

Business outreach surveys support the local economy

By Amy Whitehead

For rural and mid-sized communities, most job creation potential is within existing business and industry and new small business development. If your community does not communicate with these businesses and create an environment where they can thrive, another community will certainly be willing to be their new home. Without open lines of communication with your local business and industry, potential threats to the community's economic base may be ignored, and opportunities to grow or retain existing industry may not occur.

Business surveys can be a useful and easy first step in starting a business retention and expansion program. Though conducting a survey requires an investment of time, it does not require a significant investment of financial resources to be deployed.

Why conduct a business survey?

Surveying your local business community provides several benefits to local leaders. The Newport Economic Development Commission (NEDC) is a good example of a consistent business outreach strategy. NEDC is a public commission funded through taxpayer money that deploys a business and stakeholder survey on a biennial basis for the past ten years. Jon Chadwell, executive director of NEDC, says, "We have been able to head off some problems earlier than we would have without the survey and we've been able to use the aggregate information when recruiting other businesses."

The information collected through business surveys allows community leaders to:

- Monitor the business climate;
- Understand opportunities and threats to the local economy and workforce and respond accordingly;
- Understand what policy or advocacy issues need to be addressed at the local, state, or federal level in order to support the local business community; and
- Assist with economic development marketing efforts.

Local leadership may spend a significant amount of time and resources attracting business investment to a community, then once the business has started operations it is not given the same level of attention and care that was initially extended in the attraction phase.

Conducting a survey each year will allow you to see trends in the local business climate and economy and anticipate warning signs and threats that can be mitigated.

What should be included in a business survey?

While surveys can be low cost, they require an understanding of what types of information will provide you actionable data. If you are ready to invest the time in deploying a business survey, potential questions may relate to:

- Business owners' perceptions of the economy and five-year outlook;
- Challenges related to workforce, infrastructure, regulations, etc.;
- Training needed to take the business to the next level;
- Plans for expansion (or retraction) of facilities, product lines, or employees; and
- Percentage of sales outside the region or country, which allows you to understand what businesses are injecting new money in to the local economy.

Deploying the survey electronically through email or a website is recommended. Survey Monkey and FluidSurveys are two web-based programs that work well for conducting a survey. It is also a good idea to have hard copies available for those businesses that may not utilize the Internet on a regular basis. These surveys can be distributed to the businesses through mail, hand delivered, or placed in a central location such as the chamber of commerce or city hall.

What to do with the survey responses

One of the worst things you can do is to ask for a business's feedback, and then not do anything with their responses. If a business identifies that they have an issue, then local leadership needs to respond to and address that issue. If the issue requires expertise or assistance beyond the capacity of local leadership, there are numerous state and federal entities that can assist businesses with their needs. The network of Small Business Technology Development Centers, the Small Business Administration, Arkansas Manufacturing Solutions,

Arkansas Economic Development Commission, and local universities and colleges can all serve as resources.

The University of Central Arkansas has worked with the Clinton Chamber of Commerce to deploy a business survey, and is currently working with the Park Hill Business and Merchants Association to conduct a business survey. Are you interested in conducting a business survey in your community? To get started, contact UCA's Center for Community and Economic Development at cced@uca.edu or call 501-852-2930.



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