

Marketing for Rural Communities

Initial Focus Groups

Moving Challenges

The intervening conditions or moving challenges are those situations that positively or negatively influence a person's feeling of belonging or likelihood of remaining in the community. The eight intervening conditions that emerged in order of emphasis were: positive people experience, transitioning to community, services available, housing, information sharing, job opportunities, small business struggles and socio-economic issues. Examples of the eight intervening conditions are briefly described next.

The majority of the new residents had positive people experiences. Many of the new residents described the community as friendly and caring, as this new resident shared, "My wife and I were pleasantly surprised with just how friendly people were."

The second intervening condition to emerge was transitioning to a new community. The research showed that a number of the participants found adjusting to the small town environment a challenge. A retiree to a community under 3,500 in population commented, "I think people were curious as to why we chose [the community]. Why did you move here?" A new resident in her mid 20s said, "I almost feel like people are only friendly to you to the point of being cordial ... they are not really planning to reach you." Having different values, being a single young adult and adjusting to laid back attitudes were all identified as transition challenges.

The lack of services was a third category identified. For those who moved to a farm or ranch, they needed to understand the available services in the area, such as retail and trade services. Others that needed health services or day care services expressed similar concerns. Three situations commonly heard throughout the focus groups were: 1) lack of services or no services in the area, 2) difficulty in finding the information and services, and 3) laid back attitude in performing the service. For example, in larger communities there was appreciation for the health care available, while inversely there was a concern about the lack of health care in smaller communities.

Housing is a causal condition as a need and becomes the fourth intervening condition as focus group participants searched for their new residence. In this study, new residents who moved to communities under 3,500 spoke highly of housing availability while those moving to communities over 5,000 felt lucky to find a home. Many of the new residents moving to communities over 5,000 in population stated, "We were lucky enough to buy a new house." Another woman in her 20s said, "In regards to finding a place to rent, it's near impossible."

Job opportunities, the fifth intervening condition, also impacted expectations. This was especially important for those moving to be near family and for those whose spouse was searching for a position. Others found that the position was not what they wanted and had difficulty finding alternative employment at livable wages.

Finding out what is going on in the community was the sixth intervening condition that was identified in each focus group session. Many of the new residents expressed that it was difficult to find out information

regarding activities, entertainment, service changes and school activities. Businesses may or may not be listed in the yellow pages or on the Chamber Web sites. Numerous times in the focus groups, a conversation would begin, "The event this weekend was awesome." Yet, another new resident would say, "We didn't know about that."

The seventh and eighth intervening conditions, small business struggles and socio-economic concerns were not discussed in every focus group. However, these concerns were so important to those that had expressed them that they could not be ignored. In the focus groups where this type of concern was addressed, a whole group discussion occurred or the other participants acknowledged the pain or frustration being shared by the individual speaking.

A few of the new residents in the focus groups had started a small business and have struggled. One businessman said labor shortage was an issue as he expressed, "Just plain available labor in the community to do the work." Other business struggles identified were the ability to obtain financial lending and being welcomed in the business community.

The socio-economic issues cited were related to people not earning a livable wage, drug and alcohol abuse and minority discrimination. Overall, individuals who were minorities expressed that the communities had less discrimination compared to other locations they had lived. Available support services for drug and alcohol issues were also addressed by some as evident in this comment, "There is a really good recovery group (in some communities) ... in (other communities), we don't have much ... in small towns, it's so hard to get something going ... I know that for those coming along behind us, if we don't do some mentoring, there won't be any behind us." In one focus group in particular, a number of individuals in crisis moved for family support. This included support after divorce, recovering from addiction or raising a child.