

# The First Impressions Exercise

*"You don't get a second chance at a first impression"*

## **Preamble**

Communities and their residents often have difficulty in developing an objective assessment of their strengths, limitations and opportunities, due to over familiarisation, fear of offending someone and the diversity of local perspectives.

The First Impressions Exercise provides a simple and inexpensive mechanism to gain valuable feedback and insights from a neutral source with no local vested interests. It is a simple tool to provide feedback to a community from a "first time" visitor.

## **The Process**

The First Impressions Exercise involves the following steps:

1. Towns or cities opt to participate in the program.
2. ATCM pairs up two towns or cities, who will each visit their 'partner' location and complete the ATCM survey form recording their observations and impressions. Ideally two or more representatives will visit the partner location.
3. Each team then compiles a short report based on their findings and sends it to the town or city they visited, as well as to the ATCM. There is a sample report available for download on the ATCM website.
4. The feedback is shared with the partnership and stakeholders of the visited town or city.

Teams may also opt to meet face to face and share their observations with each other.

## **Survey Components**

We have expanded the First Impression section of the ATCM Healthcheck. The survey exercise has five sections, namely:

- an initial impressions section
- a 'drive about' section
- a walking tour section
- an actor role section with each team member assuming one of the following roles; a tourist visitor, a potential resident/retiree and a potential business operator
- an overall impressions section

## **Process Tips**

1. Visit teams should have some diversity in their make up in terms of age, gender, occupation, background etc.
2. Each team should get together before the visit and go over the process and survey form and agree on times/dates etc.
3. Visit teams should preferably travel to the visited community in one vehicle in order to maximise discussion.

4. Except on the initial drive through the town, the visiting team members should avoid walking around as a noticeable group and should try to avoid being detected as 'researchers', e.g. do not use clipboards or similar.
5. Visit team members should try to find as many opportunities as possible to examine local services/facilities and services. To this extent they should buy goods, have lunch, buy a local paper etc.
6. If possible, the visit team should use a camera to record the features of suggestions.
7. It is important for the visit team to focus on both the positives as well as the negatives (we all like to hear what we are doing right!).
8. Make the visits FUN!
9. It is important to take as many notes as possible (without appearing conspicuous). It helps when compiling the team report.
10. The visit team should interact with as many locals as possible, e.g. ask for directions or ask for their thoughts, suggestions and impressions.
11. The team report that is submitted to the visited community should:
  - be put together straight after the visit, while the memories are still clear and focussed, preferably by the next day.
  - avoid yes/no answers - use descriptions, give actual examples and make as many suggestions as possible.
  - include any differences of opinion between visit team members.
  - be typed into a presentable format with an explanatory letter.
12. Always remember that the exercise is about impressions - it is not about right and wrong. Impressions may vary even among the visit team and that is fine!

## Impressions Survey Form

### a) Initial Impressions Section

1. As you drive towards your "visit locations" what are your expectations of that location?
2. Upon arrival what are your initial impressions? They may relate to impact, town entrance statements, signage, general appearance, what stood out etc.
3. Drive through the town and park at the other end of town. Record your thoughts on such things as overall appearance, streetscape, signage etc.

### b) 'Drive About' Section

Spend some time driving around the town and record impressions (both positive and negative) in regards to:

1. Town gateways  
e.g. signage, quality and quantity of commercial advertising, billboards, logos, beautification efforts - hanging baskets, roundabouts.
2. Main shopping area appearance  
e.g. condition of the buildings, heritage themes, enhancement, degree of empty buildings, sense of pride and place and signage.
3. Industrial area appearance  
e.g. layout, degree of activity, signage, directions, beautification, location and accessibility.

### c) Walking Tour Section

Wander individually around the town and comment on the following:

1. Physical state of businesses  
e.g. physical condition, window displays, merchandising, physical welcoming and nature of business.
2. Range and diversity of businesses  
e.g. amount of product, service range and apparent gaps.
3. The people factor  
e.g. friendliness, helpfulness, knowledge of local facilities, services and other businesses, smiles, welcome and customer service.

4. Community information

e.g. information boards, brochures and maps.

5. Public toilets and other facilities

e.g. condition of, location and range of toilets, post boxes, telephones and water fountains.

6. Parking

e.g. location and array.

d) Actor Section

Each visit team member assumes one of the following roles and records impressions while 'in character':

1. Tourist/visitor

Comment on such things as knowledge and attitude of locals towards tourist attractions and services, tourist information, range and appeal of attractions, opening hours, costs, etc.

2. Potential resident/retiree

Comment on issues that would be of influence if you were looking to re-settle or retire in the town, e.g. housing availability, recreation opportunities, community facilities, impressions of local education and services, welcome activities and aged services.

3. Potential Business Operator

Comment on issues related to purchasing or establishing a business in town based on comments of other operators, customers and people, e.g. perceptions of the positives and negatives of doing business in town, local loyalty, business networking, opportunity gaps, local chamber of commerce, access to supplies and labour hire issues.

e) Overall Feelings

At the end of your visit, record your impressions/comments in regard to the following:

1. Overall "gut feeling" about the community

2. List the six most positive features you observed in the community

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.
- 6.

3. Describe one or two ideas that you feel you could use in your own location.

4. What do you consider the key area that the community needs to give attention to?
5. What aspect of the community made the greatest impact on you (positive or negative)?
6. Any final comment(s) you would like to record.