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**PUBLIC RELATIONS IN THE COURTS, NATIONAL TRENDS AND A
PLAN FOR YAKIMA COUNTY**

This study documents court related public relations strategies employed across the country and evaluates their relative success. This study also explores general strategies employed by major marketing firms and experts and offers an opportunity to compare current public relations efforts in the courts against basic marketing principles used in the private sector. The most important aspect of this study was the investigation of public relations strategies and activities which enabled a specific action plan for Yakima County Washington to be developed.

This study looks at national trends in court public relations, strategies in the private sector and local demographics and culture to provide an overall strategy for one court in Washington. The information presented would allow any court to replicate the project. Another court could use the research from this study supplemented by local data to design an action plan for their specific location and needs.

The national survey conducted as part of this study indicates that while most courts spend some time developing and disseminating information, this activity represents only a small part of the overall court function. In an age where more and more litigants are unrepresented and tax payers' demands for services increase, responses to the survey indicate that courts are just beginning to enter the marketing arena. This study showed that in some instances court services are promoted to educate the general public

about where to go for which service. In other instances public relations activities are used to explain court services and functions and the role of the judiciary in government. Marketing products are used by the courts to educate, clarify and persuade.

In Yakima County not only the media is interested in the court expenditures, revenues, case management and operations. Funding sources, government officials, the bar, community leaders and educators are asking for more information as the local law and justice agencies including the courts, request additional funding. Funding increases are essential for facilities' expansion, staffing to handle increasingly complex civil and expanding criminal caseloads resulting from increased criminal activity.

The development of a public relations action plan is very timely for Yakima. As funding has decreased overall for the county due to recently passed state initiatives, it is extremely difficult to maintain current budgets and next-to-impossible to garner support for increases in general fund court appropriations. The county is depending upon voter passed-taxes to fund some criminal justice operations directly and for some facilities expansion projects.

This study has helped Yakima in two ways. First, the study explored all of the methods courts nation-wide use in their public relations efforts. Many excellently prepared materials for specific topics emerged which the Court can use as prototypes for their own materials. Secondly, it examined local demographics and preferences to determine which public relations strategies would be best suited for Yakima.

The most difficult piece of public relations strategy development is in identifying the market in which a particular court exists and then selecting the tools and products that will most effectively reach that local market with the intended message. The action plan

for Yakima County Courts is specifically tailored to its environment and the bench enthusiastically agrees with the approach recommended.

Had a study of this depth not been conducted for Yakima, the author would have taken a completely different approach to a public relations strategy for this county. It was during the research phase of the study and after the interviews that the final strategy emerged. A sustainable public relations program for Yakima County, which builds upon activities conducted each month through a 24- month period, will create a solid foundation for communicating with the public and community leaders.

Lacking this foundation, public relations efforts are not able to reach a broad audience and are not able to address critical issues more than superficially. Marketing products may play a secondary role in this approach but will only be used as tools to enhance foundational aspects of communications and will not be substituted for much needed and welcomed one-on-one inter-faces with decision makers and the public at large.

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