

Guerrilla Queer Bar : Special Operations Manual

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1 GQB Modus Operandi

Guerrilla Queer Bar is an accidental creation that has been interpreted in different ways by different people. A group of us in San Francisco started the first chapter on a whim, and were motivated by a variety of reasons.

First, we wanted to do something to create an alternative to the classic stereotype of a gay disco. While this is fun when you've just come out of the closet in Independence, Missouri, it sure gets awfully repetitive and boring listening to the same damned Janet Jackson remix for the thousandth time. We thought the world could use some more options besides the standard fare. Face it, the only reason a lot of people tolerate gay bars is because of the possibility of hooking up.

We also realized that the upcoming generation of queer boys and girls (ourselves included) do not feel the need to be all-gay, all the time. The world isn't nearly as oppressive as it used to be. Most of us do not need to live within the comfortable yet confining world of the urban gay ghetto. Instead of limiting ourselves to the safe, but bland, gay venues, we decided to expand our horizons. Now, any space can become a queer space, if only for an evening. No longer confined to the gay neighborhoods of San Francisco, the entire city was at our disposal, and the opportunities for fun and culture jamming endless.

More than anything, we wanted to create a space that emphasized having fun, good old fashioned laugh so hard you piss your pants kind of fun. Living in San Francisco, the so-called gay mecca, we were disturbed at how anti-social and drug oriented the gay culture in our fine city had become. This has happened in many cities. On one extreme, you have the drug addled circuit party scene. Fun for a while, but not a healthy way to live your life. On the other extreme, you have the anti-social world of Internet chat. These two forces conspired, at least in San Francisco, to kill the casual social atmosphere of many queer spaces. For a while, it seemed like the city was a ghost town. If you weren't into dosing yourself with party drugs or spending endless hours on AOL, the city, once vibrant and sometimes riotous, seemed to be dying.

This is the real point of Guerrilla Queer Bar. It is essentially an ongoing sociology experiment. We wanted to see what would happen if we used the Internet to recruit an adventurous, fun-loving crowd of queer folk and throw them into unexpected venues and situations. Instead of doing the same thing every week, we decided to do something different, in a different neighborhood,

on a different schedule, every time we went out. We wanted to mix things up, take people to places they had never been to before, and let things happen.

In making things up as we went along, we discovered that something about Guerrilla Queer Bar really caught peoples' attention in a way that we never anticipated. What started out as a simple pub-crawl evolved into an interactive and multi-faceted creation: part party, part street theatre, and part political statement. However you want to label it, it's a refreshing break from running the gauntlet at the local gay bar (while listening to the same music, watching the same light show, same same same).

Two things really captured peoples' imagination. 1) Even in San Francisco, where there are more queer venues than you can shake a stick at, people were desperate for something new to do, 2) the chaotic nature of our events prompted people to interact with each other in ways that rarely occur in a typical bar scenario.

By accident, we stumbled on a formula for creating events that tapped into crowd psychology, and somehow lowered social barriers for people who would not otherwise talk to each other.

People have a deep-seated need to socialize, yet most queer spaces are set up in a very anti-social manner. They're dark, loud, and full of people trying to be what they think other people want them to be. They're often intimidating and superficial. Not a problem if you're an extrovert and thrive on this kind of environment, but for most of us it's not a great way to meet new people.

If you come away with one idea from this intro, remember this. The real point of Guerrilla Queer Bar isn't invading straight bars, mocking gay discos, or behaving like idiots. The point of it all is to create an environment where people can loosen up a bit and meet new people, without having to take a hit of ecstasy beforehand. Invading straight bars, for example, is a part of this. It creates an esprit de corps that causes people in a crowd to bond with strangers. Yet, it is not the sole focus of the evening. The focus is on having fun (and different types of fun), and meeting new people. Everything else we do serves this primary goal.

With that said, Guerrilla Queer Bar has a political side to it, but it's not the purpose of our existence. Often, by merely appearing at an otherwise tidy-whitey venue, we make a casual political statement. As the San Francisco Bar Guardian aptly put it, this can be paraphrased as "*We're here. We're queer. And we want a little drink.*" We have fun. The people at the bars we invade often have fun (although many run for cover). In the process, we make an unspoken statement by being ourselves and having fun in an environment that wasn't specifically built for queer people.

DRAFT, 12/16/00

Guerrilla Queer Bar's statement is not a protest (like Act Up or Queer Nation), it's really a celebration of our increasing freedom to be ourselves, wherever we decide to go.

2 Getting Started

Launching GQB in your city is a fairly easy thing to do. All that's required is a nose for fun bars and other hangouts, and a minimal level of computer knowledge. Armed with these two skills, you have everything you need.

The first step is easy. All you need to do is to create a mailing list and simple website for your local group. We recommend eGroups (www.egroups.com), now part of Yahoo! Clubs, as the best way to do this. By simply filling out a couple of online forms, you can set up a simple website and email invite list. Best of all, the subscriber list manages itself, as people can add and remove themselves from the list without your help. All you need to do is create the webpage and promote the address (we'll also help you promote it through our site).

Once you've done this, the next step is to seed the subscriber list with as many of your friends and friends of friends as you can find. Try to start off with 50 or 100 people, so you have enough people who can forward invites to their friends to spread the word effectively. This is important because the list grows through word of mouth. So, if you start off with 100 people, they will indirectly promote the concept to their friends, and their friends, as infinitum.

Step three, go out and find some fun places to visit. Depending on where you are located this may be easy, or it may be difficult. See the section on venues for more information about selecting spaces. However, this is one of the two most important factors that will affect your success. You need to pick places that people will enjoy, and that are practical to get to, for the event to catch on. (The other important factor is the way the website and emails are written, more on this in moment).

So, it's as easy as 1-2-3. 1) set up a simple website and email list, 2) sign up all of your friends and acquaintances, 3) find some cool places and invite people to join you.

With all of the attention we've received of late, it's easy to overlook the fact that the original organizers behind GQB are not professional club people. In fact, it seems to work best if it's a sort of casual, loosely organized thing. Just take people to fun places, and people will enjoy the opportunity to get outside of the usual scene. That's really all there is to it.

3 Organizing Events

This section summarizes what we've learned from our experience organizing parties here in San Francisco. None of this is written in stone or anything, but this information will probably help you avoid some of the mistakes we've made.

3.1 Choosing Venues

Probably the most important thing about GQB is variety. Variety is the spice of life, a fact lost on almost all queer bars these days. We aim to provide variety on several levels: the type of space, the neighborhood, the time of the event, and the type of crowd we think it will appeal to. The aim is to mix things up, and by doing so, to attract a different crowd to each event. We want to avoid being pigeonholed as a particular type of party, and try to stay a step ahead of what people are expecting us to do. This raises the expectations somewhat, but it also makes it fun to organize these events.

Our basic formula in San Francisco can be summarized as follows:

- We go to different neighborhoods each time
- We rotate between different types of spaces (e.g. big vs small, loud vs quiet, themed vs plain, etc)
- We alternate between weeknight and weekend nights
- We usually go for cheaper places (low or no cover, cheap drinks). We make exceptions for especially kitschy or unusual spaces.
- We prefer venues that either have a good jukebox, or a DJ that plays decent music (and preferably something outside the confines of what we call K-Tel Fag Disco).
- We rotate between different types of events (rowdy pub crawl vs sedate lounge vs theme party)
- We avoid going to mainstream gay bars (we do, however, occasionally go to neglected gay dives, which can be a lot of fun).
- We avoid venues that are under-staffed or that have slow, surly bar service. Nobody wants to stand in line for a half an hour for a simple drink.

- When possible, we choose places that are convenient to people traveling by taxi or by public transit (an important consideration in SF, but less so in other cities).
- We sometimes parade our crowd, en masse, from one spot to another. Sometimes we are less coordinated.

It's a pretty simple formula really. Just avoid getting stuck in a rut by going to the same place every other week.

3.1.1 Large Cities

Achieving this type of variety is easy to do in San Francisco, which has a well-developed ecosystem of drinking establishments. In smaller cities, this may be more of a challenge. The same is true of other large cities, especially cities whose downtown areas are pedestrian oriented. Suburbanized cities tend not to have the same density of bars and restaurants, which makes the logistics a little more complicated.

If you're lucky to live in a big city, all you need to do is go out and find some fun places to visit, and invite several hundred of your faggy friends to join you.

3.1.2 Smaller Cities

In smaller cities, you have two problems to contend with: a lower density of venues worth visiting, and increased distances due to urban/suburban sprawl. Chances are the majority of people will be driving to the event, unless public transit is really well developed in your neighborhood, so you'll need to keep this in mind while choosing places. Not the end of the world, it just means more work for the organizers, since you won't have a dozen candidate bars within spitting distance. The real challenge is to come up with venues that will be interesting enough to motivate people to get off their couches and go to the party. On the plus side, there's also less competition from mainstream gay venues, so people will probably be thrilled at the chance to go somewhere new.

3.1.3 Rural Areas

We'd especially like to see GQB take off in rural areas. Some of us hail from the South, and have firsthand experience with the anemic and often repressive scene in this part of the country. One of the neat things about GQB is it doesn't require someone in your community to sink huge amounts of time and money into opening a bar. You simply colonize some of the many existing bars and clubs, and turn them into your party space. While this might sound rude and inconsiderate, our experience has been that most bars are happy to see several dozen thirsty, well-tipping customers pour in their front door (there are obviously exceptions to this rule, see the section on safety).

The concept can be applied equally well to create private party spaces. If there isn't a critical mass of bars that are open to the public, you can alternate between meeting at public and private venues. So, if you don't like the available alternatives, create your own party.

In a rural setting, or highly sprawled suburban setting, it's important to mix the locations up, so people who do not live nearby can make it to some of the parties. Some email list programs allow you to collect demographic information when people sign up (i.e. zipcode, city, etc). Get this information where possible, or poll people about preferred location. Use this information in your decisions about where to throw your parties. It makes a big difference in turnout.

3.1.4 Private Parties

Since people have to be invited or explicitly subscribe to your invite list, you are, in effect, creating a private party. While going to a bar, and letting someone else deal with serving drinks, cleanup, etc, has its benefits, there are also benefits to throwing private parties.

In California, for example, bars are highly regulated environments. You can't even smoke cigarettes in bars here, a restriction which is pretty ironic considering that nobody is going to a bar because they are concerned about their health. This trend toward the government becoming your surrogate mother is only going to get worse before it gets better.

In a private party, however, the situation is quite different. Since it is a private gathering, and not a commercial business, as long as you're not breaking any laws, you can basically do whatever you want. Obviously, in some states, merely being gay is considered a crime, but as a general rule, what you do on your own property is your own business.

The bottom line: if you don't like the available venues, or don't have enough to visit, just create your own space.

3.2 Entertainment

The next decision to make, besides the venue, is what kind of entertainment to provide at the party.

Our experience has been that our parties tend to fall into one of two categories: 1) single venue parties where the emphasis is on socializing and having fun, 2) rowdy bar-crawl/street party events where the emphasis is on behaving like an idiot. We like to encourage a mixture of the two since all of one and none of the other gets tired after a while.

In most cases, we have found that simply picking a fun bar and filling it with a fun crowd is all the entertainment that's really required. One of the things we really like to do is to encourage people to provide their own entertainment. One of the problems with gay venues is they are set up to discourage social interaction, in the same way that a movie theatre does. You fork over your cover charge, and then walk into a bar that is so loud and dark that it thwarts normal conversation.

Two of the important criteria in selecting a venue are: 1) the music (jukebox or DJ), and the efficiency of the bar service. If a place is deathly quiet, it will kill any party. Bad bar service is another buzz-kill. So pay attention to these details when scouting locations. Seems like a minor detail, but if the bar has the ambience of a library, the party will be stillborn. Some awkwardness or confusion is a good thing. It builds an esprit de corps that encourages people to bond and strike up conversations where they would otherwise go into wallflower mode.

Something else that is important. Find people who like attention, and like to put on their own show, and invite them to your party. The best parties we threw attracted people with a penchant for street theatre. They showed up in outrageous costumes, in drag, or just did something that put people on edge. They provide lots of entertainment, and help mix things up.

3.2.1 Music

Since we show up at most venues unannounced, we have to make do with whatever music is available. This usually is a good thing since each venue tends to play its own kind of music, and that's a refreshing change from the K-Tel Madonna Disco Compilation that is on endless repeat at most queer venues.

It's important to provide variety in music as with venues. Obviously there are some music genres that will annoy almost everyone. Christian rock comes to mind as one example, Musak™ as another. With certain limitations in mind, look for variety in the music you provide. Some fags like plain old rock music. Some dykes like fag disco. Don't assume everyone likes to listen to the same thing.

One of the good things about throwing a private party, or making prior arrangements with the bar, is you can bring your own DJ or tapes. If you do this, just observe the rule of thumb about variety.

3.2.2 Theatre

Every now and then, we like to do something theatrical, often in the form of a theme event where we encourage people to show up in costume. Examples of these parties included Guerrilla Leather Bar (W Hotel), Take Back the Marina! (Halloween bar crawl) and Queers on Ice (Xmas ice skating). Again, the crowd provided most of the entertainment, since many people put together pretty

elaborate outfits. This may or may not translate well to other cities, since San Francisco has a long tradition of street theatre and alternative dress codes. You'll have to experiment with this to figure out what your crowd's comfort zone is like. However, it's a lot of fun to get a group of people who are dressed as the polar opposite of whatever venue you're colonizing. (e.g. really sissified fags in a biker bar, for example).

The main point to emphasize here is that you want to find ways to encourage people to loosen up a bit and do something different. This doesn't mean you want to get everyone to show up in drag, just to do something different that they wouldn't ordinarily do. It changes the psychology of the party, which makes it more fun.

3.3 Logistics & Communication

For the most part, it's pretty easy to organize these gatherings. Just tell people where to go and when, and they'll show up ready to party. Things don't always go as planned, so it's important to be somewhat organized in the way you plan the events.

3.3.1 Transportation

One of the things that is important when picking venues is accessibility. Is the venue easy to get to, or out of the way? Sometimes it's fun to go on a long trip to visit a place that is especially kitschy or unusual. Most of the time, people prefer not to make a big production out of going out for a drink. So, it's important to balance your desire to find the ultimate fun bar against the need to find practical locations.

The ideal location is one that is within walking distance of one or more bars and restaurants. This is a nice bonus because 1) people can grab a bite to eat beforehand, 2) if things go sour at one place, you can relocate your crowd to another bar with minimum distress. This is an important consideration because sooner or later, things will go foul, and you'll need to come up with a backup plan.

Something else to consider is a car pool system for people who have to drive to the party. (Or, you can have the "town whores" provide lodging for those who are too impaired to drive at night's end). This is relatively easy to organize on the Internet, and definitely worth doing since getting a DUI or getting into an accident is a real downer. This doesn't need to be something that you provide directly, but rather something you can facilitate through your website. Something to keep in mind if you're in a suburban or rural area.

3.3.2 Backup Plan (Murphy's Law)

Nine times out of ten, your parties will come off pretty well. You might be stressed out because you're one of the organizers, but most of the people who show up will have a good time, and that's ultimately what matters.

Don't get lulled into complacency though. Every now and then, you'll run into a snag. Some bars just won't want you there, and will refuse service. Ironically, the one time this happened to us was at a gay owned bar (go figure). Sometimes, you'll go to a place that just has really crappy service. Whether you encounter hostility, bad service or a private party that wasn't announced, you want to have a plan in your back pocket to relocate the party to another location that's relatively nearby.

We've had to put a backup plan into motion two or three times. In these cases, we simply pulled out our megaphones (see communication), and told everybody we were breaking camp and moving onto another location. A few people would get bitchy about this, but most people know the program (these are ad hoc, hastily planned events where we show up unannounced) and go along for the adventure. If you set people's expectations right, this is part of the fun. You never know where you might wind up at the end of an evening. You can also use this aspect of the party to discourage people who are anal-retentive and expect their entertainment to be dispensed to them in a shrink-wrapped format.

This is why location scouting is so important. While it is sometimes tempting to go for the super-kitschy dive in the middle of nowhere, it's often more practical to go somewhere that has one or more other venues within a reasonable distance, just in case things don't go as planned.

If you really have to cover large distances, you should consider renting a bus. Then, it becomes easy to cart people from location to location if needed. Just have people pitch in to cover the cost of the bus rental. Usually a few dollars per person will cover the costs if you can more than half fill the bus.

The important thing is to assume that things will go wrong at the venue, and to think about what you will do and where you will take people if that happens. If you have all of this worked out in advance, it's not a big deal when things don't go your way. You just activate Plan B and move on. (Plus, it's really fun to completely empty a bar that's being obnoxious to you. They see first hand how much money just walked out of the door.)

3.3.3 Communication

While you don't need military style planning to pull these events off, it helps if you have the following tools at your disposal. They make it a lot easier to move the crowd, make announcements, call or help, etc.

- Megaphones – available for \$20 or so at Radio Shack, megaphones are an indispensable tool for controlling relatively large crowds (up to several hundred people). With them, you can make announcements that can be heard throughout a bar, and out on the open street. With some, you can connect an external sound source (such as an MP3 player), and use them as a portable PA system, and can even organize street karaoke (the Annie song, “Sun Will Come Out Tomorrow” is a favorite). Hint: make sure you conceal them in backpacks, most doormen won’t let you inside if they see you sporting a big megaphone. The megaphone should be held by somebody who is loud and bossy.
- Two-way radios (family radio systems) – two-way radio, also available for as little as \$20 apiece, are also really useful on the night of an event. They make it easy for organizers to communicate via a sort of party line. They’re worth their weight in gold when you get spread out and need to communicate.
- Cell phones – another indispensable tool, especially if you’re traveling among sites that are more than a half-mile apart (the walkie talkies have short range). You need to have a least one cell phone, for safety reasons if nothing else. If you need help, you can always dial 911.

For smaller gatherings, you don’t need to go overboard, but if you see your attendance reaching the 100 mark, it’s not a bad idea to invest in some of these tools. When you need them, they can make the difference between anarchy and a fun, but relatively uneventful migration.

3.4 Safety

While you don’t want to let fear to dictate your actions, the reality is that some spaces are not only not queer friendly, they’re queer hostile. Also, anti-gay violence can occur anywhere, so it is important to consider safety issues, especially if you’re pushing the envelope in your community.

There is a lot to be said for safety in numbers. While it’s easy for someone to jump one or two people who are alone in an isolated area, this is not true for a large crowd with megaphones, walkie-talkies, camcorders and cell phones. The chances of successfully attacking someone in a crowd without being caught are a lot lower.

Use this to your advantage when you organize events. If you plan to go somewhere that may not be accepting, have everyone meet first at a more comfortable space, then travel en masse to the next place. This way you can travel in a large pack, and in most cases, can be seated at the bar before anybody figures out what has just happened. Organize things so that people are always part of a crowd.

The most important thing is to be vigilant and keep an eye on your surroundings (as well as the comfort level of the people in the group). Also, use some common sense in choosing venues, and avoid places whose exterior environment lends itself to trouble. Also, don't be afraid to rely on the police, they can be your best ally in many cases.

While it's always possible that someone will try to pick a fight, if you use common sense, you can avoid trouble by anticipating it.

What's much more likely is that someone in your own group will get themselves into trouble, typically because of their inability to control their consumption of alcohol or illegal drugs. This seems to be especially true in big cities, where speed and other party drugs are rampant. The best advice we can offer is to strongly discourage these people from coming to your parties. The last thing you want to be dealing with in an unfamiliar environment is some idiot overdosing on GHB. Plus, the whole point of the party is to create a fun, social space, not another variant of the drug-addled circuit scene.

However, no matter how much you discourage irresponsible behavior, somebody will eventually cross the line and make their drug abuse your problem by passing out at your party. Again, it's unlikely to happen, but throw enough parties, and it's bound to happen sooner or later. The best thing you can do is keep an eye out for people who are having difficulty. If you see someone who has obviously overdone it, make sure they have a friend take them home, or if needed, get them medical attention. Don't hesitate to 86 someone who makes their irresponsible behavior your problem.

3.5 Police

The police can be your greatest friend, or your greatest enemy, all depending on where you go and how you comport yourselves. For the most part, cops are mainly interested in protecting the public, and are not there to be morality police. This is obviously not universally true, but don't assume that the cops are out to get you unless you know this to be the case.

3.5.1 Friendly Cops

If the police department in your town is friendly to the gay community, one thing you can do is work the local grapevine to find out which officers act as liaisons to the gay community. Then, contact these people, let them know what you're up to and work out some sort of arrangement so that you can get help in a hurry if you need it. You don't want to go overboard with having cops at your parties, but it's nice to know that you can call someone who will respond in a hurry if needed. If there are gay or lesbian cops in the local police force, better yet, just invite them to come along on the more risky outings.

Whether to inform them about your activities is a judgement call, and depends on the amount of animosity toward queers in your community. If you encounter

a lot of problems with harassment, simply having a patrol car in the parking lot will work wonders to dissuade anybody who's thinking about capping of their evening with a gay bashing. If it's not an issue, just having some phone numbers you can call if you need help is a nice security blanket.

Again, the point is not to live in fear, just plan for the worst, and be pleasantly surprised when things turn out well.

3.5.2 Hostile Cops

Unfortunately, not all police or police departments care about our rights, or even our safety. This is rare, but if it's the case in your town, your options will be more limited. If the cops in your city have a penchant for harassing gays and lesbians, then the less they know about you and your activities, the better. Sad, but true. You'll also need to provide for your own safety, which means you'll need to be more careful about how you organize your events, and less cavalier about things.

One thing you have working in your favor in this situation. If you do encounter trouble and need the police to break up a fight, when you call 911, the dispatcher won't immediately flag the call "fight at the gay bar." So, if the cops are anti-gay and slow to respond to calls like this, they'll most likely treat it like any other call, and respond fairly promptly.

The worst-case scenario is a police department that decides to actively harass your group for whatever reason. Although unlikely, this calls for a different tactic, which is to document everything, and to invite local journalists and/or attorneys (some of whom will be gay or gay friendly) to your parties. Then, if you encounter a blatant case of harassment (e.g. police searching everyone who walks out of a pub), you can get it on tape, and have credible witnesses. This enables you to make a scene, and if the situation is really adversarial, to defend your rights in court. If this happens, your members should also use common sense about what they bring along with them. If the cops want to harass you, the easiest way they can do this is by looking for illegal drugs. In some states, even possessing small amounts of pot can lead to big trouble, so don't give them an excuse to make your life hell.

Just remember, this is a free country, and you have a right to do your own thing in safety. If you encounter harassment, it may not be fun to deal with, but this means that someone needs to push the envelope in your community, and it might as well be you.

3.6 Crowd Psychology

One of the things that makes GQB interesting is the fact that it's hard to predict how your crowd (and the regular crowd at the bar you go to) will react.

In some respects, this is your most important job as an organizer, to anticipate how the crowd will react, and what will get people to loosen up and talk to each other. This is more of an art than a science, but we've noticed some general trends that we wanted to share with you.

Unusual situations lower social barriers

Throwing people, en masse, into an unusual or confusing situation takes people's attention off of their nervousness about talking to new people, and refocuses it on the situation at hand. Most people are shy at parties because they're too self-conscious. By diverting their attention to their environment, they'll be focused on what's happening around them, and will be more likely to forget about being nervous about talking to the cute guy or girl next to them. The trick is to make the situation unusual enough that people band together, but not so unsettling that people freak out and leave. This is a judgement call. You'll learn from experience where this line is for people in your community.

Music is good, too much music is bad

If a place is deathly quiet, this will stifle conversation and ruin the whole atmosphere of the party. On the other hand, deafening music, especially if it's not agreeable to the crowd, will have the same effect. You want just enough background noise to mask far away conversations, but you don't want so much that the music gets pushed to the foreground and becomes the focus of the whole thing (unless you have a really good DJ and that's the purpose of the party, then that's a different story). What you need is an appropriate level of background noise so that people are not self-conscious about talking.

Mixing the crowd reduces the formation of cliques

By keeping things on the move, you physically mix the crowd up throughout the evening. This helps override people's tendency to clump together with a handful of their friends. Pub-crawls are especially good for this, because nobody is allowed to stand in the same place for very long. It's pretty obvious that if you're constantly being jostled around and re-arranged, that you're going to, literally, bump into more people.

Costumes and drag are fun, but not every week

A themed party that invites people to get creative with costumes, drag and street theatre can be a lot of fun. But too much of a good thing gets tired. Every party should not be a drag show. Remember, the key is variety. Bad drag gets especially tired, especially quickly.

Superficial people spread bad karma faster than anything

Apart from drug addicts, the next worst thing to have at your party are superficial people (most often gay men) who openly judge people by the extent

to which they conform to a particular look. While it's nice to attract a cute crowd, it's important to make sure the parties are open to everybody. Otherwise, the crowd degenerates into a very narrow demographic, and one that is not particularly interesting or fun to be with (see also .. circuit parties). Don't go out of your way to court the favor of the "A-list" club crowd. When you step back and look at it, it's a pretty dysfunctional scene, and not much fun. Just do your own thing and make your own fun.

Some people are shy, and just don't get over it

Have the more extroverted people in your group keep an eye out for people who are not engaged in the group. Go out of your way to introduce them to people, and make it easy for them to meet people. Some people are just shy, and need someone else to approach them as an ice-breaker. This is also one of the reasons why drugs are so prevalent, so making it easy for people to socialize, without taking a hit of ecstasy, will ultimately make the parties more fun.

Complainers are like cancer, and should be excised at the first opportunity

You'll usually encounter one or two bitter fags or dykes at each party who don't like the crowd (too pretty, not pretty enough), music, venue or whatever. Don't be afraid to remind them that you're organizing a non-profit event where people provide their own entertainment, and that each party is different. If they keep whining, don't be afraid to tell them to hit the road. Nobody is putting a gun to their head and forcing them to go. Far better to attract a small crowd of people who really have fun, than to attract a large crowd that is interspersed with whiners who want to bring everyone else down. The maxim "the customer is always right" is not right. Some customers are full of shit. You'll learn to recognize them after you've organized a few of these. Some people will have a bad time no matter what others do to appease them. Let them stay home and annoy their roommates instead.

3.7 The Element of Surprise

Another decision you'll need to make for each event is the extent to which you will pre-announce your "takeover target". This is a trade-off between surprise and convenience.

Sometimes, it is best to show up unannounced, since this deprives the selected venue of the opportunity to come up with a pretense for excluding you (i.e. "we're closed for private party"). It is much, much harder to remove a group that is already entrenched than it is to lock the door before they arrive. While most bars have the right to refuse service to anyone, it is bad form to 86 people en masse, especially if this would cause them to be perceived as prejudiced.

On the other hand, pre-announcing the details has advantages, especially if your group is large enough to overwhelm an establishment. In this case, you might want to tip them off so they can schedule extra bartenders. There have been a couple of parties where we wished we had done this. This is also important if you want to bring your own DJ and take control of the music. It's easier to do this if you've made prior arrangement.

That said, we usually favor the surprise approach. The element of uncertainty makes the evening more interesting, if not more stressful for the organizers. That's part of the overall attraction of the event, you'll find out where you're going when you get there. This strategy also reduces the potential for a venue to exclude or harass you at the door. By the time they figure out what's going on, most of your people will already be inside, and the bartenders will be making a killing. (Another tip: take care of the bartenders, then everything else will take care of itself).

If you go the surprise route, the formula that works best is to have people meet beforehand at another warm-up site. Then, you go over to the main venue en masse, or at least at similar times. This way you don't need to publicly disclose the real destination, so they have no idea that you're coming until the bar suddenly gets very busy. This is also helpful if you're going to a place that people would feel uncomfortable walking into alone.

This approach raises the bar for you as organizers since you have to coordinate the movement of the crowd and have contingency plans in case things go south on you. However, this is part of the fun, as it turns a routine meeting at a bar into an adventure filled field trip with many possible destinations.

4 Communication

Now we've covered the basics of organizing a guerrilla event in your city. This section covers the nuts and bolts of communicating and promoting your events. Thanks to new technologies, primarily email, this can be done much more cheaply than ever before.

4.1 Communicating at the event

Discussed in section three, you can use several tools to communicate effectively during an event. These are: megaphones, walkie-talkies, and cell phones. In addition to these high-tech methods, there are several low-tech methods you can use to improve communication at the party.

Hastily printed business cards can be used to "announce" the next location in a bar crawl, for example. If you don't want to tip off people outside your group about where you're going next, you can use this kind of silent announcement to spread the word. Just hand stacks of cards to a few people and ask them to distribute them. Sounds like a hassle, but it's very effective.

Whiteboards are a good way for people to send messages to each other at the event (i.e. "Bill H, meet us at XYZ at 11"). Low-tech, but it works. Can also be used for corny dating games.

The most important thing is that the organizers can communicate with each other, and are aware of what's going on around them.

4.2 Communicating with the outside world

Communicating with the rest of the world is now much easier thanks to Internet and telecom technology. Using a collection of free services, you can easily communicate with an audience of thousands of people, and can effectively promote your group and events for free.

4.2.1 Email

The most useful tool you have at your disposal is email. Email is a great medium for promoting your events because it is 1) free, 2) it spreads like a virus in the form of forwarded messages. The trick is to write your emails in such a way that they invite people to pass them along to friends. Short, entertaining emails which capture people's attention can spread far and wide

on the Internet. But, best of all, email is free. The cost to email 10,000 people is the same as the cost to email ten people. Before email, there was always some cost associated with publishing something, now that is no longer true.

When using email to communicate, the most important things to do are:

- Make it easy to subscribe, and unsubscribe, from your list – services like eGroups make this process automatic. Users simply fill in a form to join or leave your list, making it very easy to manage.
- Make your emails short, witty, and somewhat infrequent. Never spam people. Nothing is more annoying than excessive, irrelevant email. Use your list sparingly, and most people will remain on it indefinitely. Never sell your list to anyone else.
- Encourage people to forward your emails to their friends. Don't be too heavy handed about it. Just drop the hint, and most people will get it.
- Take advantage of arts & entertainment event lists. In San Francisco, for example, The Squid List is an arts & event email list that reaches several thousand people. It's free for readers and event organizers and has been a great way to inform people about our activities.

Probably the most important thing, apart from how you use your list, is writing fun messages. Make them too dry, and people will ignore them. Make them too outrageous, and they'll turn some people off. So, the trick is to find the right balance between pithy and factual writing.

4.2.2 Website

Your website is the primary way people will get basic information about your group, and is also how they will add themselves to your email list. The website should be simple, easy to navigate and support these two functions. What you really want to do is convert website visitors into email subscribers. People can find out everything they need to know about upcoming events via email. Also, email comes to them, they don't have to remember to visit the site once a week.

Our website has a mixture of general information, links to the email subscription service, and an archive of write-ups about previous parties. This gives visitors basic information about who we are, what we're doing, and how to join the party. We try to keep it simple, and communicate the most important information via emails that go out roughly once per week.

One main rule: don't put important information on your site that is not also repeated in email. Some people will never visit the site, and will only see emails forwarded to them by their friends or co-workers. Remember, the site is mainly there to get people to sign up for your email invite list. Copy whatever

you send out via email to the site somehow, but always make sure anything important that goes on the site is mentioned in email somewhere.

When you create your website, let us know about it. We maintain a directory of GQB offshoots on our site. Just drop a line to barney_schlockum@yahoo.com to be added to the directory.

4.2.3 Voice Mail

Voice mail is a very effective way to communicate last minute changes to people, especially on the night of an event. Whether this is a phone line hooked up to an answering machine, or a virtual mailbox on a service like OneBox (www.onebox.com), this enables anybody with a phone to call in and get recently updated information about where to go. This will save your ass if you need to relocate your crowd from a hostile bar on short notice. With this tool, you can record a message from a cell phone to tell everyone who shows up late where you've gone. This way, you don't have to wait around for stragglers or worry about people getting left behind.

OneBox (www.onebox.com) offers a free voice mail service that is especially useful for this type of thing. You can get local numbers throughout the United States, no long distance calls for the people calling in to listen to the message. Callers dial a local number, followed by a four digit extension, to hear your message. The recorded message can be updated from any touch tone telephone (including your cell phone). So, updating the message from the field is as simple as making a call.

If OneBox doesn't offer local numbers in your city, another good solution is to buy a digital answering machine and hook it up to a shared or dedicated phone line. Hello Direct (www.hellodirect.com) and Everything Wireless (www.everythingwireless.com) sell some good phone/answering machine combos. The only disadvantage with using an answering machine is it is limited to take one call at a time on a single phone line. If several dozen people try to call at about the same time, they'll get busy signals. This doesn't happen nearly as often with voice mail.

4.2.4 A word about word of mouth

Word of mouth is an extremely powerful thing. We haven't spent a dime on advertising GQB in San Francisco, a big city with a lot of competing nightlife. All we did was set up an email list and start throwing parties. Despite this lack of effort, we've been covered by almost all of the straight press, and recently appeared on the cover of the city's biggest weekly paper. This says a lot about how positive word of mouth can translate into real visibility throughout a community.

Email is a powerful word of mouth medium because it is so easy to forward a message to a large list of other people. So, an invite that directly reaches only 50 people may be forwarded to another 200 people who forward it to another 200 people and so on. This is why it is important to find good writers to put your invites together. A pithy invite is more likely to be forwarded than a dry and uninviting email.

Also, be mindful of the fact that you never know who is going to see these emails. A lot of the press coverage we received resulted from bored and jaded journalists signing up for their own entertainment. They then came to a party, had a good time, and decided to write about it.

Conclusion

That's pretty much it. We've tried to condense what we've learned into this short manual.

Organizing a roaming party in your city is a lot of fun, and a great way to explore your environs. Hopefully this hastily written manual will help you pull some interesting events together.

If you have any further questions, drop a line to barney_schlockum@yahoo.com

Happy pub hunting!

Barney Schlockum