

Amtrak Cascades Marketing Meeting

On November 6, 2009, the State Rail and Marine office hosted a stakeholder meeting regarding marketing of the Amtrak *Cascades* service.

As Amtrak *Cascades* service is supported by the state of Washington, WSDOT is responsible for:

- Planning and project identification
- Budget development
- Construction project management and reporting
- Operations oversight and reporting
- Local, regional, state, national, and international program coordination
- Public education, public involvement, and marketing activities

The marketing of the service is a joint effort between WSDOT and Amtrak, although WSDOT has more oversight.

With the addition of the second train service to Vancouver, B.C. which was introduced on August 19, there was an increase in the interest level of supporting the service to make it a success from the various stakeholder groups for Amtrak *Cascades*. So the State Rail and Marine office pulled together the various stakeholder groups and invited them to participate in a group marketing meeting.

The meeting started out with presentations by WSDOT State Rail and Marine staff.

- **Andrew Wood**, Deputy Director of Delivery talked about the Amtrak *Cascades* service, WSDOT's role and investment in the service, and why we do marketing.
- **Vickie Sheehan**, Marketing and Communications Manager gave an overview of the marketing and advertising campaign.
- **Dan Engstrom & Rose Blackson** with Amtrak Field Marketing shared with everyone their role as the grassroots marketing team for Amtrak and how they promote Amtrak *Cascades* through community events, travel and tourism industry, and general local promotions along the route.
- **Kirk Fredrickson**, Project Manager gave an overview of the Amtrak *Cascades* Trainsets Overhaul project. The Amtrak *Cascades* train fleet has been undergoing an interior overhaul for the last couple of years which has included new leather seats, updated interiors, new carpet, and refurbishment of the restrooms and vestibules. Next on the schedule is the remodel of the Bistro and Lounge cars, upgrade of the audio/visual system, and addition of Wi-Fi.

- **Kevin Jeffers**, Rail Engineering Manager gave an overview of capital rail projects that will help improve Amtrak *Cascades* service, reliability, and expansion.

Following the presentations, the group broke out into four work groups that focused on On-board services, Advertising & Marketing, Connectivity, and Customer Service. Each group brainstormed ideas for making improvements to the Amtrak *Cascades* service.

The groups were asked to assess their ideas according to the following rating scale:

- **High value/easy to implement** - ideas that have a high value, and are relatively easy to implement.
- **High value/difficult to implement** - ideas that have a high value, but have a high degree of difficulty to implement.
- **Low value/ easy to implement** - ideas that have a low value, and are relatively easy to implement.
- **Low value/high difficulty** - ideas that have a low value, and have a high degree of difficulty to implement.

Below is a recap of the ideas presented by the groups and an update of WSDOT has done in response to these suggestions. The colors correspond to the four classifications outlined by the group as described above.

On-board services:

1. **Do something to make the lounge car look nicer.**
We recognize that the Lounge Cars are showing signs of wear and tear and we have scheduled them for inclusion in the next stage of the refurbishment in the Amtrak *Cascades* overhaul project.
2. **Move the Amtrak staff out of the lounge car.**
As we move forward with the overhaul of the current train sets, WSDOT and Amtrak are exploring the issues surrounding this concern. We are currently looking at all options to accommodate the staff and their important functions without impeding our customers or impacting revenue.
3. **Add more bike racks.**
We are looking into the current demand for bike racks on-board by analyzing how often they are utilized, demand per routes, etc. We will revisit this when we have results from our analysis.

4. Add a second lounge car.

We recognize the need for additional capacity and this is one of our priorities. Part of our ARRA application included funding to study what type of trains we should purchase in order to expand. If we receive our grant request, we will be seeking input regarding the purchase of additional trains.

5. Once the new Wi-Fi system is in and the existing monitors are gone, make DVD rentals available in a limited number (like Alaska Airlines does) so people without laptops can have access to on-board entertainment. If the DVD devices are made available, we should market this.

As we move forward with the design work for the train overhauls, we are exploring many options with the on-board video and audio.

6. Put duty-free shopping on the Canada trains. Use the glass case in the bistro car for this.

With the very limited amount of storage space, it would be next to impossible to accommodate this idea. Not only would it require much more storage space, but it would have to be locked and bonded.

Advertising & Marketing:

1. Employ social media tools.

Since the meeting in November, we have already started to utilize social media tools such as blogs, Twitter, and photo blogs. In December we posted a blog about the Bistro Car redesign that garnered a huge response with very helpful feedback.

2. Package theme tours, i.e.: pub crawl, geo-caching, etc.

Packaged theme tours have been done through Amtrak's Field Marketing team for some time and they continue to explore all possibilities available.

3. Foreign travel packages – Chinese emerging demographic

Amtrak's Field Marketing team works with local travel agencies to help coordinate travel packages for foreign tourists visiting the Northwest.

4. Co-op advertising.

WSDOT and Amtrak work together to develop cooperative advertising promotions with business partners like the Seattle Seahawks, Seattle Sounders, Victoria Clipper, Kimpton Hotels, radio stations, and others. Most promotions involve the opportunity for both businesses to help each other by using their tools to cooperatively promote the relationship.

5. On-line targeted ads by content.

WSDOT and Amtrak work together to develop on-line advertising

opportunities that target a specific reader on a site that is complimentary to passenger rail travel like Websites focused on travel, news, and weather. For instance, if someone is visiting a news site and is “surfing” the travel page, our ad would pop up.

6. Olympics promotions.

WSDOT and Amtrak have scheduled Amtrak *Cascades* advertising to run in conjunction with the 2010 Olympics and have secured a few radio promotions that tie in with a trip to the Olympics or to Vancouver, BC.

Connectivity:

1. Electronic message boards announcing trains arrivals/departures (like airlines).

WSDOT is working with Amtrak to implement electronic message boards at all stations by late 2010 or early 2011.

2. Show links on Amtrak *Cascades* website to local transit schedules and intercity bus websites (already doing this).

Our Website is updated regularly and contains links to all transit agencies available at each station.

3. Improve marketing of schedule connections with local transit and intercity bus.

Local transit information is available at most stations in addition to listed on our Website under each station city. This is another opportunity that can be improved as we increase our reliability.

4. Include long term parking at major stations in marketing.

All long and short term parking is identified on each station on the Website and is updated as necessary.

5. King Street Station – buses

King Street Station is currently undergoing a \$30 million refurbishment but many of the funds have not yet been secured. We agree that as partners we should aim to make improvements to connections at the station and a couple of options are being discussed.

6. Curbside transit access at stations.

We are continuing to work with transit agencies throughout the corridor to improve and increase transit access at all stations. As we work to improve our reliability, transit agencies will be able to provide more access to coincide with our train schedule.

7. **Google transit**
Although a great connectivity tool, Google Transit is very complex and difficult to maintain accurate information. We are exploring this option as part of our goal to improve all connectivity options.
8. **Zip car or rental car locations at stations.**
There are rental car companies located nearby many of the stations. Some of the stations are owned by Amtrak and some are owned by the cities they are in. Many of the stations simply do not have the available real estate, nor the volume to make it sensible for a rental car company to locate a satellite office at one of our stations.
9. **Improved bike facilities; fenced in areas, bike boxes/crates, etc.**
We have found that most people that cycle and take Amtrak *Cascades* usually bring their bikes with them on board. There doesn't seem to be many people who bring their bikes to the stations and leave them there. Our first step will be to research the demand for this.

Customer service:

1. **Better info on-line regarding services; bike information hard to find.**
Bike information is located on-line at AmtrakCascades.com under Baggage. We are developing a survey on our Website accessibility to gather some feedback on the ease of navigating our site.
2. **Better on/off guidance.**
We are working with Amtrak to improve all areas of service. The addition of the Wi-Fi service and the video upgrade to the trains will help improve this issue.
3. **Identify staff on-board who can answer questions, address issues, etc.**
The addition of the Wi-Fi service and the video upgrade to the trains will help improve this issue, as well as where the staff work space will be located.
4. **Food availability and variety.**
Currently our Bistro menu offers a variety of Northwest favorites, snacks, sandwiches, and beverages designed to accommodate the casual traveler. A few main entrée-like meals are offered and they are rotated each quarter. We try to maintain a good selection that will appeal to all and an annual review of the menu is conducted to look for new opportunities.

5. **Better assistance with luggage.**
We work with Amtrak to improve all areas of service to improve the passenger's experience. Unfortunately, not all stations have the staffing available for baggage assistance, and providing it would be an additional cost to the service.
6. **Guarantee Bistro and Lounge car seating availability.**
As the seating in the Bistro and Lounge car is supplemental, it is subject to a "first come, first serve" process. As we move forward with the overhaul of the current train sets, we are looking at all options to accommodate the needs of our customers in both the Bistro and Lounge Cars. But, as these seats are only a fraction of the revenue seats, we could not guarantee that seating would always be available.
7. **Food service cart taken through cars for convenience and to relieve congestion at Bistro.**
We think this may be something we could try on certain trains, but loadings of some sections would not be viable. As we move forward with the overhaul of the current train sets, we are looking at all options in our re-design.
8. **Seat assignments when booking on-line.**
Amtrak is exploring this option throughout their national system.
9. **On-time reliability.**
On-time reliability is our number one priority. WSDOT and Amtrak are constantly striving to improve reliability. We will be able to make significant improvements to reliability if we are granted ARRA funds that will allow us to complete current capital rail projects that will help reduce rail line congestion.
10. **Allow pets on trains.**
There are many issues to consider with regards to animals on board the trains. To have animals travel in baggage cars would require modifications be made to the trains to accommodate pet crates/travel equipment. It would not be possible to have animals travel in the passenger cars due to health and safety reasons. As the service grows and the demand for more accommodation for animals increases, we will explore this option.
11. **Install call button at seats.**
The seats installed in the trains are not equipped to accommodate this option. The addition of the Wi-Fi service and the video upgrade to the trains will help improve communications between Amtrak staff and passengers.

The meeting concluded with presentations from each group of their ideas. The State Rail and Marine office will follow up with this stakeholder group with a second meeting in the spring to discuss the progress of some of these ideas and strategize on future endeavors. Several of the ideas outlined need further development and study.