

Denver-backed "cash mob" calls on small book shop

By John Mossman *The Denver Post* *The Denver Post*
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Take the flash-mob phenomenon, give it a financial spin, and you have a "cash mob" — in which civic-minded citizens use social media to organize spontaneous visits by paying customers to small, local businesses.

Cash mobs, in which participants are typically asked to spend \$20 or more at the selected business, began sweeping the country last year. Most are grassroots efforts, but the movement recently gained civic backing when the city of Denver helped organize one such effort.

Denver's Office of Economic Development last month launched a cash mob to help celebrate National Small Business Week.

"There have been others in Denver, mostly through grassroots groups," said Office of Economic Development spokesman Derek Woodbury. "Some chambers of commerce in other cities have done it, but not governments."

The office invited retail businesses that had participated in its lending programs to take part, then used its Facebook page to conduct an online poll to select a company to be cash-mobbed.

The Bookery Nook in northwest Denver was selected for the May 24 cash mob.

"We got a call that Wednesday night saying it was looking good for us," said Shannon Piserchio, who co-owns the business with her husband, Gary. "We were notified the next morning that we were the one and that it would happen at 2:30. We helped get the word out on our Facebook page."

Gary Piserchio said about 20 to 30 people visited the small bookstore and adjoining ice-cream parlor during a two-hour period May 24.

"We had no idea what to expect, with us being the first. We hoped we would be overrun with customers. We had crowds at a couple of different points. Probably at other points, there was more media here than customers."

"It wasn't huge," he said, "but it was a lot more than we get on a normal weekday. All of them bought books, and some bought ice cream. We were pleasantly surprised."

Thanks to a loyal following, the bookstore at 4280 Tennyson St. has won "Best of Denver" and "Top of the Town" awards from *Westword* and *5280* magazine, respectively. But "we've had an uphill battle since we opened about three years ago," said Shannon Piserchio.

Other cash mobs have been held at Dos Gringos restaurant in Carbondale; Nature's Bin, a small grocery in Lakewood; and Posh Pastries in Parker.

David Fleming, an advertising executive in Colorado Springs, has formed Colorado Springs Cash Mobs to help small businesses in that area. As with most mobs, the Colorado Springs effort is organized through Facebook and Twitter.

While cash mobs provide undeniably immediate economic benefits to the often-struggling mom-and-pop businesses, the long-term benefits tend to be less sustainable and not as measurable.

As a result, opinions vary on the effectiveness of cash mobs.

"What we do know is that cash mobs give businesses a chance to wow their new customers," said Sallie Burnett, an adjunct professor of marketing at the University of Denver's Daniels College of Business. "You get an e-mail address, and you have a way of connecting with them and continuing the relationship."

A cash mob can be just as much a social stimulus as an economic one.

"Cash mobs are empowering," Burnett said. "The economy is so bad, we don't feel we can change it, but we feel through mobs that we are taking control of our community. Seeing your favorite place survive makes us feel good about ourselves."

Suzanne Obszanski, spokeswoman for Cashmob.com, a website that helps coordinate and facilitate cash mobs, noted that "social media is phenomenal for this type of thing. Helping small businesses compete with big-box retailers is what this is about.

"Raising awareness in the community about a business does have long-term benefits. Maybe people didn't even know the business existed or what it sold or what services it provided."

For their part, the Piserchios aren't sure whether the boost in business will last.

"It seems like a one-time shot," Gary Piserchio said. "Several people came from across town, and we don't know if they'll return. But we continue to see our locals. We got a lot of positive response.

"This is certainly something we would do again."

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