

Eight tips for organizing a flash mob



Have you ever had a quiet walk in your city or shopping trip to the nearest mall interrupted by a group of folks who seem to have spontaneously gathered to sing, dance, zombie-walk, etc.? Then, within minutes, the group quickly disperses as if nothing ever happened?

If so, then you've likely witnessed a "flash mob" – an assembly of individuals in public spaces performing bizarre (yet really fun) actions to raise awareness on an important issue. Or just bring people together in an act of temporary community.

Flash mobs are being used more and more by activists around the world as a creative way to generate a buzz around an issue. Done well, flash mobs have the ability to grab the attention of reporters and the public-at-large. At best, they are energetic, fun and a short time commitment for those who participate.

Still confused? Check out a few fun examples on YouTube:

- Hundreds "freeze" at Grand Central Station in New York City:
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jwMj3PJDxuo>
- "Don't get caught in a bad hotel!" Protest for worker rights in San Francisco:
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-79pX1IOqPU>
- Flash mob for Sexual Assault Awareness Month at Villanova University in Philadelphia:
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wwzAcFEk34Y>
- "Target Ain't People!" Protestors take aim at retail giant Target's election funding for an anti-worker, anti-gay candidate: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9FhMMmqzbd8>
- Torontonians share the love during a Valentine's Day kissing flash mob:
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4sXTS1gnoQs>

How about using this great technique in your community as part of a campaign? Interested in organizing your own flash mob? Here are some helpful tips to get you started:

Summary of eight tips for running a flash mob:

1. Set a clear and achievable goal
2. Determine your flash mob action
3. Know your location
4. Get organized
5. Time it out
6. Keep it simple
7. Keep it a secret
8. Record the event

TIP 1 Set a clear and achievable goal

Perhaps your main goal is to raise public awareness about an issue impacting your community. That's great! Maybe your goal is to send a message directly to your MP. That's good! Or, maybe you want to publicly embarrass your MP for a position they've already taken. That's fair game too. Be clear about your goal. This will help focus your energy and your message.

TIP 2 Determine your flash mob action

Each flash mob is unique. A lot of the planning depends on the circumstances at hand (e.g. what are the key locations in the community; what is your MP's summer barbecue schedule; how many people will participate; etc...).

Before going any further, you'll have to figure out:

1. **WHEN** the flash mob will be held (date/time);
2. **WHERE** it will take place (location);
3. **HOW** it will look (based on the resources at your disposal);
4. And **WHO** will participate (aim for as many energetic participants as possible!).

Also, whatever flash mob action you choose it must easily and clearly communicate your message to the public (it's no good to run a flash mob if the message is lost on onlookers).

Flash Mob Suggestion Box

- Freeze mob (all participants stand still);
- Dress up as zombies and stagger around a public space;
- Sing a song (one that's catchy and that clearly gets your message across);
- Hold a quiet vigil flash mob (participants stay quite, holding signs, or candles);

TIP 3 Know your location

If you're targeting a train station, consider a time when most people are getting on and off the train (without disrupting their travel plans). If it's a shopping mall, plan a time when most people are shopping - not a Wednesday evening at 9 p.m. If you're holding the flash mob in a town square, make sure there aren't renovations taking place that will make the flash mob more difficult to coordinate. If it's your MP's constituency office, make sure it's on a day that she or he is actually there! Better yet, consider a time when there is an event going on at the office!

Knowing your location is critical. Take the time to scope out the grounds and make sure it's conducive to your flash mob plans.

TIP 4 Get organized

Part of the challenge in setting up a flash mob is coordination and accurate timing.

It is highly recommended that a comprehensive phone, email or text message tree is established. This enables organizers to send out short, quick instructions on where to be and when to start and to stay in regular contact with participants before, during and after the mob takes place.

If you've decided to set up a dance flash mob, it's very important participants have a chance to practice the moves first – so as not to look out of place (HINT: most dance flash mobs involve a professional dance choreographer).

If your flash mob requires props, banners, whistles, streamers, whatever... it's important that those are prepared well in advance.

Also, participants must know what to do and where to go, once the flash mob action is finished. It's no good having hundreds of people standing around, confused and not knowing what to do next. Wrapping up a flash mob in a timely and orderly fashion is just as important as getting one started.

TIP 5 Time it out

Flash mobs are most effective when they're done quickly, in 2-3 minutes tops!

TIP 6 Keep it simple

Make sure you don't overshoot expectations. Unless you're planning on running a choreographed dance, participants should be asked to do one thing during the flash mob that's not complicated. Keeping the action simple (e.g. freezing in one place for one minute) will encourage more participation and keep your action focused.

Always use common sense

Never compromise the safety of flash mob participants. This is very important.

- Don't organize a flash mob in a dangerous location (e.g. a busy intersection).
- Don't run a flash mob that includes dangerous, violent or aggressive behaviour (this includes using props that are dangerous or could be misconstrued as dangerous – like toy guns).
- Don't upset the public or inconvenience them (remember: this isn't a picket line)
- This list of examples is not exhaustive! If you have any questions about flash mob actions, please don't hesitate to contact Unifor.

TIP 7 Keep it a secret

The key to an effective flash mob is the element of surprise. Don't take out a full page ad in the newspaper inviting people to attend. If so, you've let the cat out of the bag!

Feel free to tip off your local media in advance of your flash mob, but don't give away too many details (i.e. tell them that there will be an important and unusual protest on a certain date and at a certain time. Tell them it'll be worth their while to show up and to bring a camera). Just the mystery of it all might improve the chances that the story gets covered.

TIP 8 Record the event

The amazing part of flash mobs is their global popularity driven by social media. Most people have learned about flash mobs through Facebook or YouTube, not by relying on mainstream media outlets to spread the word. ALL flash mob organizers set up a team of videographers and photographers to capture the event. These people must be discrete too!

Once you've captured all the footage, it is worthwhile to enlist the help of a video producer – or someone who is computer savvy – to create a short, entertaining video of the event.

Be sure to send in your videos to communications@unifor.org

Unifor will post your flash mob videos on its YouTube channel. They might even be shown at an upcoming conference, workshop or seminar. Be sure to circulate the link through your own social media lists and spread the word!

