

Flash Mob “Invades” Sleepy Rural Town

Lorie A. Tuma, Grand Valley State University

Roy A. Cook, Fort Lewis College

Kara Waldecker, Undergraduate Student, Central Michigan University

This case was prepared by the authors and is intended to be used as a basis for class discussion. The views presented here are those of the authors based on their professional judgment and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Society for Case Research. Copyright © 2014 by the Society for Case Research and the authors. No part of this work may be reproduced or used in any form or by any means without the written permission of the Society for Case Research.

Introduction

What do a flash mob and social media have to do with social change and economic development? The citizens of Rogers City, Michigan, a little-known, sleepy town on the northern shores of Lake Huron, soon found themselves at the epicenter of change when their town suddenly appeared “on the map.” In an instance, the world knew about Rogers City when a flash mob created instant notoriety for the town when a group of college students were videotaped by the editor of the local paper while performing “The Hustle” on Main Street at the only four-corner stoplight in town.

The five television and newspaper reporters who initially covered the story created a social media buzz on Twitter that was followed by more than 2,000 comments and “hits” on Facebook, YouTube, and Vimeo. Students, members of the community, and statewide advocates left a thread of testimonials and comments that resulted in a renewed commitment, according to residents, and a desire by local business people and elected officials to enhance the city’s tourism profile. The events leading up to the appearance of this flash mob, the impetus for its existence, and the subsequent results of its appearance provided a great deal of insight into social change and the potential benefits of tourism as a means of economic development.

Searching for Economic Growth

Rogers City, Michigan, was like many other small rural beach towns dotting the shores of the Great Lakes. With a population of 2,819, this picturesque town, reminiscent of a Norman Rockwell painting, is located along the shoreline of Lake Huron approximately 50 miles south of the famous Mackinac Bridge. Rogers City, the county seat of Presque Isle County, was founded in 1872 and has had a long history of successes and challenges. The lumber industry first drew settlers to the area, but then farming became the main economic driver. Next came the discovery of the largest limestone deposit in the world just south of town and the mining boom that followed.

As each of these industries rose in economic significance and then faded away, so did the town’s fortunes. The citizens seemed to lose their self-esteem as they looked on hopelessly as the town declined. The population has declined slowly over the past 2 decades, dropping a little more than

9% since 1990. Rogers City became just one of many towns in the Great Lakes region struggling with economic stagnation.

As stated in the *Hour Detroit* (“Rogers City Renaissance,” 2013),

For years, every spring when Jo Gingras and her mother drove from Farmington to Rogers City to open the family cottage, she always had a lump in her throat on the first trip to town. She couldn’t help but wonder: Which businesses had survived the winter, and which ones had closed up shop? (p. 1)

As Rogers City continued to face challenges related to economic development, the idea of focusing on its scenic beauty and natural resources to attract more tourists seemed like a viable option to some of the locals. However, one large hurdle stood in the way of this desire: Community leaders and business owners needed to communicate effectively what they had to offer to potential visitors, but they had no funds for marketing.

Lack of Focus

Like many small towns in Michigan, Rogers City had been given the opportunity to participate in the state’s Renaissance Zone Project to encourage business growth, but just like the results of so many other towns of a similar size, these efforts at economic development had been fruitless. Looking for alternatives to achieve economic growth while also reflecting on the physical attractiveness of their town and its lakeside setting, the leaders of Rogers City decided to position the town as a great place to visit, a great place for families to live, and a great place for senior citizens to retire. However, “with a shortage in job opportunities, and the lack of a formal marketing campaign, Rogers City continued to struggle to establish itself as a tourism destination. Recreation activities such as boating and sport fishing had also declined further decreasing local economic activity” (“Community Recreation Plan, Rogers City,” 2009, p. 1). Without resources, Rogers City had not been able to participate in the Pure Michigan campaign, one of the most successful tourism branding promotions in the world (Forbes, 2010).

Although there was no designated tourist office for Rogers City, the town had been included in the county’s tourism site, which provided maps as well as accommodation and site attraction information to visitors. Any tourism activity that took place in the area was the direct result of an overflow from neighboring destinations, not from anything intentionally developed or encouraged by the town. Although tourism development had not been encouraged intentionally in the Rogers City area, three main tourist attractions did exist and did bring people into the surrounding area: the 40 Mile Point Lighthouse; Hoeft State Park, a heavily wooded park with a mile of the sandy Lake Huron shoreline; and the Presque Isle Museum. Without the support of a local tourism office or official initiative for tourism development, if Rogers City was going to make tourism a real economic driver, the local citizens had to sense more pride in their city, become involved, and find ways to let others know what the city and surrounding area had to offer.

The city hosts the Nautical Festival each year in August. The festival is the town’s one large tourism event and includes a pageant, a dinner, a mixer, a sailors’ memorial, sidewalk art, crafts,

games, and tournaments. Over the past few years, this event has attracted large numbers of visitors, more than tripling the size of the town. Could other events, activities, or other focused efforts provide increased tourism activity and economic growth for the community?

Community leaders had thought about these questions, but the nonexistent budget had meant little concrete action. Unbeknownst to these leaders, a group of college students fulfilling a basic course requirement were about to create a way for the city to communicate what it had to offer to the world. With a little encouragement and a goal of creating social change, these students latched on to an idea that created an opportunity to shine an international spotlight on this sleepy rural town.

Turning an Impossible Dream into a Grand Slam Home Run

How the idea, or maybe the dream of instant notoriety, for Rogers City to appear on the scene in the form of a flash mob found its way to this bucolic lakeside setting might be difficult to imagine. A group of tourism leadership students had that dream and made it a reality. The concept of a group of people gathering en masse just for the sake of gathering and performing, known as a flash mob, might make little sense, unless one is a millennial student, a cohort of adolescents and 20-somethings. Contemporary students are wired, connected, and mobile. They use social networking to connect, and they desire immediacy (Tapscott, 2009); fast technology; and access around the clock (Shih & Allen, 2007).

As a suggestion to the reader, let your imagination run wild as you envision a typical flash mob setting, and think about how this same set of circumstances might take place in Rogers City. Flash mobs characteristically take place in large cities or venues, so Rogers City definitely was not a typical candidate for this type of activity. For example, you might have found yourself casually having lunch in a local mall with a friend. Many people around you were probably doing the same; some might have left to return to shop, and others might have taken the time to stop and rest as they placed shopping bags at their feet and sat down. Suddenly, you started to hear music playing in the background. You looked around, trying to locate the source. It got louder and louder, and before you knew it, a person just a few feet away from you got up and started to dance. You silently chuckled and dismissed these actions as play—someone just being silly—until a second and then a third person joined in the action.

The music continued; the volume increased; and within seconds, other people joined in using choreographed motions. As you sat in amazement, the people whom you assumed were there to have lunch started to get out of their seats and take their place in this performance. Before you knew it, tens, hundreds, and maybe even thousands joined in, and together, they created a performance, a flash mob. Once finished, they dispersed quickly and went their separate ways, almost as if nothing out of the ordinary had happened. What initially seemed to be an unassuming crowd transitioned into an inspirational, well-rehearsed, seemingly spontaneous, and creative initiative.

The event was captured on video, uploaded to the Internet, and shared with the world in just seconds. You had just witnessed, and perhaps unknowingly participated in, a flash mob. Could this have happened in a place like Rogers City? With a lot of leadership and planning, it could,

and it did!

It might seem unreasonable to think about a strategy that can organize the masses for an impromptu performance that brings people curbside with phone camera in hand to record such an event in a small rural town. However, it is very reasonable if you consider the benefits that organizations that might spend millions of dollars on brand awareness campaigns are already tapping into by using flash mobs to promote themselves. In fact, marketing organizations such as Liquid Mountaineering, Coca Cola, T-Mobile, and Soul Pancake, to name but a few, have started to realize that going viral, a marketing technique used by social networks to increase brand awareness, can provide a phenomenal boost to conventional marketing strategies. Let your imagination run a little wilder, and think about the benefits of the potential buzz that might be generated by a group of college students fulfilling the requirements of a class assignment. Think about the potential social change on a small town. Rogers City became the focus of this type of attention.

Social Change

A report commissioned by Walden University and conducted online by Harris Interactive in February and March of 2012 identified the reasons adults engage in social change and the roles that individuals, nonprofit organizations, government entities, and the media play in facilitating such change:

- Global economic conditions impact how adults get involved in positive social change.
- Individual adults are the driving force behind social change engagement.
- Adults are more likely to join digital social change conversations than to initiate them.

“The 2012 survey’s findings emphasize how factors such as the state of the economy can influence social change attitudes and behaviors, especially at a time when the need is so great” said Dr. Cynthia Baum, president of Walden University (“Social Change Impact Report,” 2012, p. 1). Globally, adults feel compelled to create social change in some capacity. Of the 8,953 people surveyed internationally, 84% believed that being involved in social change is important personally, with the majority believing that social change can benefit other people. In areas where economic conditions were bad, the majority of respondents indicated that they would be more likely to volunteer, participate in social networking groups, donate goods and services, become involved in community organizations, and donate money as the result of a social change initiative (“Social Change Impact Report,” 2012).

In terms of social change and the integration of technology (e.g., social media, including flash mobs, etc.), specific increases were noted in the United States and Canada, whose respondents indicated that they would be more likely to share photos and videos, send messages, or join an online group as the result of a social change initiative. Furthermore, 59% of the respondents agreed that the most important agents of social change are individuals, with 70% indicating their desire to contribute to digital social change involving online conversations and other types of communication about these initiatives. It also is important to note that younger adults are more

likely to start and join digital change conversations (“Social Change Impact Report,” 2012).

College Students With a Mission

Fifty-five college students enrolled in an Introduction to Leadership class found an opportunity to combine an act of philanthropy focused on social change with a little bit of fun to create a win-win situation for themselves and the unsuspecting citizens of Rogers City. Students in this class were charged with the responsibility of creating social change by volunteering at a local nonprofit organization. Historically, the students had completed this assignment independently, but this semester, they decided to combine their efforts and do something big and a little bit different to fulfill the course requirements.

The students identified a project, namely, the renovation of the Purple Martin Nature Center and Lakeside Inn, a derelict building that had previously been scheduled for demolition, into a home for foster children in Rogers City. Then the students raised the necessary funds to cover their transportation costs for a 3-hour bus trip to Rogers City, where they would participate in completing the renovations. Once at their destination, they would help to remodel and repair the small nature center that was destined to be a respite home for foster children and their siblings. Although the name of the building made it sound like a lodging establishment, it was, in fact, named after a conglomeration of birdhouses built on the site to attract nesting purple martins.

In completing this project, the students volunteered 5,500 hours of labor and used \$8,000 in donated materials. Materials used for the renovation were donated to the organization from various individuals and suppliers throughout the state of Michigan. Other items were purchased at a deep discount or sold at cost to the organization. All materials were delivered to the Purple Martin Nature Center and were on-site prior to the students’ arrival. Costs associated with the transportation of the students were offset by individual bake sales and fundraisers that the students held prior to departure. The bus company also discounted the cost of transportation when management learned of the initiative.

In addition to this act of philanthropy, the students also were encouraged, in their capacity as tourism and recreation students, to think about how their actions could facilitate social change and serve as a foundation to create ongoing economic benefits to the town. The project itself and the added twist of economic benefit were perfect for the Rogers City destination. The idea of creating publicity with a flash mob was introduced to the class, and the fun began. At the end of class each week, students learned the choreographed dance moves to “The Hustle” and planned their strategy for surprising the local citizens. After completing their service project, they would perform downtown in the middle of the street for members of the community.

The Performance

The service project was completed successfully, and then the action began. According to Cindy Vezinau, owner of the Purple Martin Nature Center and Lakeside Inn, and a self-proclaimed Rogers City cheerleader (as cited in R. Lamb, personal communication, April 19, 2012),

At 3:30 p.m., and with large speaker systems in the back of a cart, students walked downtown, some stopping to talk to citizens of the community, while others looked into the local shops to say hello. No one knew what was about to happen, and then all of a sudden, the music started, and students ran out into the middle of the street and performed for the citizens of our small community.

She added, “For a small town, in an economically disadvantaged state, this was a big deal, and I think we are still reeling from the excitement.”

The October 2011 Rogers City Flash Mob was recognized as one of the most successful social change initiatives launched in northern Michigan. It was estimated that more than 200 citizens from the area, including the mayor, city manager, and other governmental officials (members of the city commission), along with area newspaper and television reporters, stopped by to see the students engaged in the remodel of the nature center and then convened again curbside to watch them as they performed “The Hustle” in the middle of the street. Some of the onlookers were so caught up in the excitement that they asked the students to “do it again” so that they could join in the fun. The students provided a tipping point (Gladwell, 2002) for social change that could lead to increased awareness of tourism opportunities and economic growth.

References

- Community Recreation Plan, Rogers City.* (2009). Retrieved from http://www.rogerscity.com/city_government/appointedpeople/docs/Parks122109RecPlanFinalDraft.pdf
- Forbes. (2010). *Pure Michigan: Branding the Great Lakes state for 6 years.* Retrieved from <http://www.thenewsherald.com>
- Gladwell, M. (2002). *The tipping point: How little things can make a big difference.* New York, NY: Back Bay Books.
- Rogers City Renaissance. (2013). *Hour Detroit.* Retrieved from <http://www.hourdetroit.com/>
- Shih, W., & Allen, M. (2007). Working with generation-D: Adopting and adapting to cultural learning and change. *Library Management*, 28(1/2), 89-100.
- Social change impact report.* (2012). Retrieved from <http://www.waldenu.edu/>
- Tapscott, D. (2009). *Grown up digital.* New York, NY: McGraw Hill.