HOW TO ORGANIZE A FLASH MOB

Written by Hollaback Brussels with input from Wiki-How and our international community of site leaders.

A Flash Mob is a strategic way to bring awareness to street harassment. Holding a public demonstration helps reach new supporters, dialogue with the general public, and bring attention to street harassment. Here are the key steps you can take to conduct a successful flash mob:

1 RESEARCH! Watch previous flash mob events on YouTube. There is quite a collection available to watch and this will provide an excellent source of inspiration as well as an idea of the do’s and don’ts. Here are a few.

2. Decide where you will have your flash mob. The success of a flash mob event is dependent on the originality, liveliness, and attractiveness of the event. Avoid copying a flash mob event that has been performed somewhere else. Always make alterations to any flash mob performance that has inspired you so that it has your own mark of originality and local relevance. In all cases, the performance must be worked out in advance and either rehearsed or well explained in some manner (such as through online instructions) so that everyone knows their role and interactions with the other performers. The most typical flash mob performances involve such activities as:
- Choreographed dance: an example would be a large group all performing a dance in the park to support a lover proposing to his girlfriend.
- Singing something. For example, you can do a rendition of a popular song by changing the lyrics so they are street harassment-related.
- Acting out a particular scenario: such as how to respond to a street harasser.
- Mime: An example would be pretending to try and find a way through a wall that isn't there.
- World Record: Trying to break a Guinness World Record by having the largest gathering doing a street harassment awareness event at the same time.
- Freeze Flash Mob: All members become living statues and freeze.

Street harassment specific themes include: “Dreaming of a Brussels without Street Harassment” and “Primal Scream.” For “Dreaming of a Brussels without Street Harassment” there is a group of people frozen in a public place and they have signs affixed to their clothes that say “I’m dreaming of a Brussels without Street Harassment”. “Primal Scream” never happened as a flash mob because we felt it played too much into a “deranged woman” archetype and was not productive at this time. However, as an example: a group of men and women screaming together for 1 minute, all at the same time. That is your action. The theme connected to that action would be “frustration with the current state of affairs of equality between the sexes.”
3. **Communication.** If your action does not involve words or explanation, consider making signs, or planting representatives in the public, or having audio of some kind, if you are trying to convey a specific message if you want the public to know what organization you are representing. A flash mob by the group *Improv Everywhere* where a large group of men went into Abercrombie & Fitch with their shirts off is an example of something that was effective, but didn’t need extra communication. Although *Improv Everywhere* only does events to cause a scene, this action could also be interpreted as a comment on the ridiculousness of using muscled naked bodies as a marketing tool to sell clothing.

4. **Establish a support system** of organizations that are interested in becoming co-sponsors of the flash mob in order to bring in extra people, do a cool action together for a cause, get to know one another as organizations, and support each other.

5. **Get people to participate** using your social media networks and your partner organizations’ networks. You may also be able to draw on the resources of a class you’re in, a performance or dance group you’re a part of, or other groups of people you spend time with. Ask your friends and family if they'd like to be a part of it too. **But remember that flash mobs are supposed to be a surprise** so keep that in mind before you send out invites on facebook or twitter. It’s best to send personal messages on facebook or email or create private facebook groups. Try using the “tell 10 to tell 10” tactic where you ask each invitee to tell ten more people about the flash mob. In these messages make sure you are clear what your expectations are for involvement. For example, if you are organizing a flash mob with a dance routine, you should tell people in advance that they will be expected to show up to rehearsals.

Reach beyond your personal social network:

- One online resource for organizing a flash mob is through Flashmob.com.
- *Improv Everywhere* is based in New York City and while not all of its street performances are flash mobs, some are and you might be able to participate with them if you're located in NYC. Check out their website for more information ([http://improveverywhere.com/missions/](http://improveverywhere.com/missions/)).
- There are many local flash mob websites; just use a search engine to find them using your location name and the term "flash mob".

3. **Find a safe place or someplace where the particular issue is prevalent.** Communicate with your supporters to be sure that they feel safe at the location where the event will be held. **Know the limitations of your location.** Do a proper check of the area you’re proposing to perform the flash mob in. There may be safety, legal, or physical limits on what can be done in the location. To avoid getting into trouble legally it’s important to not create unsafe obstructions, safety problems, or to hold up people in ways that prevent them from their usual business on non-public premises. While there is obviously a balance between encouraging people to watch and blocking people from getting on with their usual activities, you need to judge that your flash mob won’t be the cause of emergency or unlawful situations. For example, if your flash mob would be likely to block emergency exits, then think again about where to locate the event.
Tell your participants what to do in the event that the police or some other authority requests that your group leave. The best option is to do as asked quietly and peacefully. In any case, a well-run, legitimate flash mob will be over and done with before these people even arrive!

4. Set a time that is convenient for most supporters. You can create a survey (for free online through surveymonkey.com) that participants can fill out with information about which time frame works best for them. Using those results you can pick a time based on the majority consensus.

5. Delegate roles in the organization team such as choreographer and volunteer coordinator.

6. Create and communicate clear instructions for participants who will be participating in the action. Put these instructions into a shared document so people can refer back to it.

From Wiki How:

**Provide clear instructions to your group of people.** The success of your flash mob event will require your participants to know exactly what to do. It is best if you can have a rehearsal beforehand, but if this isn't possible, then at least provide very clear instructions (either online or by email, etc.) as to what to wear, where to be at what time, what to do (for example: Be prepared to freeze, walk, dance, gape like a fish, etc, on the corner of 55th street and 3rd avenue at 7am), and how long to do the act for. If any participants need to interact together, it's best if they rehearse this for the sake of timing and accuracy.

If the instructions are simple, such as everyone stand in one place reading a newspaper they've cut eye holes in, then the simplicity of the action will probably mean you don't need to rehearse. However, it's a very good idea for everyone participating to try and meet up somewhere prior to the event to quickly run over the details, what's expected of the event and participants, and what to do when it's over. It's also helpful to explain what to do if people get annoyed or the police try to shift the group.

If the instructions are complex, especially where scenes need to be choreographed and organized, then consider having a smaller group of people you are certain can turn up to rehearsals and keep fairly quiet about the event, rather than having a much larger and harder to coordinate group. About 50 people can be organized fairly successfully, but higher numbers mean that things start getting trickier.

7. Gather any supplies or props that you might need (print out signs, gather costumes). **Make signs and banners** that are eye-catching and that bring attention to the seriousness of street harassment and other issues being addressed. For example, you may have supporters create banners with statistics showing the prevalence of street harassment or signs that show pictures of harassers.—please see the “communication” bullet point to know whether or not you want to use banners to alert the public of the “point” or “cause” of your flash mob.

**Note:** It is best to ask the participants to bring their own props or to organize their own costume gear (such as evening wear, swimsuits, wigs, whatever) but sometimes you'll need to provide
things for everyone. If the props or costumes are difficult for people to find or make on their own, consider holding a workshop beforehand in which everyone has the opportunity to create the items needed. However, you should aim for simple clothes and items, or things that people already have in their wardrobe or house.

For complicated props, coordinate with any on-site partners (example: are you trying to use someone else’s sound system to provide music)?

8. Recording the event: **Organize quality videography/photography for the event.** It's definitely worth having the whole event filmed so that you can upload it to YouTube, vimeo, twitter, facebook etc. Who knows? It might even go viral! If nothing else, it will serve as inspiration for other flash mobs in the future.

9. Decide on a finish: **Finish as if nothing ever happened.** Once the flash mob event is over, don’t allow the participants to sit around and talk or to start talking to the crowd. They need to mingle back with the crowd and head off into the sunset as if nothing ever took place.

Note: Hollaback! Brussels decided to do the traditional flash mob model finish. However, we also decided to return (after a few minutes) to the location and unroll our banner and talk to people/get people’s opinions on their desires for the streets of Brussels as it relates to safety and harassment, so ours was a double event—flash mob plus a “public poll” of some sort—asking for dreams of how they want their city to be in detail.

10. **Look for a meeting point for before and after.**

    **Before:** If necessary, pick a spot where you can gather before the action to be sure the communication of planning and the actions to be executed is clear for everyone and to hand out potential supplies needed for the action.

    **After:** De-briefing of how the action went, tea or coffee or meal or picnic for people to discuss the issue in general/compare experiences of the flash mob/decompression time for those
who want it. You can also talk about actions for the long term, i.e. what to do next and how to collaborate with other organizations in the future.

11. Be aware that several people might not show up that signed up to participate and come prepared with a Plan B.

12. Make sure that your message is inclusive and that you do not alienate anyone who may be a supporter. Before the event, talk with your supporters about appropriate messages for signs and banners to make sure that they represent the message of the event without singling out or offending a particular group of people. Always encourage diversity and unity at your event. Prep those who are participating on the message of Hollaback. Quite often during Flash Mobs, those around or walking by might ask participants questions, challenge the action (especially if it is not frenetic action), or otherwise. Pre-training or a frank conversation beforehand is a good idea because of this and also for your core group to clarify whether or not you want to encourage people to talk/represent themselves as participants, represent Hollaback, or prefer them to just do the action and not step out of it in order to explain. That will be up to you, but it will also be up to those participating and what they are comfortable with.

13. Decide how to deal with the press. Flash mobs are supposed to be a surprise but you might want the press to be there. One idea is that if you know the press agents well enough that you can get them to sign a secrecy form that says they can’t alert the police or any other press
agents. One other idea is that you don’t invite press, but you use your own photos and videos of the event to send to your press contacts after you finish.

If you want to alert the press, you can send your press release to local newspapers and other media outlets (see our ‘how to’ on press releases.) Avoid websites and blogs because that will make the flash mob too public and you’ll lose the element of surprise. Unfortunately, the method by which you get the participants will alert people to its existence, but you could ask participants not to spread the news any further and hope that the average bystander who happens to be about when you execute the flash mob won’t have been alerted to the event!

14. **Keep the peace** by making sure that your supporters are not breaking laws that may result in arrests. Blocking traffic, failure to disperse after being ordered to, and loitering are all actions that may result in arrest. **Some cities may require you to obtain a permit for certain activities, such as using a microphone outside. In Belgium you might need a police presence and approval. This can take weeks or months to get. Decide whether or not you would like to risk not getting a permit.**

Other things to consider:
- Know the local laws with respect to large gatherings in particular places. It may be illegal. Be clued into the difference between public and private locations and the possibility of people attempting to sue for trespass. If you’ve left an internet trail, it won’t be hard to find someone who will complain, so just make sure to cover your bases by being legally savvy.
- You might get stopped by officials. Be prepared when that happens and don’t be argumentative or confrontational. Follow directions and disperse as requested.
- Some people will be offended or put off by a flash mob. This is more likely to be the case if you invade a retail business or anywhere that business is being conducted, as those running the business will view the interruption as potentially damaging to sales, customer impressions and workers’ routines. As discussed above, you need to do your homework well in advance to ensure that what you do is not overly disruptive and is definitely not illegal, harmful, safety compromising, or likely to cost someone else a lot of money. Be wise in your choice of venue.

Things you might need:
- Large amount of willing participants
- Rehearsal area (optional)
- Online rallying sites such as Twitter, Facebook, Google+, a website, etc.
- Props (optional)
- Music and music player or sound system (optional)

ENJOY!!