

Over 1,400,000 square feet (130,060 square meters)

Televised opera hits high note in England

On April 7, 2005, Meadowhall Centre surprised the public by hosting *Flashmob the Opera*, a televised interactive opera filmed live at the center by BBC3.

A flashmob is a seemingly spontaneous gathering of people in a crowd to do something unusual in unison, then disperse. Organized secretly by e-mail or text messaging, the flashmob appears to onlookers as unorganized and unbelievable but is actually the result of meticulous planning and timing.

For the opera at Meadowhall, cast members dressed as ordinary shoppers and mall employees — for example, the male lead was dressed as a security guard — but they broke into song, performing a customized version of a popular opera at the mall. For Meadowhall, the event was a huge public-relations opportunity.

Implementation

Meadowhall had to convince BBC3 to hold the event at the center; the crew considered 15 locations. Meadowhall had to sell itself to BBC3 without knowing the nature of the project, which the production crew kept secret until the location was chosen.

Meadowhall emphasized benefits of filming in the center, including a video wall, which could be used to show the production as it was filmed to everyone in the food court; the plasma-screen TV network in the mall; the center's Web site; and other communications tools. The center also noted past large-scale events held there.

Flashmob the Opera was an interactive event with national and local talent, led by the 64-piece BBC Concert Orchestra, a local brass band, Sheffield Teachers Choir and three local schools. The production had a cast and crew of over 300 people.

As the opera played out in the center, crowds gathered. Awestruck shoppers cheered, clapped and sung along with the cast. The script was a contemporary spin on the legend of



Faust, re-written around Meadowhall. Meadowhall's PR staff plied script writers with details about the center, so its shops were prominently featured in the production. The script mentioned store names and even described Meadowhall as a "vast cathedral of retail devotion."

Meadowhall's PR team alerted eight major local media outlets that something would occur at the center on April 7. An in-depth press release was sent out the day before the event but was embargoed; many interviews were arranged at that point.

The PR team broke the news about *Flashmob the Opera* at 8 a.m. on April 7 with a radio announcement and a package of live interviews at the center and on TV, following with communication throughout the day and into the next. Meadowhall coordinated media interviews with the opera's cast and crew to maximize coverage.

Results

BBC3 aired a 50-minute live show, rebroadcasting it four times, which for Meadowhall offered the equivalent of £60,000 (\$114,000) in TV advertising. Related coverage carried an additional ad value of over £42,000 (\$80,000), all at no cost to Meadowhall.

On Flashmob day, the center's foot traffic grew by 6.2 percent compared with a national increase of 5.6 percent. Stores in the food court had a sales increase of 3.1 percent for the day. ■

Flashmob the Opera

Meadowhall Centre
Sheffield, U.K.

Expenses: No cost to Meadowhall; £6,506 (\$12,270) costs paid by BBC3

Owned by: British Land

Managed by: Smith Young Partnership

Professional Recognition: Kit Harris, public relations executive