

Marketing for Rural Communities

Initial Focus Groups

PROPOSITIONS AND DISCUSSION

Through the development of this framework, propositions were constructed that focused on the decision-making process new residents use when moving to a rural community and the community factors impacting their expectations that influence retention. The selected literature in the discussion looks at rural communities from motivations for migration, community interaction and social capital.

Proposition 1: A complex set of factors impact the decision to move to a rural community and the decision to remain in the community.

Nearly 50% of the participants indicated a job opportunity was the dominant reason for the move. However, the majority (86.5%) of those indicating the importance of the job also stated that it was more complex than simply having a job. They recognized that jobs paying a livable wage and steady income are important but not the only reason to move or remain in the community. Wilkinsen (1986), in his address to the Third Biennial GITAP Interdisciplinary Conference in 1986, stated “Development that does not start with jobs and income simply does not start; but, by the same token, if development ends with jobs and income, it ends.” This conclusion by Wilkinsen supports the data that emerged in the focus groups. When deciding to move, new residents looked for additional community attributes such as safety, family and faith oriented communities, being free of congestion and proximity to family. Ultimately they were looking for their image of a small town atmosphere.

Warren (1992, as cited by Barcus) identified life cycle courses such as leaving a parental home, mid-career promotions, marriage and divorce. Many of the focus group members identified one of Warren’s 11 transitions as a preexisting condition in their relocation decision. The findings also agree with Barcus (2002) that there are noneconomic reasons that include location-specific, residential preferences such as the role of amenities. In the present focus group study the location is identified as a specific area while the role of amenities is a part of the context of the community. This study expands Barcus’ findings and highlights the role the size of community may play in the decision making process.

Day and Sutton (2004) identified retirement counties and environmental amenities as two indicators of future rural growth. The Cromartie and Nelson (2009) study affirms what Fetto (1999), Bryant (2003) and McGranahan and Wojan (2007) have found, that as baby boomers retire they will consider moving to rural areas with amenities. In this study, a number of early retirees did purchase property in communities under 3,500 in population with environmental amenities as this quote shows, “I have this house, second to highest house in town with 180 degree vista...it’s just gorgeous. I have an unobstructed view of the buttes, and I just love it. Just what I wanted!” While Day and Sutton did not list the Nebraska Panhandle as one of the potential growth areas, McGranahan and Beale (2002) identified areas of the Panhandle as having high natural amenities.

Some participants in this study seemed to be pondering questions similar to what Florida (2002) asked, “What really matters in making this life decision?” (p 217). Florida’s work emphasizes the importance of place and community. Florida concluded that those working in knowledge-intensive industries (the creative class) will move to urban areas with natural amenities as well as outdoor recreation, educational opportunities and cultural events. McGranahan & Wojan (2007) identified that landscape was important, as well as climate and the labor market. This was supported in the focus group as many of the new residents moved for climate, employment and location amenities. McGranahan and Wojan further suggest that the creative class is drawn to high amenity areas and that rural communities can create these areas by identifying and building upon those characteristics that could enhance an active life style. These characteristics include high-quality schools and social and cultural interaction. Rural towns that promote places for public gatherings and interaction were identified as features the creative class would appreciate. This research study supports that the new residents desired interaction within the community as many of the new residents identified the desire and need to be connected. “There certainly are quality of life issues. For us, it is proximity to recreation – outdoor recreation. Proximity to good health care. Proximity to a variety of communities of various sizes from urban to very rural.” This suggests that rural communities in the study have amenities to attract the creative class.

Size of community also emerged as a variable that influenced the move. In the study, individuals stated different reasons for moving to particular areas. Those moving to communities with population or to farms and ranches were more likely to say location and job opportunities were determining factors. Jobs were the primary reason given for those moving to a community with a population between 5,000 and 9,999. Job opportunity, family/friend and location were evenly mentioned as the primary reasons for relocation for those moving to the one community larger than 20,000.

Sofranko and Fliegel (2001) found that rural-origin newcomers migrate primarily for job reasons, while migrants from urban areas are much more likely to give noneconomic reasons for moving. The rural-origin newcomers were younger than newcomers from urban areas and better educated in the study. Cantrell, Burkhart-Kriesel, Johnson, Narjes, Vogt (2008) generally agreed with Sofranko and Fliegel that noneconomic reasons were more likely to be given by movers from metropolitan points of origin. This is consistent with the focus group study.

Proposition 2: Community vision influences individuals to move to a community. In addition, the visioning process builds social capital when new residents are a part of the process.

New residents indicated that a clear positive community vision for the future was important to them. When the new residents were asked to elaborate, one individual said, “Get aggressive about your vision for the future.” The majority of the new residents would also like to see an open minded attitude towards new resident ideas. Others indicated that they would like to be involved in the community and suggested that when leaders market the community, to target individuals that want to be a part of that vision to help the community achieve its goals. During the interviews, a number of participants suggested that it would be beneficial to have focus group sessions that include both new and existing residents. Bringing together all residents to discuss issues would encourage the flow of information.

Castle (2003) defines social capital as a degree of trust, expectation of reciprocity and he adds a third characteristic, an exchange of information. Castle further states, “The presence of social capital becomes

evident when one can show that the norms and networks which facilitate collective action contribute to useful goods and services” (p 347). The focus group participants believed that collective action to create a vision would have a positive long-term impact on the community supporting Castle’s expanded definition.

Emery, Fernandez, Gutierrez-Montes, Flora (2007) in a qualitative evaluation of the Hometown Competitiveness Program suggest that “leadership for community capacity building is more than skills, relationships, and influence; it is also finding and sharing a deeper, more inclusive vision of all perspectives and open to hearing the voices within the decision making process. This can mobilize the whole community and align these separate projects in ways that build assets across the community capitals” (p. 68). Emery also suggested leaders will emerge during the process of creating the vision. These statements suggest that both the new and existing residents need to be included in the visioning process. The themes that emerged from interviews support Emery’s statement that communities benefit in several ways by being inclusive and participatory in creating a vision.

The use of collective action as noted by Wilkinson (1991) is a way to increase rural economic resources, improve rural services, reduce inequality, and facilitate local leadership in planning and decision-making. Collective action was identified during the focus group interviews. Some participants commented that there is a need for more rural services such as healthcare and alcohol treatment support systems. A number of new residents also identified that there are inequalities in services for those that are in need of assistance. The need for broader community representation and engagement emerged from the study when participants in several locations stated that dominant industries and established leaders do not take into consideration the entire community when decisions are being made. Creating a broad community vision not only engages new residents, it also supports the notion of collective action which will increase social capital.

Proposition 3: Community involvement not only engages new residents, it increases social interaction and community information exchange. These positively impact the building of social capital.

Many of the new residents were involved in their new communities. As one new resident stated, “It [involvement] is what you do.” Examples of individuals becoming involved in community service and various activities were described in every focus group. Churches were identified by many as a way to connect and receive emotional support. This supports experiences that Keddy (2001) noticed in developing local organizing efforts when he described people as being hungry for meaningful, effective involvement in the community. This social interaction is also a key element in communities according to Wilkinson’s (1991) interactional theory. Flora and Flora (2008) would agree, “Community social capital facilitates groups’ working together. Both bonding and bridging forms of social capital are important for community prosperity and sustainability” (p. 9).

McDonough and Vachta (2005) stated that larger and diverse memberships of the local community participating in various actions and activities leads to increased interactions. These interactions provide for opportunities to build group cohesion and a sense of community (Matarrita-Cascante and Luloff, 2008). This suggests that when group membership and interactions are limited, it becomes more difficult to build a sense of community. This was noted by new residents when they acknowledged that not all current residents supported efforts that may enhance local community development.

In the current study, transitioning to the community and information sharing were identified as intervening conditions that either positively or negatively influence an individual's satisfaction with the move. The residents often stated that they had difficulty finding information about services, organizations and activities in their new communities. Three of the community strategies that the new residents identified to help them make the relocation transition easier were community welcome programs, local news media and involvement in community groups.

Newcomers encouraged the development of comprehensive welcoming programs that included events such as picnics and ongoing social gatherings to create more interaction. In an international study of rural residents moving to the slums of India, Bangladesh and Pakistan, Ruback, Pandey, Begum, Tarig, Kamal (2004) found that social networks were a key to satisfaction with the move. Specifically, they described networks that can help with information, aid and emotional support. In the current study, difficulty in finding information about activities and services was one of the intervening conditions that hindered an individual's ability to become connected to the community. Ruback's research suggests that creating networks to enhance interaction will be a key to increasing satisfaction among new residents. This fact was evident during the focus group sessions, where new residents created a community of support as they listened to each other tell their stories. It was common for participants to exchange phone numbers or email addresses after the interview.

Brown (2002), in a historical perspective that looked at the theoretical and empirical research on migration, states that migration and social networks are reciprocally related. The volume and direction of migration are affected by information, ideas and resources embedded in networks that link family, friends and neighbors across origin and destination communities. Migration, in turn, is directly and indirectly responsible for building and transforming social networks. Social networks, once established, reduce the cost and risk associated with migration (Todaro 1980 as cited by Brown). The link between social networks and migration was identified in this focus group study when the issue of retention was discussed. A number of new residents indicated that if they had friends or felt like they belonged in the community, they would be more likely to remain in the community. This study supports Brown's premise on the reciprocity between migration and social networks.

Proposition 4: When community expectations are not met, disillusionment negatively influences retention. Increasing community involvement and information exchange may be one way to positively influence new residents' long term retention.

Not all expectations are met when moving to a rural community. Furuesh (1998) said the unexpected surprises and unanticipated situations may contradict the image that the urban resident has in moving to a rural community. The family-oriented community and rural lifestyle may not be appreciated when the new resident begins to see the socioeconomic issues. The new residents may not have anticipated these conditions in the focus group study, as over 60% of the interviewees moved from an urban area. The intervening conditions of job opportunities, services available and housing directly impact the community expectations of new residents and ultimately their satisfaction with the community. Single, young adults seemed to have more difficulty adjusting to the new community. A man in his early 30s stated, "When you have kids that meet each other and you all of a sudden have friends because the kids are friends so then the parents are friends." Another young woman in her late 20s said, "If I were to get married and have children

and if I were to leave here, which I plan to, I would definitely come back here in a heartbeat with a family because this is the type of community that just works well with a family.”

CONCLUSION

Every new resident's experience is unique and at the same time, similar to other new residents. At the foundation of all of these insights are two broad commonalities: 1) the complexity of the relocation decision-making process; and 2) the importance of the new resident's community connection. Historically, the migration literature has focused on one factor such as housing, age or the environment – thus missing the complexity of the relocation decision-making process. Using a constructivist grounded theory, this study strived to develop a broader understanding of the motivations that led new residents to western Nebraska and how likely they will remain.

Stakeholders often want to know what is more important in the decision-making process – do people move for the job or do they move for quality of life issues? This research supports that people move for the job and for quality of life issues. Employment allows the household the opportunity to move. Vogt, Allen and Cordes (2000) in an unpublished paper wrote, “Nebraskans continue to place a great deal on the social attributes of their community ... yet, economic opportunities continue to plague rural residents when deciding where to live.” This suggests that the jobs are important but not the only factor. The current research highlighted the importance of a community's quality of life attributes, such as climate, available recreation, schools and educational opportunities; location to family and friends; and church affiliations as just a few of the community assets that may influence a decision to move to the community.

Past research has shown the importance of community interaction and the feeling of belonging to the community. This research shows it is important for the community to develop opportunities to connect with the new resident. Comprehensive community welcome programs and networking opportunities and community Web sites, as suggested by the new residents, will engage new residents, increase social capital and community information exchange. Albrecht (2006) found that those moving to metro areas continued to be better off economically while nonmetro residents described themselves slightly more often than metro residents to be very happy. Albrecht further suggested that the different interaction patterns in smaller population areas may be a factor to individuals being more happy. This research expands on that point that if new residents do not have the interaction patterns, they will be less content with their move.

A surprise finding in the focus group research was the role of community vision on the new residents' perception in the communities' ability to attract new residents. Clearly the newcomers want to relocate to a location that is moving forward and working together. This vision, when highlighted on a Web site and news media, can help in attracting new residents who want to be engaged, connected and living in the new community. Participants did not want to see merely visionary rhetoric but the ongoing plans and completion of projects that would achieve the long-term vision. New residents also wanted the opportunity to be part of the ongoing planning process where they can share their ideas and personally contribute to the vision.

This study supports the need for more interdisciplinary studies as Castle (2003) suggested to understand the reasons new residents move to rural communities. The data itself can be further researched in more detail

using various geographic regions or studying one component such as the intervening conditions of the move in more depth. Another factor is timing. The study was completed during the summer of 2007, before the 2009 recession. What effect, if any, has this economic downturn had on the new resident relocation decision-making process in rural areas?

The qualitative study provided depth and understanding to the reason new residents moved to the Nebraska Panhandle. Results can be cautiously generalized, as appropriate steps were conducted to ensure credibility. The framework that emerged can be used by community residents and practitioners when developing attraction and retention strategies. For example, a community may want to explore who are the new residents in your new community? Are people moving primarily for jobs or to the location? What strategies are available for a potential new resident to find relocation information? Once moved, are there adequate services and housing available? What intervening conditions encourage retention? Does your community have a long-term vision? One new resident remarked: "I think as a piece of advice I would say to listen ... things could grow out of conversation, extended conversation like this ... I don't know what the conversation would be like if it were [the community] that listens to itself, not just newcomers, it might discover that there's more desire for change."

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