

The Community Exchange - First Impressions

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If we have ever had the chance to speak, or if you have heard me do a presentation, then you know I prefer not to be identified as a consultant. Consultants seem to have a reputation for writing reports that either tell you what you want to hear, or what you already know. Our team doesn't do that. We insist on helping you face up to some hard truths and prepare to make real changes that will help your community turn the corner. I suppose that is why we are so often referred to as community therapists. That seems a lot more appropriate to our style and goal.

I am about to do something else that will demonstrate that we aren't consultants...at least not in the typical sense. I'm going to tell you about a valuable tool that will save you a lot of money, because you won't need to hire a consultant to do the work for you. The program is called First Impressions. It started in Wisconsin several years ago and it has now been adopted across Canada and the United States, but it remains a very well-kept secret. Now you could call us and have us do a First Impressions evaluation of your community, or you can access this program in your jurisdiction and get started on your own.

The program involves being paired with another community that is like yours in many ways. The exchange takes place when visitors from each community visit the other unannounced, and evaluate the impression the community makes on the outside visitors. The evaluation can focus on beauty, business, infrastructure, housing, recreation, and anything else you wish to have evaluated. Then a presentation is made where each group of visitors explains what their impressions of the other community were.

It is important to note that you don't want to be paired with a community too close to your own, or the presentation and feedback are instantly written off as simply jealous criticisms from a rival community. People are people and always will be. The truth is often hard to take, especially from neighbours, friends or rivals. It is often easier if the evaluation and presentation come from someone who isn't local, or even from the region. That is why we often still get called to do such an evaluation.

The greatest value of such a program is that it shows you things about your community that you don't see anymore. When we see the same thing over and over for years on end, we actually begin to not see it anymore. Please don't presume they are all bad things either. I know that your thoughts are probably drifting to that abandoned lot, or that run-down and ratty-looking building on the main street, but normally, you don't actually see them anymore. It is often the case that we don't see the good things after a while either. That is because we start to take them for granted, and begin to lose appreciation for what we have.

I know one community that has a beautiful man-made lake right in the middle of it, with a beautiful fountain in the center. Surrounding it are paved walking trails that run through a park-like setting, with grand trees and colorful flowerbeds. I hear a lot of strangers comment about how beautiful it is when they drive through the community. When I bring it up with locals, I often get a slightly confused expression followed by the remark, "The lake?...Oh, right! That one." They honestly don't see it anymore, but outsiders do.

The opportunity to bring in outsiders to have a look at your community will mean they will see the bad side of your community. You may be shy and embarrassed by that, and be reluctant to partner as a result. No one wants their darker underside exposed. However, they will also see the great things about your community that you might not even see anymore, and that can help you identify what makes you unique, remarkable-and marketable. It's a great chance to have outside eyes help you assess your strengths and weaknesses, and if you are trying to make your community better, that is one of the best places to start.

We highly recommend checking for a First Impressions Exchange program in your region and signing yourself up. If there isn't one, perhaps you can encourage one to begin. It is a very economical way to evaluate where your community is at, and will help you figure out where you need to go.

This syndicated content is provided by Doug Griffiths, best-selling author and chief community builder at 13 Ways, a company with a mission to push communities to face their challenges to find their unique path to success. For more information visit www.13ways.ca, or we can start the conversation at info@13ways.ca.