

The Power of Family, Friends, and Images in Attracting New Residents to Rural Communities

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In the world of business, word of mouth referrals is the gold standard in marketing promotion. If the referral also comes from a family member or friend, it will probably be given even greater consideration. Think back to a time when this might have happened to you. Your curiosity probably nudged you to at least check out the recommendation.

Traditional in-person word-of-mouth referrals and our more modern version of online referrals and social media reviews are powerful methods of communication designed to both inform and move us to action.

Just like in business, these methods are also relevant in promoting a community as a relocation site. Research shows that people looking to relocate to rural areas usually find a community in two ways – through referrals from a family member or friend or through internet searches that pull up social media feeds and community websites.

Unfortunately, these commonly used communication tools can be challenging for rural communities to use because: 1) current community members don't realize the importance of their network of family and friends as a conduit for newcomer recruitment; 2) they cannot see what their community has to offer potential community members and don't have resources available to help them with that task; and 3) information and images that are available, especially on the Internet, may not adequately show what the community has as assets, opportunities and connections to regional resources. (Burkhart-Kriesel, Cantrell, Hodur, Narjes, Vogt, 2015).

There is an obvious disconnect – potential rural newcomers are looking for specific relocation information from rural communities, but rural communities may not be providing them with what they want or need. The good news is that it can be easily fixed once the issue is brought to the forefront.

This is especially true when it comes to images that are shared through social media and community websites. We all use web searches to find information and potential newcomers are no exception. Images are often used to convey feelings and emotions. However, they also need to focus on what a potential newcomer wants to learn about as a possible relocation destination. Since today's social media is organic, it is important for the community to have a common message that is shared. Research indicates that to target positive relocation actions, communities post images on that web that show:

- A positive yet realistic view of what it is like to live in the community
- Everyday activities like grocery shopping, children walking in a park, adults mowing the yard, etc.
- The local culture, landscape, and surrounding area of the community
- People participating in activities and events using community amenities
- A mix of ages, genders, and ethnic diversity
- Examples of multigenerational and intergenerational interaction
- People and places that represent a diverse group of employment opportunities

- A range of housing options

- People accessing available services and amenities such as recreation facilities, healthcare, schools, etc. (Burkhart-Kriesel, Cantrell, Johnson, Narjes, O'Brien, 2010)

If communities want to evaluate new or currently posted images, one method might be to ask a random sample of new community members what the photos tell them about the community and what photos they would have liked to see as they made their relocation decision. This kind of local market research can be very helpful as communities try to connect with potential newcomers.

Each community is different, and newcomer wants and needs change over time. Telling your community “story” through a variety of paths including traditional referrals, online venues or images, is an on-going communication process that should be placed into the spotlight.

References:

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