A program for community assessment & improvement

The University of Wisconsin-Extension often helps communities assess community development opportunities and develop strategies for community improvement. The First Impressions program helps communities learn about existing strengths and weaknesses through the eyes of the first-time visitor and provides a structured opportunity to learn about strengths and weaknesses of similar communities. The results from a First Impressions visit can serve as the basis for community action and as a way to document changes in the community over time.

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

How does it work?

Volunteers from two somewhat similar communities in terms of size, location, and county seat, etc., agree to do unannounced visits and then report on their findings. Participants become “secret shoppers” for the day to discover what they can about a similar community or neighborhood. Participants follow procedures and document their visit using a participant guide or an online version of the guide to upload photos and comments. The guide, which ensures that evaluations and reports are thorough and uniform, requires minimal training.

First developed by Andy Lewis and James Schneider in 1991, First Impressions has gone through several revisions that integrate questions about timely and relevant emerging issues that communities face. The communities of Fennimore, Wisconsin and Bellevue, Iowa first piloted the program on April 15, 1991. Since that time, hundreds of communities across the U.S. and Canada have found value in the program.
What's new in First Impressions?

The questions you like, more adaptable for your community needs. Visit teams often find the reflection questions at the beginning and end of the booklet to be the most valuable. None of these questions have changed.

Clearer and more consistent wording of questions and a revised table of contents that makes it easier for participants to locate topics during their visit.

A new “grading” system for questions that eliminates the numeric rating system and encourages participants to grade based on their expectations and provide more valuable supplemental comments.

More ways to access First Impressions materials.

- Communities can access the 8 ½- x 11-inch paper version of Community First Impressions (G4040-01) at no cost and at any time by downloading a PDF directly from the Learning Store.
- Booklet-sized printed versions of Community First Impressions may be ordered from the Learning Store for a small per-unit charge.
- The online version is created on request. Inquire with the UW-Extension Center for Community & Economic Development.
- Supplemental training and orientation materials—including the coordinator manual, PowerPoint slides, and online videos—are also available on request.

A supplemental, mobile-device friendly online version of the survey allows participants to enter observations, photos, and photo descriptions using either the paper tool or their smart phone or tablet. Visit coordinators can use the online survey tool to easily compile their report. To obtain a survey link for your community, contact the UW-Extension Center for Community & Economic Development.

A new version designed for neighborhoods and small communities. Neighborhood First Impressions (G4040-02) is a simplified version of the original, for very small places or urban neighborhoods.

New sections that specifically address downtowns, retail, and tourism ideal for use with Downtown or Main Street organizations. These sections are not included in the neighborhood version.

More questions about timely, relevant issues, including changing demographics (an aging population, changing racial/ethnic demographics, and a focus on retaining young people), health and physical activity, sustainability and adaptation to climate change, and access to technology infrastructure. Overall, you’ll find more focus on questions to encourage community discussion about diversity and inclusion.

Here are some examples of new questions you’ll find in this version:

Sustainability

Grade and comment on the quality of the natural environment in the downtown (trees, flower plantings, pocket parks, green spaces, etc.).

Grade and comment on the visibility and availability of emergency shelters available to the public to accommodate residents in the event of a heat wave, flood, or other disaster.

Health and physical activity

Grade and comment on the variety and quality of retail food outlets. Are healthy food options available?

Grade and comment on the visibility and availability of private or public fitness centers or facilities for physical recreation.

Diversity and inclusion

Does the community appear welcoming to people of all races and ethnicities, abilities, religions, sexual orientation, and marital statuses? Why or why not?

Technology

Grade and comment on the adequacy and availability of high-speed internet services in this community.