

## INTRODUCTION

Recruiting and retaining new residents is critically important to rural communities that historically have had decreasing populations. City councils and village boards across the state often ask the question, “How can we bring in and keep new people today?” This issue has not gone unnoticed by the Nebraska Department of Economic Development or the University of Nebraska.

The Nebraska Department of Economic Development recently implemented two state-wide surveys of:

- 1) new residents, based on a Department of Motor Vehicle new resident list; and
- 2) former residents, using lists from colleges, trade schools, and professional and blue collar employers.

The goal of the surveys was to better understand who was moving into Nebraska and their motivation for moving and to learn from previous residents about their level of interest in moving back to the state. One product of this research was a “best practices” list of community marketing tactics focusing on community Web site content and functionality in attracting new residents and businesses.

At about the same time, the University of Nebraska conducted a study of new residents in the 11-county Nebraska Panhandle. Funded by a USDA National Research Initiative grant, the study was to identify potentially successful strategies for residential recruitment and retention in sparsely populated rural areas. (See an overview of the research process and findings from the survey and focus group interviews with new residents and the online survey with community development professionals at <http://cari.unl.edu/buffalo/publications.shtml#Briefs>.)



## TAILORING RURAL COMMUNITY

# Web Sites TO NEW RESIDENTS

## WHY EMPHASIZE COMMUNITY WEB SITES?

When both groups of researchers came together to discuss their project results, it was clear that community Web sites were a key tool used by new residents in the relocation decision process. It was also clear that new residents typically were challenged in finding the *right kind* of community information on local Web sites. Instead of Web sites making it easy for them to find information, they made it difficult and often undersold the community and region.

To help communities meet this need, University of Nebraska faculty and Nebraska Department of Economic Development staff translated these new-resident research findings into:

- 1) community talking points to spark a broader conversation about community marketing; and
- 2) examples of how communities could modify Web sites and other marketing material.

This publication addresses two issues:

- 1) “What New Residents Tell Us” shares research findings and translates them into Web site marketing actions that communities could take; and
- 2) “Community Information Needed by New Residents” highlights a wide array of community attributes that should be included to make the community Web site new-resident friendly.

You might be wondering, “Do these general marketing suggestions work everywhere in Nebraska?” Good question. It’s impossible to know for sure. The University of Nebraska research was conducted only in the 11 most western counties, but the Nebraska Department of Economic Development’s research was with communities statewide. In reality, each community is different just as each potential new resident is different. The best test for a community may be to ask these questions:

- What information are new residents telling us they need?
- Where can a potential new resident find this information about the community? Do these suggested Web site actions make sense for our community?
- How do we best highlight our local and regional opportunities?



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## Research Finding

### New residents shop around — a job and quality of life are a package.

Most new residents consider multiple locations before choosing a community to move to. Jobs are critical, but jobs alone may not bring new residents to the community. New residents also emphasize the importance of local quality of life considerations.

## Web Site Actions

Community marketing efforts should feature those characteristics that make living in a given town and region special and desirable. Think carefully about what your location has to offer and emphasize those amenities. They might include:

- Natural amenities and outdoor recreational opportunities
- Safety
- School quality
- Health care quality
- Water quality
- Housing quality and availability
- Arts and entertainment — even amateur or school productions
- Proximity to retail centers
- Events and festivals
- Volunteer and leadership opportunities
- Reasonable tax rates
- Clubs and organizations
- Religious institutions

(See a more extensive list in the section, *Community Information Needed by New Residents*.)

So what does this look like on a Web site? For example, to highlight “natural amenities and recreational opportunities” communities could include a photo or description of a bike path, picnic area, fishing spot, scenic drive, or event that showcases one of these sites. To highlight “water quality” communities might share a photo or description about local children’s water fairs, the regional Natural Resource District, or community testing and regulation standards. Sometimes just knowing that there is regular education and governmental oversight can be a positive aspect for a potential new resident.

## Research Finding

**Some new residents are coming home, but for the majority, moving to this location is a new experience.**

About two-thirds of new residents will not have had prior experience in the area and about one-third may, in fact, be coming home.

## Web Site Actions

Those who are completely new to the area may have lots of questions about issues that current residents take for granted. To address this, a community Web site could:

- Post frequently asked questions (FAQs) from new residents.
- Use Web 2.0 applications like YouTube to feature testimonials on benefits that are often taken for granted, such as the cost of daycare, commute times, etc.
- List phone numbers of people commonly called during the initial relocation process, including real estate agents, utility companies, the local school admissions representative, etc. If a community can make the relocation process look easy, it will be seen positively.

## Research Finding

**The majority are new to small town rural life.**

Most new residents move from a metropolitan county (because most Americans are metropolitan).

## Web Site Actions

Potential new residents cited lifestyle considerations such as “a slower pace of life” and “safety” more often than a specific job as being important to their decision. Do these attributes characterize your community? Are there ways to show this?

Highlighting small town life through photographs and descriptions on the Web site may seem insignificant to residents who have lived in the community all their lives, but to new residents, these are important. They want to be able to see themselves fitting into the community.

## **Research Finding**

### **Web sites and family are key information sources.**

**W**hen considering relocation, new residents look first and most frequently to the Internet and to family for information about a community. Current co-workers, friends, and community residents also are consulted, but less frequently.

## **Web Site Actions**

**D**oes the community Web site have an easily found “relocation” button or tab so that potential residents can find the information they need? This suggestion may sound obvious, but can be easily overlooked.

Do local residents know this information is available on the site and where it is located? If family and friends are often consulted about relocation information, it only makes sense that they should be aware of it. It could be a helpful tool for them.

## **Research Finding**

### **If we want them to stay, there need to be easy and fun ways to meet people and develop friendships.**

**A**tracting new residents is not the same as retaining them. Forty percent are either not planning to stay in their current community or aren’t sure of their plans. A feeling of “belonging” in the community has the strongest relationship with the expectation of staying in the community.

## **Web Site Actions**

**I**s there a way for new residents to easily contact someone to help them find what they need to support their nonwork interests and to introduce them to social networks where people share their interests? New residents want to connect with these kinds of groups.

A Web site could make it easier for them by providing a local name and contact information for local and regional special interest groups. For instance, it could include places of worship, social and civic organizations, book and garden clubs, and all kinds of recreational groups like trap shooting, baseball, volleyball, etc.

## Research Finding

**New residents bring their talents with them — they want to contribute to community life.**

When compared to the existing population, new residents in rural areas are generally characterized as having:

- higher levels of education,
- children,
- professional occupation skills,
- entrepreneurial backgrounds, and
- volunteer and community leadership experience.

People who are considering moving to rural communities are looking for locations where their special abilities will be recognized and where they will have a chance to apply them.

## Web Site Actions

Communities should emphasize how a new resident can become involved in the social and cultural life of the community. These actions dovetail closely with the research findings described previously and the need for “*developing easy and fun ways to meet people and develop friendships.*” It is all about helping the new residents connect with groups of people who have similar interests.

Communities might think of ways to make a conscious effort to identify the social skills and interests that new residents bring in the same way that businesses seek to identify their work skills. Listing community organization contact names and email addresses on the Web site might be a place to start.

## Research Finding

**A picture is not only worth a thousand words — it is also worth thousands of dollars in marketing efforts!**

People relate to community images. They can be very important in developing the viewer’s first impression of the location.

## Web Site Actions

In this research, new residents emphasized their desire to see community characteristics visually through imagery. Consider adding photos that show, for example:

**Safety.** This can be communicated through photos of children at play and unlocked bicycles at the pool or school. It also can be linked with families riding their bicycles together on a summer evening.

**Community Social Life.** This can be communicated through photos of public gatherings, such as at sporting events or festivals.

## Research Finding

### Sell your community accurately — don't hide it!

Every community has unique assets. Current residents, especially those who have lived in the area for many years, may not see the assets in the same way as new residents. Often unique features, events, and local opportunities are kept almost hidden from prospective new residents. Communities need to accurately share this information.

## Web Site Actions

If your community has recruitment projects (newcomer picnics, a welcome packet, newsletters, etc.), use the Web to communicate what these activities have to offer a new resident. Represent those efforts honestly and seek to ensure their availability.

If your community actively recruits individuals for unique positions (physicians, educators, etc.), represent the community accurately — make sure your community can meet the expectations.

It also may be important to recognize what assets are missing in a community and to honestly describe how residents adjust. For instance, if there isn't a local airport, how long is the drive to the nearest airport? Is a shuttle available to a regional airport?

A community should consider ways to sell their region and regional assets. What about linking to a regional Web site? Tourism sites often have a regional emphasis.

## Research Finding

### Share your history, current successes, and dreams for the future — communicate vision.

New residents reported that when they looked at potential new communities, they sought one with a vision for the future. Moving is a huge financial and emotional investment. New residents want to be assured that the community they choose will be progressive.

## Web Site Actions

Communities that have identified a vision for their future should emphasize that vision in their Web site's recruiting efforts and identify opportunities for newcomers to participate in future activities. For example, does the local business association or economic development group have a new-resident task force where they can offer suggestions? This group could be one of many listed on the Web site.

Planning efforts that showcase completed community projects also should be highlighted. For instance, communities could post photos of the old and new school if this was a recent change. Libraries, community centers, soccer or baseball fields, and park improvements are all examples that could be considered. These examples illustrate community vision and growth.

# Community Information Needed By **NEW RESIDENTS**

Potential new residents want to know as much as they can about a community before deciding to move there. Unfortunately, some information can be hard to find. Community Web sites are designed by current residents — usually people who have lived there for many years. The kind of information they want in a community Web site is not the same information that a potential new resident wants.

Following is a list of several categories of information that are a priority for new residents. Think of this list as a starting place — every community will have unique attributes to showcase. Once information is placed on a Web site, it will need to be kept up-to-date. Outdated photographs or information can send a negative image.

The ultimate goal of each community Web site should be to document and facilitate ways to help people find up-to-date local and regional amenities to enhance everyday life. These could include:

- Unique selling features (the Sandhills, rivers, ethnic festivals, etc.)
- Sites of historical significance (Willa Cather's hometown, Homestead National Monument, etc.)
- Recreation — natural (lakes, hiking trails, parks, etc.)
- Recreation — built (movie theatres, swimming pools, baseball fields, etc.)
- Local or regional culture and the arts (community theatre, local dance, karate, and art classes, etc.)
- Events calendar with regional offerings, examples of nightlife, things to do
- Education (primary, secondary, postsecondary; alumni groups; regional opportunities)
- Child care options
- Health care (tele-health; doctors, dentists, orthodontists; visiting health care providers; home health, clinics, etc.)
- Pet/animal care (veterinarians, pet sitting, small animal care, etc.)
- Places of worship
- Cost of living
- Available real estate (residential, commercial, industrial)
- Telecommunications (broadband speeds, costs; cell phone coverage by carrier)
- Job opportunities and spousal employment (professional, internships, etc.)
- Business transition opportunities
- Entrepreneurial climate (How does the area support new businesses?)
- Comprehensive local business listings, and links to regional businesses (Web sites, brief descriptions, contact info)
- New resident/new business incentives (free land, down payment assistance, moving subsidy, entrepreneurial assistance)
- New resident welcome package/offers
- Moving companies
- Civic organizations (chamber, community betterment, professional organizations)
- Government (city, county, state, local initiatives)
- Utility access (hook-up numbers, etc.)
- Commute times
- Transportation (highways, rail, local and regional airports)
- Testimonials (community members, alumni, businesses, return residents)

## Summary

This publication was designed to share research findings and translate them into action steps that communities can take to highlight a wide array of community attributes and make their Web sites new-resident friendly. The information presented here is just a start. Ultimately communities will need to evaluate the usefulness of this information through these questions:

- What information are new residents telling us they need?
- Where can a potential new resident find this information about the community?
- Do these suggested Web site actions make sense for the community?
- How do we best highlight our local and regional opportunities?

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