

Cash Mobs: Not a Crime Spree, but a Shopping Spree

By Andrea L. Dono | From Main Street Story of the Week | May-June 2012

Last year seemed to be the advent of “cash mobs” on Main Street. If you haven’t heard, a cash mob is the shop local version of a “flash mob”—people descend upon a small business and agree to spend at least \$20 during a short window of time. This trend is a perfect fit for Main Street, the champions of supporting small businesses and rallying community members, especially with the trend’s mantra, “We each do a little. We all do a lot.”

So, what is the point of a cash mob? Essentially it’s just another way of celebrating our small businesses and what they do for our communities. Most importantly, it’s about the customers. This is their event. It does not belong to you or to the retailers. It’s their chance to feel good about doing something small that can have a big impact, and it helps build community spirit.

An added benefit is that a cash mob introduces new customers to an establishment. This can be a boon for a business that has just opened. It also brings media and customer attention to your entire commercial district. If you haven’t done one yet, rest assured that it doesn’t take much planning, and can pretty much be executed on the fly.

It isn’t clear where the first cash mob happened or who coined the phrase. Even Andrew Samtoy, the organizer of what he thought was the first one in Cleveland in November 2011, learned that Christopher Smith organized one a few months earlier with the same name in Buffalo, New York. Regardless, Samtoy has created a website (cashmobs.wordpress.com) that serves as a blog and online community for people interested in cash mobs.

Cash mobs are truly “of the people.” Samtoy originally posted three rules for a cash mob:

- spend \$20
- meet three new people
- and have fun.

Other suggested rules have popped up and have been deleted in the last year and even Samtoy admits he finds himself questioning them. This website is a great place to ask a question, have a dialog, and learn what others have done that works and doesn’t work.

First things first: know right off the bat that your Main Street program does not have to be the coordinator of this event, although many programs have enjoyed taking this on. If your promotion committee volunteers are already swamped, but love the idea of a cash mob in your district, plant the seed with your allies. It doesn’t need to be led by an organization; individuals in the community can do it.

Amy Cortese, for example, the keynote speaker at our 2012 National Main Streets Conference, organizes cash mobs in her Brooklyn neighborhood. Lancaster Alive, a group that formed with the goal of developing a sense of place and improving the quality of life in Lancaster, Ohio, organized a cash mob at a bookstore in the Main Street district. Another example is the St. Johns Main Street program in Portland, Oregon, which used a small coalition of people to plan its cash mob. The idea was shared after a St. Johns resident heard about cash mobs on NPR and posted a comment on the neighborhood’s Facebook page. People responded enthusiastically, and three local business owners took the lead in organizing the event and setting up and administering the cash mob’s Facebook page.

You’ll first need to select a date. Let’s use some of the info I shared in the Network Note about convenient shopping hours. Unless you have a strong office worker pool to pull from for a lunch-hour cash mob (which could be kinda cool, actually, because you can use the event to help change shopping/dining habits of downtown employees), planning an early evening event on a typically slower business day would probably be best (Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday are likely choices). Hitting the business during its busiest time will only make a business owner and his or her staff frantic. Most cash mobs are over in a flash—an hour usually does the trick, so they are great for boosting sales during a slower time in the week.

This year, Saturday, March 24th, was International Cash Mob Day. Some Main Street programs planned their first and only cash mob for this day, while others started a recurring event. Most groups who do cash mobs regularly schedule them once a month. St. Johns cash mobs are on the first Friday of every month. It follows St. Johns Last Friday Art Walk, which gives people two consecutive weekends of events in the neighborhood. The Downtown Tupelo Main Street Association in Mississippi planned one in conjunction with its April downtown Open House event where retailers offered free drinks and snacks, special sales, and a showcase of Easter merchandise.

In Hamilton County, Iowa, the tiny town of Stratford had a cash mob in March at a community-owned grocery store, the Stratford Food Center. They took a non-traditional approach and left it open as to what time people shopped because the staff and single cash register would not have been able to handle it otherwise. Thanks to the cash mob, the store had \$8,500 in sales that day; a typical Saturday usually brings in around \$2,400.

Once you have the date and time, you need to get the word out. The end goal is to get as many people there as possible so use all of your communication channels to tell people about it and do it often. Lead time ranges between a month to a week or two. A really long lead time might lose momentum and buzz, but if you do a monthly gathering like St. Johns, it can make it easier to stay at the forefront of people's minds. A shorter lead time might help the event "go viral" online and build a quick momentum where participants get caught up in the buzz and decide to join in.

This is a great event to promote via social media like Facebook and Twitter. Many organizers even create separate pages for the cash mob on Facebook. Samtoy suggests setting up a special Twitter handle that is "CM[your city name]." Durant, Oklahoma, for example, used the hashtag #CashMobDurantOK. Also, use your e-newsletters, website, and traditional media outreach. I have seen a lot of local news coverage—both print and broadcast—so tip off your journalists about this feel-good story.

Next, select the lucky business. People have gotten very creative with the selection process. Nacogdoches Main Street asked locals to write on their Facebook wall and tweet where they wanted to have the cash mob. Many organizers take nominations from community members, generally through social media, and ask people to vote on where the cash mob will take place. Letting customers decide on the mob venue not only reinforces the spirit behind the idea; it also takes the pressure off the organizers to choose a business themselves.

Livermore Downtown in California used the Main Street Four-Point Approach® to guide the selection process. The promotion committee planned the event and put the name of each downtown business in a bucket. Each time a business owner attended a promotion committee meeting, the name of his or her business was again dropped into the bucket, which boosted their chances of winning. When participants meet to start the cash mob, a name is drawn from the bucket and the business is immediately broadcast via social media so the business owner and shoppers will know where it will be held.

There are two schools of thought when it comes to announcing the business to be cash mobbed. Some people like to choose and announce the business in advance while others choose it right before they go shopping. On one hand, advanced notice gives the business owner enough time to prep the inventory and schedule enough staff. On the other hand, the cash mob craze originated as a spontaneous event. If the retailer gets a week or two to advertise the cash mob, it comes across more as an advertisement, and we get enough of those.

Rachael Snedecor, executive director of Livermore Downtown, feels strongly that Main Street programs should honor the spirit of the cash mob as something that is shopper-driven and let participants and organizers, not the business, promote it. Even though the Durant cash mob organizers only told participants where they were going once everyone gathered at the designated meeting spot, they dropped hints during the week leading up to the event.

Almost all cash mobs ask people to spend at least \$20 at the local business. This price point is about inclusion so that shoppers of all income levels can support their community. Snedecor coaches shops that sell expensive items to prepare for the cash mob by having less expensive items available.

“The shoe shop where we had our first cash mob sells high-end comfort shoes that can cost up to a few hundred dollars,” Snedecor says. “But they also carry socks, jewelry, shoe cleaners, and accessories. Everyone who participated was determined to somehow spend at least \$20 there. You’re inviting all of the customers who care, not just big spenders. There needs to be something for everyone—don’t ruin their motive. You can’t ask them to spend their entire budget.”

Given the spirit of a cash mob, it’s always more about the community coming together than the dollars they spent. Be realistic about what will be accomplished monetarily. If a business is going under and really struggling, a one-time shopping blitz isn’t going to save it, especially if poor business skills or lack of a business plan is to blame. But in the case of the shoe store in Livermore, the business owner was having a pretty slow day, selling only about \$200 of merchandise. The cash mob brought in \$950 in just an hour. And, even though only one employee was in the store at the time, customers were patient about waiting for service and purchases.

For many people, spending money is recreational, so never forget that fun is at the heart of this event. “It’s about community spirit,” says Annie Allerdice, a cash mob co-conspirator with the St. Johns Cultural Guild. “It is so rewarding to support each other. And, we are making new friends.”

The “meeting three new people” rule is definitely a cool idea, so try to keep that sentiment alive. Take lots of photos as people assemble, as they meet each other, as they shop, as they are handing the clerk their \$20 bills, and then post the pictures. Keep it social. Put your photos on Facebook and Twitter, and ask people to post theirs as well.

This is your chance to expose new people to more of what the downtown has to offer. Lancaster Alive cleverly kicked off its cash mob at a downtown eatery for a group lunch, and then followed a shopping blitz with socializing at a nearby bar. This plan showcased three downtown businesses and gave participants plenty of time to chat and get to know each other.

However, hold off on the impulse to make your cash mob a downtown-wide event. Of course it would be great if cash mobbers decided to make an entire outing out of shopping at Main Street businesses, but then this event would resemble Sidewalk Sales or Open House business promotions. Remember, cash mobs aren’t about people emptying their wallets. It seems like anywhere from 25-65 participants is the norm and success comes in making an entrepreneur’s day and giving community members something to do as a group.

Snedecor suggests that businesses not getting mobbed should stay open on the night of the cash mob in case there is spill-over shopping. Perhaps they can hand out coupons to give shoppers a reason to come back to Main Street and stop in to see them.

“But this isn’t about pressuring people to shop,” says Snedecor. “Don’t ruin the spirit. I tell everyone this trend is pure heart right now and we are going to respect that. Let that one business be the focus.”