

Resort Impressions

Program for the Tourism Industry



Report from Burnett & Washburn Counties

Adapted from Andy Lewis's First Impressions Program by:

Beverly Stencel, Associate Professor, University of Wisconsin Extension

John Preissing, Associate Professor, University of Wisconsin Extension

**FIRST IMPRESSIONS PROGRAM
FOR THE TOURISM INDUSTRY
Report from Burnett and Washburn Counties**

**John Preissing, Community Resource Development Agent
UW-Extension, Burnett County
and
Beverly Stencel, Community Resource Development Agent
UW-Extension, Washburn County**

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I. INTRODUCTION TO THE PROJECT

In the Fall of 1996, tourism organizations from Burnett County and Washburn County participated in an exchange program designed to learn about the existing strengths and weaknesses of the resort community, as seen through the eyes of the first time visitor. This report summarizes the observations from the visits.

The First Impressions program has been used by communities and the University of Wisconsin Extension throughout Wisconsin. Typically, leaders from two villages or cities of comparable size have participated in these efforts. The Burnett County and Washburn County Community Resource Development Agents, in conjunction with their tourism organizations, decided to take this approach one further step and adapt it for tourism destinations.

First Impressions participants use a step by step approach to observe how the other area appeared to them, how the signage was, what the people and facilities were like, the quality of written materials, the most positive aspects of the places they visited, and to provide general wrap up comments. A complete copy of the manual can be found in Appendix II.

Leaders from each county designated areas to be visited and offered teams to visit the other county. Four areas were targeted in Burnett County: Yellow Lake; Clam Lakes; eastern Burnett County; and western Burnett County. Washburn County targeted three areas: Long Lake/Birchwood; Spooner/Trego; and Minong. In Burnett County, this entire process was coordinated with the Resort and Campground Association, while in Washburn County it was coordinated through the Washburn County Tourism Association.

The two Extension agents led a program overview and training session on the First Impressions manual in August 1996. Early fall of 1996 was set as the time to visit the targeted areas. The remainder of this report is divided into sections on each county visited along with a project summary.

The project coordinators would like to thank all the participants of the Burnett and Washburn Counties Resort First Impressions Program. Their time and effort spent with this project is greatly appreciated.

II. IMPRESSIONS OF WASHBURN COUNTY DESTINATIONS

The participants greatly enjoyed visiting Washburn County. For most, the first impression was very positive. The "northwoods" atmosphere was an overall positive impression. More specifically, the generally good signage, cleanliness of the cabins, staff friendliness, and reasonable rates stood out as positive impressions of the area.

"Warm friendly places - a place to bring your family and not to worry about all the 'extras.' Just relax and have fun."

"Friendly people."

"I was very impressed by all the places I stopped at. They were all exceptionally clean."

"_____ has a real interest in customers. Likes to speak about the place and the area."

"They have owned their place for _____ years. The place is wearing on them. No smiles!"

"Has a variety of rates, from low to high."

God's Country

Opposing comments were made, some by the same visitor. Some highlighted the quiet and solitude a place or area offered. Others believed a lot of activities and people was what made a place ideal. Perhaps, the important conclusion is that a place or area cannot be both at the same time and we should know which one we are seeking and market it.

When places were spacious it was pointed out as important and appreciated. For many resorts, this may not be something they can improve upon without significant investment. For those with more space, however, it might be a good idea to mention this in the brochures.

"The rustic calm and solitude will be remembered six months from now."

"In the office they had hundreds of books to read and toys for kids to play with."

"A great place for meditation and quiet time."

"Lots of boats. Lots of things to do outside of cabin in rec room."

"Great view of the lake."

"Private, quiet, and cozy."

"Lots of things for the kids to do."

Seeing is Believing

Most brochures were well done, but some had problems. A common concern was that brochures did not always provide accurate descriptions of the resorts or areas. Terms such as "modern" or "ultra-modern" were not accurate descriptions for many of the places using them. If a place is not modern or spacious or offer uniformly good lake views, then this should be acknowledged. Or, at least, these attributes should not be touted if they're not really up to the mark. Sincerely describing a place seems the most appropriate thing, according to visitors.

"From the pictures and ads the place sounds bigger than what it really is."

"The ads make the area look larger than what it is."

Which Way to the Lake?

Signage was important to the First Impression visitors. Most of the visitors judged the signage to be quite adequate. Poor signage, however, was a concern, when it occurred. Because there was very good signage for most places, the weaker ones stand out.

Some of the highway or entrance signs were not as clear as they could have been. That is, signs may have been lacking or the signs that were there, may not have provided good information on how to get to the resort. Also, some of the signs on the premises did not convey clear information. Lastly, some signs detracted from the overall affect of the resort. A few cited negative comments in signs about guest responsibilities (how to clean or use the fish house, for example).

"Good signs and they had a map of layout of resort and campgrounds, walking trail, etc."

"Better signage needed at the resort on where things are located."

"The place needs a facelift. The signage was not the best."

Cleanliness Rules

A very common positive comment was on the neatness of places which was highly appreciated.

"Very neat and clean."

Back to the Future

A concern was that cabins need more updating for the current customers. Lighting, televisions, stoves, microwave ovens, and outdoor cooking facilities are areas where resorts could modernize.

"Outdoor cooking facilities would be nice."

"Better lighting needed in the cottage. Remember, we are card players."

"Keep updating things."

III. IMPRESSIONS OF BURNETT COUNTY DESTINATIONS

The visitors to Burnett County enjoyed themselves. Their overall first impressions were quite positive. The natural resources of the area, particularly the lakes, were rated very high. Specifically in relation to the sites themselves, areas attracting notice were the cleanliness and maintenance of the facilities and grounds; courtesy and helpfulness of the staff in both welcoming visitors and providing information on both the facility and the area; adequate directional signage both to the destination and to direct the visitor around the site; and brochures and other advertising that accurately portrayed the facility's accommodations and amenities.

God's Country

The natural resources of the area generally and the facilities specifically were important images noted by all of the visitors regardless of the sites visited. The presence of water, whether a backwater, fish pond or large lake, was especially noteworthy by reporters. The quietness or noisiness of a site was also frequently commented on.

"Nice lakefront and plenty of docks for each cabin."

". . . . small creek ran behind it with ducks and geese, pretty little pond."

"There was a very nice fish pond. . . . A very nice touch."

"Very quiet and peaceful."

"Heard town sounds, not real outdoors atmosphere."

Seeing is Believing

Some of the sites selected were chosen based on the visitor's perusal of the respective county tourism guide books. Very emphatic disappointment was expressed by the reporting visitor when the site did not correspond with the image portrayed in the advertising piece.

"My perception was a setting more in the wooded area.....and not so commercialized."

"Nice size cabins but in need of updated furniture and better furnishings."

"Cabins small and some need of paint. Too crowded together."

"Nice family area ---- with area for children away from the water."

"Kids play area adjacent to beach was nice -- seemed a little old -- but nice."

"Pool area very nice looking - lots of people using pool."

Which Way to the Lake?

Signage was another area emphasized by the visitors. Their comfort level, and hence their impressions, were elevated at those facilities and sites where they could most easily find Signage directing them to all points of interest. Even a closed facility, with a very pleasant and apologetic sign on the locked door, left the would-be visitors feeling welcome rather than rejected.

"Very good signs directing you to its location."

"Sign heading there was obscured by bushes and weathered. Sign on building was really nice and pretty large."

"Lots of _____ signs but not directional signs of how far and where to turn. Entrance was hard to find."

"Very good signs directing you to its location however there are no signs to give you information on where to go if you wanted to check in or reserve a room."

"Need more modern signs and need access marked better."

"Very good signs and easy to read."

"Overall, not even meeting anyone, we got an overall good first impression that they were concerned, caring people (nice note on door said "Sorry for any inconvenience.....")

Cleanliness Rules

No matter who the visitor or where the visit occurred, a couple of areas meriting special attention by resort and attraction owners and managers emerged from the resort impression reports. All of the reporters emphasized cleanliness as an important factor impacting their impression both positively and negatively. If a site lost points due to shortcomings in the cleanliness area, it never quite made it up with positive judgments in other areas of scrutiny.

"Cleaning and general maintenance seem poor."

"Cabins were very clean."

".....needs improvement or cleaning."

What's There to do Around Here?

Access to brochures, maps, calendars of events, and other information on what to do and see in the area were much appreciated by the visitors. When staff was present at the site, their ability to provide information on the area was greatly appreciated. Conversely, lack of available information proved to give a negative impression to the visitors.

"Good brochure. Not fancy but good. You had access to this information even with them being closed."

"Very nicely put together brochure. Plenty of information & very professional. Many brochures available on what the area has to offer. Special events & places of interest."

"Met with owner - a very nice lady who did talk about the different activities in the area i.e. the Gandy Dancer Trail, Forts Folle Avoine, Hole in the Wall Casino, festivals, etc."

"Only talked to one available person..... Gave literature to us. Not much conversation/didn't encourage many questions."

"Pulled in - saw no one around - it was like a ghost town. No one to ask, doors locked to visitors center, brochure rack almost empty."

IV. THOUGHTS ON THE PROJECT

Timing is Everything

There is validity to the saying "timing is everything". The time required to develop the Resort Impressions program was underestimated. This resulted in the resort and attraction visits occurring very late in the season. This adversely impacted the activity level observed at the destinations by the visitors and subsequently their resultant "first impression". In fact, some of the facilities were closed for the season by the time of the scheduled site visit.

It is difficult for resort members to participate in exchange or training programs in the midst of their season. But, that's when the resorts are most active. One possibility would be to conduct a program with outside visitors and not resort owners.

There was not an opportunity for face to face exchanges with the tourism organizations involved. A joint meeting between the organizations would be valuable to program.

Area vs. Site Visits

It may be impossible to completely take in an area using this First Impressions format. Clearly, the Birchwood Lakes area differs from Minong. Trying to reach general conclusions across the county and provide specific details on individual places is quite difficult!

Focusing on an overall first impression of a particular destination area in a county may provide more useful information to local tourism groups or chambers than doing visits to individual resorts. An area visitation approach may prove attractive when considering how mobile our visitors increasingly are. They do not spend their whole vacation at the resort or campground. They go out into the surrounding area, visiting attractions and attending events.

However, the personal visits are more valuable to the individual resorts visited. Perhaps two different visitation programs could take place: a resort exchange and a chamber or tourism organization general impressions program.

Manual Improvements

The First Impressions manual has been successfully used with many communities. However, changes were needed to make it appropriate for resort/attraction exchanges. For example, question one may need to be worded to be more specific in asking what a person's perception before visiting the site was *based on any printed material, advertising or word of mouth they may have been exposed to*. Also, using sounds and smells to describe large and diverse areas was probably not valuable in retrospect.

One of the Burnett County participants summarized their site visits in one colorful, descriptive sentence. This was helpful in giving the readers a clear "first impression". A streamlined format with more flexibility would provide more insight and encourage and accommodate such statements.

Future Visitations

This was a positive experience for the tourism organizations and the individuals involved. It is recommended that it be attempted again with the suggested modifications or modified for use in other communities.

Appendix I - Burnett and Washburn County Resort Exchange Teams

Burnett County

1. Minong/Gull Lake Area:
Donna Winberg & Linda Anderson
Virginia King & Schatzee
2. Birchwood Lake and Long Lake:
Reine & Marian Bittorf
Betty Peer & Jim McNally
3. Spooner/Trego:
Tom Stoffel & Marv Rivard/Janet Rivard
Tim Smith & Jerry Dorff - alternates

Washburn County

1. Yellow Lake:
Larry & Alison Pinela
2. Western Burnett County:
Dan & Anita Frase
3. Eastern Burnett County:
Evelyn & Pete Barnes

Appendix II - Resort Impressions Manual

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