

Marketing and Outreach Strategy Implementation

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Background

This report is in response to a proviso in the FY2011-13 budget bill:

“\$150,000 of the Puget Sound ferry operations account--state appropriation is provided solely for the department to increase recreation and tourist ridership by entering into agreements for marketing and outreach strategies with local economic development agencies. The department shall identify the number of tourist and recreation riders on the applicable ferry routes both before and after implementation of marketing and outreach strategies developed through the agreements. The department shall report results of the marketing and outreach strategies to the transportation committees of the legislature by October 15, 2012.”

The marketing program is designed to: increase ridership and promote use of the system during off-peak travel times; raise the profile of the ferry system's programs and services; and support our communities with destination marketing. WSF's approach was to engage all ferry-served communities in marketing efforts, so the benefits of the program would be evidenced broadly. The majority of strategies discussed are targeted to encourage long-term growth in ferry system ridership, and to provide ongoing support to ferry-served communities to assist in leveraging their marketing dollars.

Before proceeding to engage with ferry-served communities, WSDOT Assistant Secretary David Moseley confirmed with the leadership of the senate and house transportation committees that WSF would work directly with visitor bureaus and chambers as the representatives of local economic development in ferry-served communities. Marketing of the ferry system is a mutually beneficial effort: it brings more riders into the system, and, in turn, these riders travel into the communities served by the ferry system. Therefore, the successes of the marketing strategies employed by WSF are also the successes of the communities served by the ferry system.

Below is a summary of the marketing outreach strategies employed:

Website Improvements

WSF identified improvements to the web as a first step towards marketing the system. This work included redesigning the homepage, creating links to our communities, and developing guidance on the best times to travel, as discussed below:

WSF Homepage

The new and improved WSF homepage was redesigned to be more user-friendly, specifically targeting the two categories of users – commuter and infrequent traveler. A “spotlight” feature was added to the center of the page that rotates up to three features. In addition to promoting important ferry service information, the spotlight is a highly utilized tool by ferry served communities to draw attention to upcoming events. Community activities recently featured in the Spotlight include:

- Admiralty Head Lighthouse at Fort Casey State Park
- Friday Harbor Lab Lectures and Open Houses on San Juan Island, University of Washington
- Langlely Mystery Weekend
- Penn Cove Mussel Festival
- San Juan Scenic Byways
- Savor the San Juan Islands
- Seal Sitters, NW Marine Mammal Stranding Network
- San Juan County Fair
- Whidbey Island's Meerkerk Rhododendron Gardens

Community Links

Website links were established on each route schedule page to highlight visitor resources, including the chamber of commerce for each terminal and county/regional visitor bureaus.

Best Times to Travel

Travel tables were developed to correspond to the vehicle congestion levels for each route based on time of day and day of week. This customer friendly travel resource is posted on each route schedule page. The traveler information is based on data from the year prior and developed for each sailing schedule (fall, winter, spring, summer). This feature is now one of our most frequently used tools by visitors.

Celebrating 60 Years of Service

WSF developed many activities to commemorate the 60th anniversary of WSF. These activities were carried out for an entire year, from June 1, 2011 to May 31, 2012, to celebrate six decades of service. Marketing efforts included:

- Media campaigns, including news releases, radio advertisements and features in maritime publications
- Community partnership with Chinook Book, Seattle Mariners, and Whale Trail
- Developing a commemorative logo
- Launching ferrygear.com

All of these efforts were embraced by the communities; however, a few activities were exceptionally well received:

Chinook Book

WSF participated in the Chinook book for 2011-12 and again in 2012-13, offering free passage for one walk-on passenger with purchase of one full-fare passenger ticket. More than 2,800 customers redeemed their 2011-2012 Chinook Book coupons while traveling aboard WSF. The discounted coupon is intended to: appeal to customer with disposable income; serve as an incentive to ride a ferry and bring a friend (or husband, partner, child, etc.); and inspire future paid ferry rides. A mobile app coupon for WSF is presently under evaluation.

Compass Magazine

WSF in partnership with Phillips Publishing, developed a magazine exclusively for customers of the ferry system. 250,000 magazines were printed and made available on every ferry and it in terminals where racks are available. The first issue of *Compass* features ferry routes and destinations. The magazine targets customers new to WSF and current customers who may want to explore another route in the system.

Mariners Ferry Fan Night

For two summers in a row, WSF has partnered with the Seattle Mariners on Ferry Fan Night. Discounted ferry tickets were offered to ferry customers, communities, enthusiasts and employees for an evening of ferry camaraderie at the game. WSF advertised the availability of the tickets on the WSF spotlight, in Assistant Secretary David Moseley's weekly update, and reached out to our community marketing partners for publicity. Ferry Fan Nights in total have drawn over 800 ferry participants.

Community Marketing Group

In early 2012, WSF formed a community marketing group composed of chamber and visitor bureau representatives from ferry-dependent communities. The group met twice and is scheduled to meet for a third time on November 15, 2012. In between meetings, work products were developed and communication took place via e-mail and phone. At the initial meeting in March, the conversation focused on the proviso task and a learning opportunity for both the communities and WSF to better understand respective goals. There was consensus that there should be a shared marketing strategy for the communities and tools developed to highlight ferry-served destinations. This first meeting also served as an opportunity to understand the advertising opportunities available through WSF and contractor Trans4Media (discussed in more detail in the following section).

At the follow-up meeting in August, WSF unveiled the "Go Somewhere" campaign and the campaign community poster to be displayed aboard WSF vessels and in terminals. The group wholeheartedly supported the campaign and community poster concept and refinements were made to the poster based on input received at the meeting. WSF also shared individual marketing opportunities as part of "Go Somewhere" campaign.

In lieu of an October meeting, WSF worked with members of the community marketing group to identify icons and develop descriptions for their communities that would appear on the poster. At the next meeting, scheduled for November 15, a final copy of the poster will be distributed and work will continue on individual marketing opportunities and placement.

Discounted community advertising

WSF launched a pilot community advertising program by offering gratis advertising space to local chambers of commerce. In return, WSF was invited to present affordable advertising opportunities to local businesses. Many communities have taken advantage of this opportunity -- over 65 local businesses from ferry-served communities have

advertised on the ferry system video screens. The communities are eagerly anticipating the addition of more video screens on vessels throughout the system to broaden their marketing efforts. Some communities have expanded on this program and partnered with WSF to individualize the advertising opportunities, such as the installation of Whidbey Island map on the Mukilteo/Clinton and Port Townsend/Coupeville routes; and Farmers Market Banner, Clinton Chamber of Commerce.

These opportunities are shared at presentation and briefings around the Sound, including WSF's spring and fall community meeting series. Most recently at a May 3 briefing to Island County Tourism, Aug 8 meeting with the executive director of Seattle Convention and Visitors Bureau, and June 2012 community meeting series. WSF will provide a community advertising and marketing update at the schedule public meetings for November and December 2012.

In Summary

WSF ridership has been declining or stable over the past decade for a number of reasons – much higher fares, reduced service, changing work patterns and shifting population age demographics. Despite the ongoing challenges, WSF has experienced a growth of more than 21,000 passengers between the 2011 and 2012 peak seasons. This was much higher than expected as fares are close to 6% higher than during the peak season of 2011. WSF has come in close to 200,000 riders and \$2 million in fare revenue over what was forecasted in June. Our challenges will continue to be: steady fare increases over time; the seasonal nature of tourist travel in Puget Sound; lack of onboard amenities to promote; and long waits for vehicle passengers on popular routes during the peak season (Note: a new vehicle reservation system has been put in place on the Port Townsend-Coupeville route and on the Anacortes – Sidney route.).

This growth in ridership may be attributed, in part, to the partnership between WSF and the communities we serve to market the system; in addition to three new ferries which restored capacity and reliability to the system. We will continue to build on our successes by maintaining a partnership with the community marketing group and moving forward to publicize the “Go Somewhere” campaign (refer to “Community Marketing Group” section).