

# TACTIC

## HUMAN BANNER

A political rally arranged into a huge work of human aerial art, composing a single iconic photo that captures what's at stake.

### CONTRIBUTED BY

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Brad Newsham is the author of two round-the-world travel memoirs and is currently the owner/driver of Green Cab #914. His first human mural (one thousand people spelling out "IMPEACH!" in 100-foot lettering) was created on Ocean Beach in San Francisco, on January 6, 2007 — two days after San Francisco's Nancy Pelosi became Speaker of the US House of Representatives.

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**"YOU WANT VIEWERS TO GET YOUR MESSAGE ON FIRST BLINK, AND GASP AT ITS BEAUTY, AUDACITY, AND CLARITY."**

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There's no law saying that the revolution can't be fun — and human banners are excruciatingly fun. No chanting, no harangues; just hundreds of people using their bodies to form enormous words or an image in order to send a message.

A human banner can be spur of the moment — a milling crowd can be quickly arranged and photographed from a nearby building or lamppost — but conscientious planning can produce staggering works of aerial art.

I've helped create ten human banners, with crowds ranging from 300 to 1,500. Each event was powerful, cathartic, and the feedback was always something along the lines of: "The most enjoyable, most fun, best demonstration I've ever been to!"

The human banner is a powerful, expressive tactic. It has some of the political virtues of a rally: It turns out numbers that physically demonstrate public support and the movement's ability to mobilize, but it does so with the elegance of a work of art.

Journalists need fresh story angles and compelling visuals, and the human banner delivers: it's unusual, remarkable, notable, people-powered, and made up of a thousand individual human interest stories. And when composed correctly, it delivers the money shot the media is always looking for: a single iconic photo that speaks for itself, that tells the whole story on its own (see: THEORY: Action logic).

#### POTENTIAL RISKS

It's easy to get grandiose in your plans, but complexity doesn't scale well. Keep it simple. Or if you do want to get complicated, test drive a smaller version first, then plan meticulously.

#### RELATED TOOLS

##### Stories

- Gezi Park iftar
- "You'll never have a home in your f\*\*\*ing life!"

##### Tactics

- Artistic vigil
- Banner hang
- Enforced appearance
- Flash mob
- Light Brigade
- Public art intervention
- Visibility action

##### Principles

A human banner can be spur of the moment — a milling crowd can be quickly arranged and photographed from a nearby building or lamppost — but conscientious planning can produce staggering works of aerial art.

Here are some things to keep in mind when planning your human banner:

**Slogan/image:** Your image needs to communicate your message concisely and powerfully. Words and symbols are easiest to lay out, pictures trickier. You want viewers to get your message on first blink, and gasp at its beauty, audacity, and clarity.

**Site:** An iconic background anchors your photo to a place. Murals can be created on sand (etch the outlines before the crowd arrives), on grass (mark it with ropes or string), on pavement (chalk). A football field-sized area works well. My preferred font size for lettering is 100 feet tall, ten feet wide.

**Photography:** Video is nice, but getting at least one great photo is your goal. A helicopter gives optimal photographic maneuverability, but other possibilities include small planes, tall buildings, cranes, and camera-balloons.

**Crowd:** You'll definitely want enough folks to fill in your lettering, plus a cadre of event volunteers. Pre-registration prevents last-minute scrambling — or, worse, a "thin," scraggly image. Focus on designing an event you'd be excited to attend. Nail the details.

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## LEARN MORE

Thousands spell "RESIST!" on San Francisco's Ocean Beach  
SF Curbed, 2017

<https://sf.curbed.com/2017/2/13/14600710/trump-resist-sf-beach>

"Giant Melting da Vinci Artwork Recreated on Arctic Sea Ice"  
Greenpeace, Youtube, 2011

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=olXPh9v8Z08>

Collaborative Art for the Common Good

Spectral Q

<http://spectralq.com>

- Balance art and message
- Brand or be branded
- Consider your audience
- Do the media's work for them
- Make new folks welcome
- Play to the audience that isn't there
- Show, don't tell
- This ain't the Sistine chapel

## Theories

- Action logic
- Artivism
- Ethical spectacle
- Expressive and instrumental actions

## TAGS

Action design, Art, Communications, Movement building, Street protest, War and peace, Women's rights