



THE POWER OF A FIRST LOOK: INSIGHTS FROM KENTUCKY'S FIRST IMPRESSIONS PROGRAM

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IMPACT OF TOURISM IN KENTUCKY

Tourism continues to be a vital and growing sector of Kentucky's economy, bringing substantial benefits to communities across the state. According to a 2024 study completed by Tourism Economics for the Kentucky Department of Tourism, visitor spending reached \$9.7 billion in 2023, fueling a total economic impact of \$13.8 billion. This impact sustained 95,222 jobs and generated \$1.0 billion in state and local tax revenues. Notably, 63.8% of visitors were making day trips, indicating a strong interest in local attractions that contribute to regional economies. These figures reflect a steady increase in tourism within the state, with the total economic impact of tourism at \$12.9 billion in 2022, from the 2023 report compiled by Tourism Economics. These numbers represent the importance of continued investment in Kentucky's tourism assets—from natural landscapes and community events to historic sites and culinary experiences. As tourism grows, it not only boosts economic output but also strengthens community identity and quality of life across the Commonwealth.

OVERVIEW OF THE PROGRAM

First Impressions was originally developed at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and was adapted for use by Blueprint Kentucky. The program coordinates anonymous visits to partner communities

Image above from Breckinridge County First Impressions Report, 2017

by professionals in community and economic development, small business owners, community leaders and more. A notable modification in Kentucky's First Impressions approach includes visits conducted by financially compensated trained assessors, rather than the peer-exchange structure utilized in Wisconsin. These visitors document their experiences and interactions, and Blueprint Kentucky uses their feedback to formulate recommendations for the communities.

The initial Kentucky-based First Impressions assessment was conducted in Lyon County in 2016. Since then, the program has trained numerous community assessors and has assessed 32 counties. This article discusses the top three most common categories of recommendations and examples of strategies for addressing them.

ASSESSMENT METHODOLOGY

First Impressions visitors were trained to examine both the design and content they find online about the communities; visit state, county, and city websites, as well as look at other online sources (such as Wikipedia, Yelp, TripAdvisor, etc.); utilize social media as a tool to learn more about the community; and use information they find online to plan their day trip to the county. The volunteers were also asked to drive through each community's downtown space to examine the presence (or absence) of vibrant businesses, well utilized community services/resources, safe sidewalks, public art, etc.

Data for First Impressions was collected using two visitor surveys: one focused on the visitors' perceptions of web presence of the identified community including official websites, social media, and review websites (e.g., Yelp). The second survey assessed the actual experiences the visitors had while in the community including their assessment of the local business ecosystems, community entrances, tourism efforts, livability and public services, public infrastructure, as well as arts, culture, and heritage endeavors.

Following analysis and synthesis of visitors' responses to the two feedback surveys, Blueprint Kentucky convened community forums to present the findings back to the communities, with specific focus on recommendations and strategies for addressing visitor observations. Task groups were then formed to act on the recommendations.

Image below from McCreary County First Impressions Report, 2022





Image above from Bullitt County First Impressions Report, 2017

ASSESSMENT FINDINGS

Web Presence

Of the 32 Kentucky communities assessed, 22 received a recommendation to enhance their web presence. Specifically, the communities were encouraged to assess and identify improvement opportunities for their public-facing web presence. In many communities, websites are run by volunteers or by individuals who have a limited amount of time to dedicate to website upkeep. While some of these websites are intended for locals, they are often the first search hit for visitors. Trained reviewers' observations of the web presence of the communities assessed include:

"They are proud of their county--its people and history. They are focused on providing for the citizens and taking care of those in need as evidenced by the Flood Victim Relief information."

"Lots of great information - maybe too dense in places."

"Needs updating, I think some information is outdated."

Blueprint Kentucky also offered the communities strategies for implementing the recommendation. For example, communities were encouraged to assess (or audit) current community focused websites for broken links, outdated information, etc., and address those issues with updated information and links. Blueprint Kentucky encouraged communities to embrace the power of social media by implementing a #hashtag campaign or providing social media training to local businesses and organizations.

Perhaps the most significant aspect of recommendations targeting improvements in web presence is the opportunity for communities to harness the power of online reviews. In many of the participating counties, most local businesses were not listed on popular review websites (TripAdvisor, Yelp, or Google Reviews) and if they were, there were very few reviews. Usually, a lack of listings causes visitors to draw the conclusion that there are not things to do in the community.

Revitalize, Re-engage with, or Invest in Downtown Spaces

A third of the assessed communities (34%) received recommendations to either revitalize, re-engage with, or begin investing in downtown spaces. First Impressions visitors reported seeing unwelcoming spaces downtown in these communities.

"Downtown is very worn down. It is not active and has a deserted feel to it."

"Downtown had some quaint, cute homes but many were in disrepair."

"Coming into downtown, we did notice lack of a couple city street signs, which made it difficult to find the Main Street."

Blueprint Kentucky provided the communities with simple and practical strategies for revitalizing (or giving new life) to their communities including hosting volunteer led community clean ups, power washing awnings, or refreshing landscaping with the help of a local high school. These strategies involve community members in beautifying their common spaces and are likely to create buy-in and shared responsibility of spaces. Moreover, revitalizing, re-engaging, or investing in downtown spaces may be opportunities for community organizations, especially those focused on community development, tourism, historic preservation, or volunteerism, to work collaboratively to improve the community, which can enhance their impact and connectivity, all of which are important indicators of community social capital.

Image below from Hickman County First Impressions Report, 2019





Image above from Casey County First Impressions Report, 2017

Developing a Community Brand

About 30% of the assessed communities received a recommendation to develop a community brand. This recommendation was given when visitors observed that based on what they had seen while visiting, that they had little to no understanding of what the community stood for, found valuable, or celebrated.

"Visitors felt that some strategic marketing highlighting the unique retail could draw more visitors in to experience what the county has to offer."

"All reviewers noted there are still several opportunities for more public art to make downtown a vibrant, creative place."

"They suggested murals, banners, or landscaping as an opportunity to spruce up the area."

With regards to strategies for implementing this recommendation, Blueprint Kentucky encouraged communities to involve community volunteers in identifying a community brand and identity. In Kentucky communities, tourism and engagement efforts are often run by volunteers, people who are passionate about their place and want to share that passion with others. Usually, these volunteers have firsthand knowledge of the identity of the place, but may find it difficult to communicate that identity, or brand, to visitors. Blueprint Kentucky shared some first steps to identifying the aspects of a community brand such as hosting a focus group or visioning session where community members can discuss how they see their community and what makes it special or partnering with a local school or youth organization to host a contest to see how youth would market and trademark their town.

Community identity or brands can improve the overall perception of a community and promote the unique aspects of said community while also supporting local people, businesses, and organizations. Establishing an identity helps a community clearly define who they are and what they stand for; distinguish the community from other communities or build on similarities to support a region; rally residents around a shared vision, encouraging collaboration, volunteering, and active participation in community initiatives; attract tourists by promoting local attractions, culture, and events; and attract investment from businesses looking for vibrant, thriving communities where they can establish themselves.

Marketing a community through branding is one way to support local businesses and organizations. Developing a community brand is a strategic investment in the future, providing a clear and compelling way to communicate the community's attributes, values, and aspirations while also promoting community pride among residents.

FINAL THOUGHTS

The First Impressions program has proven to be a valuable tool for communities across Kentucky, offering a fresh perspective on how they are perceived by outsiders. Over eight years and 32 counties, the program has identified key areas where communities can improve—most notably by enhancing their web presence, revitalizing downtown spaces, and developing a cohesive community brand.

These findings underscore the importance of continuous evaluation and adaptation. Communities that take the time to audit their web presence, invest in their physical spaces, and craft a strong identity are more likely to attract visitors, businesses, and residents. Moreover, these efforts contribute to a sense of pride and ownership among community members, fostering more vibrant economies and engaged communities.

The insights provided by the First Impressions program not only highlight areas of improvement but also offer practical, actionable recommendations and strategies for implementing them. Whether it's updating a website, organizing a downtown cleanup, or hosting a focus group to gain public input on a community brand, these steps can lead to significant, positive changes that benefit both current residents and future visitors.

In conclusion, the First Impressions program suggests that even small, thoughtful efforts may contribute to a community's development. By embracing the feedback and recommendations provided, communities can enhance their appeal, preserve their unique character, and build a foundation for long-term success.

Interested in hosting First Impressions assessors in your community?

Contact Mercedes Fraser, Blueprint Kentucky Extension Specialist, to learn more:
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