Washington State Department of Transportation

Bridging the Gap Between Agencies and Citizens: Performance Journalism Offers A Practical Solution to Communicate Performance Results

By Daniela Bremmer and James H. Bryan, Jr.
TRB Paper 08-1736

The Washington State Department of Transportation (WSDOT) has been using its *Performance Journalism* approach to communicate performance results to diverse audiences including the public, the media, legislators, the governor, policy-makers, and transportation partners around the world. WSDOT has developed this approach based on experience gained over six years of reporting comprehensive transportation system performance information in the agency's quarterly performance report, *Measures, Markers and Mileposts*, also referred to as the *Gray Notebook*. These efforts resulted in enhanced public credibility and supported two subsequent funding increases. *Performance Journalism* is the combination of quantitative reporting using charts, tables, and measurements, along with narrative storytelling. The goal is to share the performance of WSDOT's most complex and diverse programs and projects clearly and concisely in a format that everyone can easily understand and explain to their neighbors.

The Seven Principles of *Performance Journalism*

1 Stories

Good Stories Combined With Good Graphics - Use Narrative Reporting To Make It Real And Tell The Story: Clear, concise, unbiased writing using the what, why, who, and when approach is the key to this first principle. This requires you to be an investigative reporter. And remember, candor builds credibility, so tell the story of when things go right and wrong.


A Perfect Storm: WSDOT Learns From Its Mistakes

WSDOT's Winter Maintenance programs have continued to develop over time in order to improve road conditions when severe winter weather strikes, however, on November 27th, 2006 a series of winter weather conditions hit the central Puget Sound region that ended up temporarily paralyzing drivers on highways and local roads in some of the worst conditions possible. The situation brought forth an opportunity to evaluate Winter maintenance performance and where improvement was needed.

WSDOT utilizes a private weather forecasting organization throughout the year in order to prepare for severe inclement weather. Predictions called for one inch of snow, followed by rain/snow mix. WSDOT usually uses a sand mixture to improve traction when conditions include snow and rain mixes. Unfortunately, below freezing (32°F) temperatures and four additional inches of snow arrived. The storm hit central Puget Sound beginning at 4:00 pm, the traditional start of rush hour.

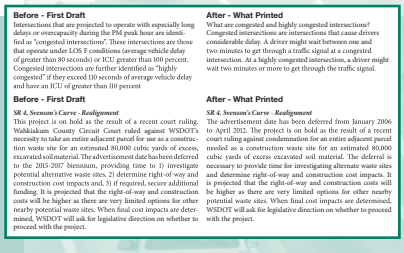
The last complication came after 10:00 pm, when a Monday Night Football game ended at Qwest Field in Seattle. More then 50,000 people immediately entered the freeway system, and were quickly isolated in congestion and decreasing temperatures. Some ended up spending cold evenings in their cars before weather conditions let up enough for WSDOT and King County maintenance vehicles to improve conditions.

After the storm WSDOT publicly addressed its maintenance performance and indicated where it could improve. Although all plows were operational and sand and deicer were well stocked, WSDOT learned that these tools are only effective when storm conditions are analyzed correctly. WSDOT must also accurately communicate to drivers about commutes, driving conditions and preparedness recommendations. Such changes were implemented in storms that arrived later in the winter season, with better performance results.

On November 27 2006, a snow and ice storm paralysed central Puget Sound. WSDOT's maintenance efforts fell short, but gave the department an opportunity to learn and improve performance.

2 Writing

Good Writing: Use a reader friendly approach. Use plain English that is clear, concise, and free of industry jargon. Could someone take that information presented in graphical and text form and explain it to their next door neighbor over the weekend barbeque? However, good writing does not mean "dumbing down" the narrative.


Before - First Draft

Intersections that are projected to operate with especially long delays or overcapacity during the PM peak hour are identified as "congested intersections". These intersections are those that operate under LOS F conditions (average vehicle delay of greater than 80 seconds) or ICU greater than 100 percent. Congested intersections are further identified as "highly congested" if they exceed 110 seconds of average vehicle delay and have an ICU of greater than 110 percent

After - What Printed

What are congested and highly congested intersections? Congested intersections are intersections that cause drivers considerable delay. A driver might wait between one and two minutes to get through a traffic signal at a congested intersection. At a highly congested intersection, a driver might wait two minutes or more to get through the traffic signal.

Before - First Draft

SR 4, Svensson's Curve - Realignment

This project is on hold as the result of a recent court ruling. Wahkiakum County Circuit Court ruled against WSDOT's necessity to take an entire adjacent parcel for use as a construction waste site for an estimated 80,000 cubic yards of excess, excavated soil material. The advertisement date has been deferred to the 2015-2017 biennium, providing time to 1) investigate potential alternative waste sites, 2) determine right-of-way and construction cost impacts and, 3) if required, secure additional funding. It is projected that the right-of-way and construction costs will be higher as there are very limited options for other nearby potential waste sites. When final cost impacts are determined, WSDOT will ask for legislative direction on whether to proceed with the project.

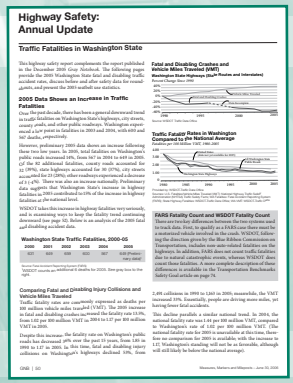
After - What Printed

SR 4, Svensson's Curve - Realignment

The advertisement date has been deferred from January 2006 to April 2012. The project is on hold as the result of a recent court ruling against condemnation for an entire adjacent parcel needed as a construction waste site for an estimated 80,000 cubic yards of excess excavated soil material. The deferral is necessary to provide time for investigating alternate waste sites and determine right-of-way and construction cost impacts. It is projected that the right-of-way and construction costs will be higher as there are very limited options for other nearby potential waste sites. When final cost impacts are determined, WSDOT will ask for legislative direction on whether to proceed with the project.

3 Data

Good Data: Data forms the basis of an organization's performance report. Thus, it is critical that organizations apply the highest standards for data analysis. This requires an unyielding pursuit of data integrity and quality. Organizations must balance this need for data perfection against a need to publish in a timely manner. In addition, an agency must address the issue of incomplete or data limitations.


Highway Safety: Annual Update

Traffic Fatalities in Washington State

2005 Data Shows an Increase in Traffic Fatalities

Washington State Traffic Fatalities, 2000-05

Fatal and Disabling Crashes and Vehicle Miles Traveled (VMT)

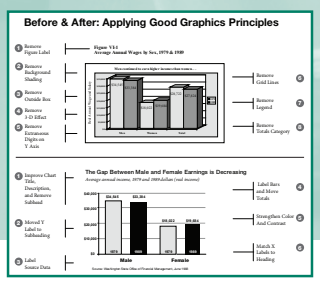
Traffic Fatality Rates in Washington Compared to the National Average

FARS Fatality Count and WSDOT Fatality Count

Comparing Fatal and disabling Injury Collisions and Vehicle Miles Traveled

4 Graphics

Good Graphics: Every Graph Tells A Story- Every Graph Asks A Question. In general, good *Performance Journalism* graphics: 1. Are quickly comprehended and understood by the reader; 2. Are relevant to the data and topic; 3. Are formatted with a sense of balance, proportion, and clarity of design; 4. Can stand on their own if lifted from the page; 5. Have data, analysis and scale integrity; and 6. Answer some fundamental questions.


Before & After: Applying Good Graphics Principles

The Gap Between Male and Female Earnings is Decreasing

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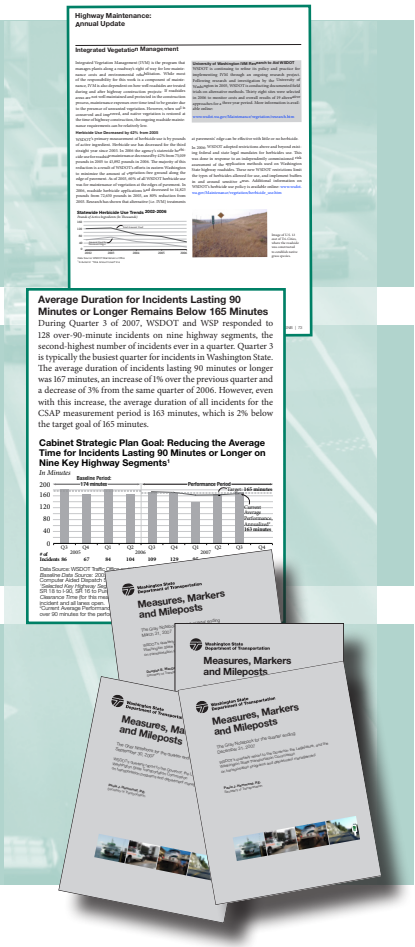
The Seven Principles of *Performance Journalism* (continued)

5 Content Driven Design

Good Format/ Presentation: Good formatting and presentation is an essential principle of *Performance Journalism*, as the design of a report should entice the reader to engage with the material, allow a quick grasp of the message, and not distract from the content. Apart from this, it should employ a reader-friendly page layout and group relevant information together.



6 Quality Control

Quality Control: It's Your Credibility. This requires critical thinking and a good sense and eye for numbers. This also includes ensuring an audit trail in addition to questioning data and text. Executives should be prepared to edit the performance report as needed - performance reporting is not a spectator sport.

7 Timing

Good Timing: Lead - Don't Follow. Timing is everything. It is important to start performance reporting now and to report frequently and consistently. While there is a sense of urgency, it is important to be selective. It is not necessary to start reporting everything immediately; rather, start small. Gradually cover all of the most critical systems and delivery issues.

General Observations and Lessons Learned

WSDOT's strategy for effective communication of performance information, employing the seven principles that are collectively called *Performance Journalism*, has been successful in gaining public support for increased funding. Seattle Mayor Gregory Nickels comments in April of 2007 provide a succinct summary of the results obtained from the *Performance Journalism* approach to performance reporting that was instituted by Secretary Douglas MacDonald: "Under [Doug MacDonald's] watch Washington State increased funding for state highway projects to an unprecedented degree. He consistently emphasized accountability to the people of Washington State." In light of the importance of effective performance reporting methods in effectively informing the public and supporting cases for increased funding, more in-depth work in researching, testing and validating the effectiveness of various performance reporting approaches needs to be done.

Where to Find Performance Information

WSDOT's Accountability website, http://www.wsdot.wa.gov/accountability/, has a number of transportation performance reporting resources. This includes a Performance Measurement Library, http://www.wsdot.wa.gov/Accountability/Publications/Library.htm, which contains an inventory of performance measurement practices of various local, national, and international organizations and agencies.

WSDOT's performance information, including the Gray Notebook, the Governor's Government Management Accountability & Performance (GMAP) Transportation Forums, WSDOT's Strategic Plan, and Performance Audits relating to WSDOT, can be easily accessed from the accountability homepage, visit: www.wsdot.wa.gov/Accountability/.

For more information, contact:

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