

Detroit Free Press www.freep.com

Majority Surveyed have no impression of Detroit
BY JEWEL GOPWANI

Knight Ridder Newspapers

DETROIT - (KRT) - There are a lot of people across the country who don't know much about Detroit, a recent survey shows. That's both good and bad news to city leaders and organizers of Super Bowl XL - a major opportunity for Detroit to make an impression and change its image.

When the nation gets a look at Detroit next year, organizers hope some of the stereotypes would fade and development dollars and jobs would follow.

But the city's image is not overwhelmingly negative, according to a phone survey of 509 people taken by San Diego-based Competitive Edge Research & Communication a few days before this year's Super Bowl.

The survey shows that 54 percent of the sample do not have any impression of the city. It also shows that 28 percent have a negative view of the city and 10 percent have a positive view of the city. The rest didn't know enough about the city to have an impression.

The results are a little disappointing, said Michael O'Callaghan, executive vice president and chief operating officer of the Detroit Metro Convention & Visitors Bureau. "But it certainly gives us a great opportunity to change people's impressions. Imagine if we were able to cut that negative number in half, what a great thing it would be for our region. I don't see any reason why we shouldn't be able to," he said.

Lessons from surveys about past host cities show that Detroit shouldn't expect a post-game transformation.

A survey by the same firm about Jacksonville, Fla., showed that the city didn't leave much of an impression after this year's Super Bowl.

Before the NFL game, 58 percent of the 509 persons surveyed didn't have an impression of Jacksonville. After the game,

61 percent of another 501 people surveyed said they didn't have any impression of the city. The margin of error was plus or minus 4.3 percentage points. But, of the people who knew of Jacksonville, the exposure chipped away at a negative image.

Jacksonville's host committee questioned the results Wednesday, saying the sample size was probably too small.

Competitive Edge conducted the same survey about Houston and found that hosting the Super Bowl made little difference in how people view the city. The firm's study of San Diego in 2003 showed that, after the Super Bowl, more people knew about San Diego and more people thought of it in a positive light after the game.

Competitive Edge expects to take the same survey about Detroit next year before and after the Super Bowl, asking the following question: Do you currently have a positive or negative impression of Detroit or do you have no impression of Detroit of this time?

Some cringe at what the answers could be.

"Maybe you cringe because you live it every day and you tend to hear the negatives," said Kurt Metzger, research director at Wayne State University's Center for Urban Studies.

After three years of taking these surveys, Competitive Edge President John Nienstedt formed two theories about the Super Bowl's impact on the image of a host city. First, cities that start with a good image will only get an even better image after the Super Bowl. Second, to really affect a city's image, it needs TV time and lots of on-air mentions.

Based on these hypotheses, Detroit already has a few strikes against it. Last year, Detroiters fought off accusations that its residents would burn the city down if the Pistons won the NBA title. Post-basketbrawl commentary on ESPN called Detroit fans "a bunch of punks." Conservative radio talk-show host Rush Limbaugh called Detroit the "New Fallujah."

Can one week of national attention repair the city's reputation?

"No," Metzger answered. "What it is going to do, I hope, is it really needs to motivate or energize this region to start thinking of itself in a positive light."

Nienstedt said references to sunny San Diego remained in the minds of the people surveyed. Houston and Jacksonville had fewer such references.

When the Super Bowl comes to Detroit, it will be the middle of winter. The average temperature for that time of year is 32 degrees.

The host committee last week handed out scarves to the media to get them ready for the weather, which shouldn't be too much of an obstacle, O'Callaghan said.

Above all, locals need to be ready to show that Detroit is a friendly place, said Ken Kettenbeil, vice president of communications for Detroit's host committee. They also need to be ready to take the barbs.

"You have to be tough. People are going to say some negative things about you. You can't take it personally," he said.