

WSDOT Ferries Division Marketing Proposal

Turning the Tide: Transforming the Brand and Rebuilding Ridership

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Transportation Commission
March 16, 2010



Washington State
Department of Transportation

Legislative Direction

2009-11 Biennium Transportation Budget Proviso:

“\$1,100,000 of the Puget Sound ferry operations account—state appropriation is provided solely for a marketing program. The department shall present a marketing program proposal to the transportation committees of the legislature during the 2010 legislative session before implementing this program.”

Why Do WSDOT Ferries Need Marketing?

- Increase ridership
- Generate more revenue
- Reduce financial pressure to increase fares

Our Current Situation: Strengths and Weaknesses

- **Strengths:** WSDOT's Ferries Division has a strong safety and reliability record, consistently completing over 99% of trips in the past 10 years.
- **Weaknesses:** WSDOT's Ferries Division has an aging fleet, and terminals with vehicle capacity constraints during peak periods, a lack of organizational focus on marketing and business development, and uncertainty about long-term sustainable funding.

Our Current Situation: Opportunities and Threats

- **Opportunities:** A host of planned service improvements present the opportunity to transform the brand, enhance the customer experience, and emphasize real modernization, improved stability and value.
- **Threats:** Externally, a decrease in population growth and an aging demographic in West Sound communities may reduce underlying demand for ferry services. In addition, negative messages in the media have tarnished the ferries brand and will continue to damage its reputation if basic problems are not addressed.

Goals and Objectives

- Transform the brand
- Grow new market segments and off-peak ridership
- Maintain and grow the commuter customer base
- Increase customer satisfaction

Phase I Action Plan, FY 09-11

The marketing strategy spans a five year planning period, but particular attention has been given to providing a detailed action plan for FY 09-11.

Phase 1 of the marketing plan will result in the following outcomes and improvements:

- Coordinated marketing campaign
- Improved traveler information
- Promotions and packages
- Audit of customer service processes

Coordinated Marketing Campaign

- Actionable plans for advertising, social media, and public relations.
- Begin initial investments in marketing to promote the campaign, including onboard advertising and website promotions.
- Groundwork for a clear and unifying approach to marketing that will touch on all aspects of ferry operations and guide efforts in Phases II and III.

Improved Traveler Information

- Launch a new and improved travel planning section on the website to provide for timely information on sailing schedules, delays and wait times.
- Integrate real-time ferry information into the regional traffic map on the WSDOT webpage.
- Partner with local ferry-served communities and tourism organizations to advertise or cross-link attractive recreational opportunities.

Promotions and Packages

- With every new vessel that comes online, we will develop promotions, events, and special ticket packages to raise awareness.
- Assess other opportunities to grow off-peak ridership, identify target markets, and develop compelling trip packages and discount promotions.

Audit of Customer Service Processes

- Customer complaints that are not addressed effectively are a barrier to transforming the brand, the customer experience, and ultimately increasing ridership.
- An internal audit of customer service processes will help management better understand why certain complaints are not being addressed, identify improvements to streamline problem-solving, and place additional emphasis on a culture of customer service.
- The audit will complement the Commission's annual customer survey, which gauges external customer opinions and satisfaction levels.

Phase II, Build Demand, FY 12-13

Highlights include:

- Address issues identified in Commission survey.
- Focus on customer service in new programs.
- Launch aggressive communication and public relations plan for ITS improvements, the reservation system and the delivery of new vessels.
- Launch an extensive advertising campaign centered around the reservation system (i.e. San Juan Islands).
- Communicate additional messages that will appeal to target markets.

Phase III, Build Ridership, FY 14-15 & Beyond

Highlights include:

- Develop a customer service strategy for the rollout of the reservation system in the central sound.
- Integrate the ITS features into the website and continue to improve trip planning functions and overall usability.
- Implement messages developed in Phase II for specific target markets and communicate via the appropriate media tools.
- Ongoing work to address issues identified in the Commission survey.

Budget and Resources

WSDOT proposes adding two key positions focused exclusively on the new ferries marketing program elements: a sales and marketing coordinator and a web marketing specialist. The balance of the market program budget is allocated among the following:

- Professional services (marketing campaign, media strategy, trainings)
- Purchased media (advertising)
- Promotions and materials (events, pamphlets, ticket packages)
- Technology/communication improvements (ITS, website)

Budget and Resources

	PHASE I (2010-2011)	PHASE II (2012-2013)	PHASE III (2014-2015)
STAFFING EXPENDITURES			
Sales and Marketing Coordinator	1 FTE	1 FTE	1 FTE
Web Marketing Specialist	1 FTE	1 FTE	1 FTE
Customer Service Agent(s)	--	TBD	TBD
Total Staffing Expenditures (\$1,000s)	\$200	\$412	\$428
OTHER EXPENDITURES			
Professional Services (Marketing campaign, media strategy, trainings)	\$475	\$180	\$180
Purchased Media (Advertising)	\$175	\$295	\$350
Promotions and Materials	\$150	\$170	\$225
Technology Improvements (Website, ITS)	\$150	\$90	\$40
Total Other Expenditures (\$1,000s)	\$900	\$735	\$795
TOTAL EXPENDITURES (\$1,000s)	\$1,100	\$1,147	\$1,223

Measuring Our Success

- WSDOT will measure the effectiveness of the strategy and track progress toward the four marketing plan objectives.
- Success will be measured by:
 - **Commission survey results.** Targeted questions related to marketing work will be included in future surveys.
 - **Quantifiable metrics.** WSDOT keeps an extensive database on its ridership, which can be used to analyze the number of trips by fare category, by route, by time of day. Other databases on specific programs, such as commercial users.
- We will submit a marketing program progress report to Legislature with each biennial budget

Questions?

For more information on the WSDOT Ferries Division
Marketing Plan, please contact:

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