



First Impressions

Assessing your Community for Tourism



First Impressions for Tourism Summary Report

Houghton, Michigan

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I. Introduction

The First Impressions program was developed in 1991 by the University of Wisconsin Extension to help communities learn about their existing strengths and weaknesses as seen through the eyes of first-time visitors. The program's results have been used to inform economic initiatives or further develop community goals to communities across the USA and Canada. Michigan State University Extension has adapted this program to meet the needs of Michigan communities.

This summary report is based on the observations of four assessors. Before beginning their unannounced visit to Houghton, each assessor was asked to conduct research of the destination online. This research helped plan and shape their visit based on personal interests, activities in the community, and within a budget allocated to each individual. They then traveled individually to Houghton between August 15th and September 30th, 2018. Each team member recorded their experiences conducting their visitor research, maneuvering through and around Houghton and the surrounding area, visiting stores, restaurants, outdoor spaces, and additional tourism-related sites. They evaluated community characteristics by completing a multi-page assessment focused on initial and lasting impressions, community information, visitor motives, the destination and its downtown, residential area, tourism assets, as well as providing input on the quality of information found online of Houghton. Their assessment results and photographs of the community were then downloaded into a data management program. The compiled results were extrapolated to create this written report and the public presentation.

Key findings were presented at a public forum on November 6th, 2018. A copy of the PowerPoint public presentation and Qualtrics data are attached to this report.

II. Key Findings

This portion of the report is divided into 11 sections reflecting the structure of the assessment tool used by each assessor before, during, and after their visit.

Houghton has assets

Houghton has some wonderful assets including the waterfront, a walkable downtown with many shopping and dining options, proximity to exceptional outdoor recreation, and many historical sites.

Houghton is already a tourist destination, and these assets serve as a foundation to build upon and strengthen Houghton's image for visitors and possible future residents.

Pre-Assessment

In order to foster a true tourist experience, online research was conducted by the assessment team prior to traveling to Houghton. The purpose was to prepare for the in-person tourist experience. By requiring visitors to view Houghton electronically beforehand assessors were able to determine highlights in the community they intended to visit and/or learn more about. The City of Houghton website was considered the best travel website by three of four assessors. "City of Houghton was the most helpful website. This site had more expansive information on things to do and some commentary on each activity and the history of the area." The youth



assessor group leader, on the other hand, considered TripAdvisor to be more valuable for younger folks: “As we were planning a day trip to Houghton as a group of adults and teens, I wanted to get an idea of the best activities/destinations to go to for us. The Trip Advisor website made it easy to see the highlights that other visitors had identified, and the information seemed unbiased as it's based on the reviews of other people, who I assume are not from Houghton.”

Other web research was as expected, with most assessors turning to big social media sites like TripAdvisor, Yelp, and Google for further research on specific locations and day-of-visit information.

Section 1 and 9 of the Qualtrics data report highlights additional pre and post-assessment of web-based information and assessor experiences.

Visualizing Houghton:

Assessors were asked to visualize Houghton prior to visiting. Overall, the assessment team had a very positive vision of Houghton: “I visualized Houghton to be a hip city on the edge of amazing natural areas,” “a good place for young people to be,” “very culturally diverse. This is a tremendous asset.”

Initial Impression

Upon arriving, assessors were asked to give their initial impression within the first 5 minutes. Overall, these were positive. In the words of one assessor: “Gripping scenery, wonderful, compact downtown with plenty to do. Eastern entrance to downtown on US41 is excellent with the statue and garden.” The youth assessment team leader reported: “The city seemed very clean. Driving through Michigan Tech's campus, we saw lots of activity and students returning to classes. I noticed lots of student housing, sororities and fraternities as we were coming into town. We noticed the Chamber of Commerce right away and stopped to get info. The downtown area looked alive and interesting.”

That said, it was also noted that downtown Houghton was less pedestrian and bike friendly than might be first assumed: “I have thought of Houghton as very bike and pedestrian friendly, but I was actually less impressed with the actual bike and pedestrian infrastructure and accommodations in place. Perhaps it is the student population that just walks and bikes more and there has always been less bike/pedestrian infrastructure/elements in place than I envisioned.” Furthermore, “the entry to downtown Houghton is far from inspiring. This is a key intersection when arriving from the east and there is far too much concrete, far too little pedestrian comforts, and far too little greenspace.”

Overall, all assessors reported they would feel compelled to stop if they were driving through.





Community Information

Assessors overall felt that it was relatively easy to obtain community information once they arrived in Houghton. Directions were accurate, it was easy to find an open visitors center with helpful staff, and tourist brochures and maps were readily available.

Visitor Motives

Assessors were presented with a list of 14 reasons visitors come to a destination and asked to select the top three. Assessors broadly agreed on these, as seen in the accompanying table.

Visit historical sites	4
Seek adventure	3
Be in nature	3
Get entertained/for entertainment	1
In transit to somewhere else	1

Destination Strengths

- Nature-based activities
- Adventure-based activities
- Historic/heritage attractions
- Dedicated tourism attractions
- Safety and security
- Variety and quality of restaurants
- Variety and quality of shopping options
- Interesting architecture
- Authenticity of attractions



Just really a great little city to visit.

Destination Opportunities for Improvement

- Accessibility of destination
- Visitor accessibility to attractions
- Road conditions
- Pedestrian travel infrastructure
- Tourism management policies
- Community involvement



It was a bit difficult to find the tourism center on a first glance because the signage denotes more prominently that it's the chamber. Once there, it was a great help in deciding what to do next.

Residential Areas

Assessors were encouraged to visit residential areas either by walking, cycling, and/or driving. By visiting the residential areas, this gives assessors a better understanding of the community at large and also provides communities with a perspective rarely evaluated by outside visitors. Overall, residential areas were rated “Good” by the team. In general, one assessor summed things up: “Well kept, visually interesting tucked into the hillside and around big rocks. Lots of trees.” However, another assessor pointed out: “Housing quality is fair to poor in many blocks adjacent to downtown. This is certainly rental housing, but the rental code and property maintenance code maybe need more teeth.”



Tourism Assets You Visited

Each asset visited received a review and is found in Section 7 of the Qualtrics data report. In addition, assessors chose not share reviews of private businesses during public forums, but do encourage community leadership teams to notify businesses of their reviews whether negative or positive. Please note, some assessors visited assets in neighboring communities. This is permitted and expected, as assessors are asked to behave as if they are “real tourists.” Thus, if in the course of their research on Houghton they decided they wished to visit an asset in Hancock they did. This should be understood by the Houghton Community Leadership Team as normal visitor behavior and these neighboring assets should be looked at as Houghton’s assets as well.

Lasting Impressions

The visiting team identified various positive experiences while visiting Houghton.

- I really enjoyed strolling in and out of shops and walking along the water. My day ended up being a bit more relaxing and slower-paced than I initially planned and that means the community 'pulled' me in and helped me slow my pace. That means an ordinary tourist might stay longer and spend more money!
- I most enjoyed walking and talking along the waterfront.
- The Quincy Mine
- Our picnic at Waterfront Park was my most positive experience. It was very relaxing to sit in the park by the water, eat delicious food from the Coop, and talk with the other people in my group. It was really fun to climb and slide at the park, even as an adult!



However, the visiting team also identified various negative experience while visiting Houghton.

- Being ignored or made to feel unwelcome by multiple businesses and organizations was the most negative part of the experience. The traffic in downtown Houghton was also a very negative experience. Coming from a hometown that has installed pedestrian crosswalk signs in the middle of the road in our downtown business area, and in which people generally stop for pedestrians, the experience in downtown Houghton striking and unpleasant.
- There is less attention to detail in the downtown area than I expected. The cleanliness was lacking and there is very little greenery and other pedestrian elements to 'soften' things. Large planters at corners could help with this if the street is too narrow for trees.
- Some not spectacular customer service at the restaurant we went to.





What are the destination's greatest strengths and challenges?

- Strengths:
 - Historical and outdoor recreation pursuits. The historical side of things is pretty good, but as I've written elsewhere, what is Houghton's unique story (vs. the mines in Hancock)? Also, the outdoor recreation side of things could be improved with better coordination among existing groups to improve promotion, directions, and signage.
 - Houghton has a vibrant downtown with a central location to interesting historical sites and nature areas. It also has a lot of strengths, compared to the surrounding area, with regards to shopping and night life.
 - There seemed to be lots of things to do in Houghton. We would have liked more time to explore. We enjoyed the food we ate while we were in the area. One strength seems to be that Houghton is kind of like the "gateway" to the Keweenaw Peninsula. I think the city of Houghton could capitalize on that. With Houghton and Hancock being so close, I also see an opportunity to work together to promote tourism within the two cities.
- Challenges:
 - Infrastructure maintenance and/or decline. Many of the buildings seem tired. Housing stock is a bit rough in many areas. The historic buildings downtown are in pretty good shape, but need to continually be maintained. Programs to help fund such upgrades would be good for the city to pursue (e.g. facade grant program).
 - It's hard to get to (you don't really just pass through), and there may not be enough to do for those less-outdoorsy.
 - The biggest challenge is attracting visitors from afar to travel the, at least, four hours to experience Houghton for the first time.
 - It seemed like we had a lot of recommendations from people within the city of Houghton that encouraged us to go to things outside of the city. The customer service was hit or miss, with an equal number of good and bad customer experiences.

Who is or should be involved with tourism development, management, and/or marketing in Houghton?

Assessors were asked if they identified organizations that are involved with tourism development. The City of Houghton, DDA, Keweenaw Chamber of Commerce, Keweenaw National Historical Park, Houghton Preservation Committee, and Quincy Mine Hoist Association were all identified as involved.

Using Senses and Safety

One assessor commented that the "smell of stale beer" was unpleasant downtown. This was the only unpleasant odor mentioned. One assessor mentioned traffic noise in the downtown area as bothersome.



Regarding safety and security in Houghton, there were mixed feelings. Overall, assessors felt welcomed and found residents pleasant, however there were some issues with poor customer service that made assessors feel unwelcome.

III. Suggestions

Business:

- Hold tourism and customer service training series so businesses can learn of local tourism assets to be promoted and best practices for doing so while making visitors feel welcome and comfortable.
- Consider programs (e.g. revolving loan fund) to improve facades in downtown. For vacant properties, paint the windows with a seasonal theme or cover them so visitors do not see the interior condition.
- Explore “Popup Shop” program to fill vacant storefronts during busy tourist seasons. This may help grow permanent downtown businesses as well.
- Focus downtown development efforts on evening activities for all ages, beyond eating and drinking.
- Encourage business to take ownership of their Yelp, Google, and TripAdvisor pages to properly market themselves in this space and curate the content (e.g. negative reviews) that others post.

Community:

- More attention to detail downtown. That means more well-cared for pedestrian zones with more human-scaled elements and green space.
- If at all possible, explore options to slow traffic in the downtown area and improve safety of crossings.
- Amendments to and/or better enforcement of property maintenance code and rental code.
- Understand that Houghton and Hancock are not separate communities in the minds of visitors.

Recreation:

- Continue to market Houghton regionally as an outdoor recreation destination.
- Package the Houghton experience with Copper Country/Isle Royale/the Keweenaw Peninsula to also capitalize on its environmental assets.
- Develop a family-friendly guide to activities and destinations in Houghton. Highlight the Chutes and Ladders park. It's a really unique and fun place.
- Encourage further use of the waterfront by, for example, highlighting nearby kayak rental locations
- More infrastructure and positive messaging/signage supporting bicycling throughout the city.
- Even more storytelling about Houghton's unique history within the broader region (Houghton vs. the mines in Hancock - what historic reasons resulted in the one vs. the other?).

General Suggestions to All FIT communities:

- Considering developing “Be a tourist in your own community” (e.g. Alcona County Bus Tour).
- Use the stories of people who have made your community their home to weave a narrative that informs a sense of place and exemplifies what makes the community a great place to live, work, and play and *visit*.



- Update all websites regularly (daily or weekly), ensuring business hours and other pertinent information is always accurate.
- Encourage monthly or quarterly business after hours at downtown businesses and create downtown as a gathering place
- Continue downtown improvements (Façade, parking, filling vacant storefronts, visible business signage, creatively using vacant building window space, sandwich boards, etc.).
- Improve marketing by involving downtown businesses, increasing cooperative marketing, utilizing regional guides and Pure Michigan branding, applying for state matching funds via DDA, etc.
- Provide training to business owners/employees (customer service, local event updates/brochures). Ensure all businesses are aware of and promote what there is to do in your community, including information that makes each place special and meaningful to the tourist.

IV. Additional Next Steps for All FIT Communities:

- Catalog existing funding sources – search-out new funding opportunities.
- Search-out low-hanging tourism-related projects, picking one or two items that can be accomplished immediately and ensure its completion.
- Schedule a discussion between the CLT, local leaders, and active/concerned citizens of all ages to review this document and discuss opportunities to work together.
- Encourage and support entrepreneurship. Provide ‘how to start a business’ and other entrepreneur training, such as an online program presented by MSU Extension Educator Andy Northrop - *Shared Economy for Entrepreneurs and Tourism* (northro5@anr.msu.edu).
- Explore Agri-tourism as a niche. Identify farmers, explore what other areas are doing, and become involved with Michigan Agritourism (<http://www.michiganfarmfun.com/>), and review articles (<http://www.michiganfarmfun.com/>).
- Consult “FIT Community Next Steps” manual provided to your CLT.

Summary of MSU Extension tourism development programs:

The following programs are available statewide to guide decision making around tourism development and implementation.

Understanding Tourism for Michigan Communities (UTMC)

This interactive workshop highlights tourism industry statistics and exposes communities to trends and travelers’ interests, as well as a number of niche tourism markets. UTMC is specifically designed to promote regional synergies, leadership and tourism product development.

Planning for Tourism

This workshop walks communities through a planning process and uses life-cycle models to explore where communities may be in establishing themselves as tourism destinations. Additional tools will be employed to determine their readiness, identify next steps for action and explore engagement strategies for coalition building within the community.



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.

Strengthening Tourism Leadership: Facilitation Tools to Move Community-driven Tourism Forward

This experiential workshop is designed to build and strengthen the skills necessary to lead and facilitate productive community groups. Participants will practice using a variety of facilitation tools and learn techniques and verbal skills necessary to lead group discussions, reach consensus, set outcome-based goals and generate ideas for action.

Custom Tourism Programs

MSU Extension tourism educators are equipped to meet the diverse needs and interests of Michigan communities. Specialized programs are available to communities with a specific interest in agri-tourism, eco-tourism and/or cultural/heritage tourism.

Contact

As Houghton continues on its journey in tourism development, please contact MSU Extension as needs arise!

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Learn more about MSU Extension tourism programs by visiting <http://msue.anr.msu.edu/topic/info/tourism>.