Driving Outdoor Recreation and Community-Tourism via Visitor "First Impressions"

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• Background
• FIT Program Overview
• Community Case Studies
  • Actions and Outcomes
• FIT Process
• Questions and Answers
Background

Population rose in first 5 years by 152,062 persons, before falling by 120,827 in last 4 years.

Legend
Percent Change
-15.98 - -10.65
-0.10651 - -4.15
-4.16 - 0.17
0.18 - 4.64
4.65 - 16.67

Change in Michigan Population: +31,235 persons, which is a 0.3% increase between 2000 and 2009.

Ontonagon County, -15.98%, -1,232 persons
Livingston County, 16.67%, 24,679 persons
Macomb County, 5.5%, 40,606 persons
Wayne County, -6.6%, -132,910 persons

Background

Michigan visitor volume and spending

Source: Tourism Economics

Background

Rural communities

- Looking for community revitalization strategies centered around tourism/QL
- Sustain their current tourism industry
- Assets are overlooked and/or neglected
- Often don’t know or realize what they have to offer or capitalize on
- Leadership and action is lacking or stagnant
- Will visitors want to return and why?
FIRST IMPRESSIONS: Assessing your community for tourism (FIT)

FIT is a comprehensive community assessment conducted by unannounced visitors in a host community positioned to lead development based on the program results. FIT involves developing community leadership, assessing the host community, sharing the results in a community forum open to all, and providing suggestions to drive community action. Overall, FIT helps communities learn about their strengths and weaknesses through the eyes of first-time visitors.

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FIT communities will:

- Learn about their assets and opportunities from first-time visitors.
- Strengthen an existing cohort of leaders and residents by providing them an opportunity to organize on the basis of valuable feedback about their community.
- Develop a list of action items for community improvement.
- Integrate action items into community plans.
- Take action on community improvements and strengthen their image.
- Improve community well-being and quality of life for residents and visitors.

The results of FIT can:
- Spawn local leadership.
- Strengthen community vitality.
- Form the basis for future development.

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Things to consider...

• Not *how* to become a tourist town, but what do tourists *think* of your town...

• Every community gets visitors...

• Do they want to return or will they and why or why not?

• Information, *not* criticism, to drive action...
The Assessment

1. Prior to the Visit
2. Initial Impression
3. Community Information
4. Visitor Motives
5. Destination Evaluation
6. Residential Areas
7. Tourism Assets Visited
8. Main Downtown Business Area
9. Waterfront Community (New Section)
10. Using Senses and Safety
11. Lasting Impressions
12. Trip Reflections
1. Prior to the Visit

- Online research for 2+ hours

- Used Smart Phones, Tablets, and PCs

- Social Media

- Searched for:
  - Things to do
  - Places to go
  - Events taking place
  - Shape experience/visits
Visualize the community prior to visiting...

- *Small, empty, but with a waterfront that would be interesting to see.*

- *Small town Michigan with a water view.*

- *I pictured the town being a lot smaller and with less stuff to do. I didn't think there would be much going on.*
1. I liked the Belle River that I crossed over to get to downtown- and the eclectic mix of shops downtown made it interesting. I wanted to park my car and investigate by foot and I was pleasantly surprised by the many waterfront parks and the unique shops.

2. Once in town, my reaction was that this was a lovely small town with historic roots (lots of old and diverse architecture), and one that was strongly linked to maritime heritage. Pleased with the amount of public and private (accessible businesses) access to the riverfront. There was evidence of a formerly thriving community.
### Top 3 reasons you think visitors come to the destination?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Motive</th>
<th>Score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Relax</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visit historical sites</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shop</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experience a unique culture</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Get entertained/for entertainment</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engage in sports activities</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Waterfront, Freighters</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enjoy the weather</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seek adventure</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Be in nature</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Get away from people</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visit friends and family</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experience the nightlife</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engage in business activities</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In transit to somewhere else</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engage in religious activities</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
5. Destination Evaluation

Safety and security: 9
Accessibility of destination: 9
Historic/heritage attractions: 9
Road conditions: 8
Authenticity of attractions: 8
Cleanliness: 7

Dedicated tourism attractions: 2
Variety of activities to do: 2
Shopping facilities: 2
Cultural attractions: 2
Variety and quality of restaurants: 1
Variety and quality of shopping options: 1
Variety and quality of accommodations: 0
7. Tourism Assets Visited

Locations visited:
- Accommodation
- Municipal Offices
- Restaurants
- Cultural/Historical Attractions
- Recreation
- Neighborhoods
- Businesses
- Trails....
What is your first impression of the waterfront?

1. The waterfront on seemed neat, tidy and accessible by all... well maintained and cared for too!

2. Good lake waterfront assets, but need to do a lot more with the river...
11. Lasting Impressions…

Positive experiences-

• “The walkability and welcoming atmosphere of some businesses
• “Walking on Main Street and talking with the shop owners/assistants…”
• Enjoying access to the waterfront including the marina walk

Negative experiences-

• Lack of signage for attractions and locating nature areas to visit
• Some of the businesses in the area were not particularly welcoming or accommodating to visitors…
• Not safe or comfortable lodging for families…
One statement best describes the destination?

- **Michigan's coastal village with a southern bayou feel!**

- **Classic small town America but with many unique features and a lot of potential for tourism growth**

- **A nice small town whose downtown moved out of town.**

- **Quiet, small town, great for those looking fish for the day.**
Suggestions:

- Art
- Recreation
- Business
- Community
FIT 2016 (Pilots)
• Sturgis and Standish

FIT 2017
• Imlay City
• City of Marlette
• Village of Elkton
• Village of Sebewaing
Imlay City - pop. 3,600

- Volunteers beautification committee created (awarding beauty vs. penalizing blight)
- Historical walking trails
- Cycling and kayak trail signage
- Public/Private agritourism partnership
- Hispanic community representation in public sector
- $3,000 grant dollars secured for future projects
City of Marlette - pop. 1,800

- Downtown Development Authority re-engaged with new projects after 9 years with all new members.

- Launched their first farmers market

- Businesses engaged for better service

- $3,000 grant dollars secured for future projects
Village of Elkton - pop. 810

- Downtown Development Authority re-engaged and launching projects after 4 years.
- Local artists engaged for mural paintings
- Websites redesigned and promotional material created
- Businesses engaged for better service
- Youth/business entrepreneurship program
Village of Sebewaing - pop. 1,700

- Established “Historic River District”
- Launched new farmers market
- Recreation plan updated after 5 years
- Kayak trail signage
- Grant dollars secured for future projects
- Active “Community Leadership Team”
FIT 2016 (Pilots)
- Sturgis and Standish

FIT 2017
- Village of Elkton
- Imlay City
- City of Marlette
- Village of Sebewaing

FIT 2018
- East Jordan
- Village of Dundee
- Bessemer
- Houghton
- Cass City
- Marine City
East Jordan – pop, 2,351

- Active “Community Leadership Team”
- Actions:
  - Adventure sports marketing
  - YouTube and Visitor Social Media
  - Business improvement programs
  - Focusing on residential Improvements
  - Pedestrian friendly connections
  - Developing Historical/Cultural Tourism
  - Signage
    - Wayfinding
    - Water & nature trail signage
FIT 2016 (Pilots)
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FIT 2019+
- Laingsburg
- ST. Clair
- Au Gres
What we’ve learned:

- Communities are using FIT to -
  - Build capacity
  - Strengthen their image, assets, and tourism opportunities
  - Update Master and/or Recreation Plans
  - Spawn new ideas and leadership
  - Get organized for state agency program for additional support
- Showed more possibilities.

- Many opportunities identified for quick success.

- It brought attention to assets we ‘forgot’ we had!

- Identified several pathways to organize around

- Identified spaces I see as liability that are seen as assets by others

- Fresh eyes give credibility to assessments – the residential neighborhood comments were interesting!

- Appreciated the snapshots of areas that need improvement.
Thoughts?

Questions?
visitrapidcity.com

https://tinyurl.com/FITNORC

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Thank you!

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