, what do people in this community appear to do for recreation/fun?
- What recreational facility (private or public) in this community surprised you? What recreational activities or facilities seemed to be missing? Rate the overall suitability of the recreational facilities for each of the following populations: senior citizens, families, singles, young adults, teens, children (12 and under). What does the community do for entertainment? What entertainment opportunities do residents feel they lack? Does the community have a vibrant nightlife?
- **Faith/Religion:** Comment on the number, appearance, and selection of denominations in the community. Are there any outstanding architectural or design features found on the religious buildings you visited?
- **Culture and Heritage:** Does the community hold any events (festivals)? Which events are held annually? What events are popular with residents? Do the residents feel there is a lack of community events? Does the community have historical buildings or places? Are they well maintained?

- **General Observations**

- Would you consider this community as a suitable location for a young family? Why or why not?
- Would you consider locating your retail or service business here? Why or why not?
- Would you consider locating a manufacturing business here? Why or why not?
- Would you consider this a suitable location for a retired person? Why or why not?
- Would you consider this a suitable location for a young adult? Why or why not?
- Would you consider visiting this community as a tourist? Why or why not?

- **Information from Community Residents**

- Comment on the quality of information and assistance provided by residents and employees of local businesses. Were community residents knowledgeable about their community? Did they refer you to someone else who would help? In general, did residents you spoke with have a positive or negative attitude toward their community? Why? Did you sense community pride? Did residents identify a particular issue (e.g. safety) to be of major concern?
- **Using Your Senses:** What did the community taste like? Was there any specialty food item, bakery, restaurant, or candy store that you will remember? What did the community smell like? Was there any offensive industrial, agricultural, or sewage smells? What about pleasant odors (flowers, food, etc.)? What sounds did you hear? Please comment on the level of noise in the community (traffic, industrial, birds singing, water falls, music on the streets, trains, noon whistle, etc.). How would describe the overall environmental health of the community (air quality, litter, noise, pollution, etc.)? Did you experience anything that had a strongly negative or positive impact on the way the community felt to you (hateful or angry responses, crowded or deserted streets, safety issues, smiling faces, etc.)? Do you think your impression would be different if your visit occurred during evening hours?

- **Wrap-up**

The following questions are to be answered by all team members:

Was your perception prior to the visit accurate? In what ways was the community different from what you expected? Did the information you collected prior to the visit

MUNICIPAL ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT TOOL KIT

accurately reflect what you observed/ experienced? What is the most outstanding feature of this community? List five positive things you observed about this community. What are three potential opportunities available to the community? What are the five biggest obstacles/challenges facing this community? What will you remember most about this community six months from now (positive or negative)? What have you learned here that has changed your impression of your own community? Has this experience given you any new ideas about what is needed in your own community? Describe *one* idea that you will borrow for use in your own business/community and describe how you will start to implement it within the next 72 hours!