

**THE POLICE
HOW-TO
GUIDES**

**HOW TO PLAN A
'JOHN' STING**

by Gerry Long
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HOW TO PLAN A 'JOHN' STING

Careful preparation from the get go will ensure that undercover vice officers and all other participants know what roles to play when you set things in motion



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Attacking prostitution in a certain neighborhood or industrial strip usually involves undercover (UC) officers attempting to solicit street-walkers and placing them in steel bracelets. However, a "john" sting can be another effective way to combat the problem.

When planning these operations, your vice officers must develop a strategy that considers the safety of the officers as its primary component. In a two-part blog, we'll explore the operational aspects of john stings for the mostly female, and often less experienced, undercover officers who enforce these laws. In this first part, we'll look at operational considerations. In the second part, we'll focus on safety tips for the undercover officer.

Savvy street-walkers often are familiar with how undercover officers approach them, and know the legal limits of an officer to ensnare them. The johns who purchase their services may not be as savvy, but can be prone to violent outbursts that imperil their target—the undercover officer.

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Let's consider steps that can be implemented to establish the safest environment for the UC.

You must first establish who will be responsible for which parts of the operation. At this initial stage, the undercover operative is a small component of planning. There must be surveillance officers to monitor the UC and other undercover officers to play the role of approaching clients. Assign the task of setting up audio and video surveillance to technical-oriented officers, who can also monitor the UCs for the client description, take-down signals, and established distress signals. Designate a take-down team to handle the hands-on arrest, processing, and towing of vehicles.

You'll also assign investigators to handle evidence submissions and interviews. Information gathered from the prostitutes and clients can lead to bigger leads that could solve other crimes in the area. Who will get the sought-after assignment of driving the marked unit and prisoner transport vehicle?

Using marked units helps clearly identify the take-down team members as police officers rather than a robbery crew. When the take down occurs, it can be hard for officers to stay in their roles, so the supervisor has the chore of keeping everybody on task. I've been involved in vice operations that went so fast and furious that one client was being escorted around the corner in handcuffs while another began engaging the UC in conversation. The UC shouldn't be left out in the cold because everyone took off after the runner. Set up each team, assign their responsibilities at a briefing, and stay on top of them throughout the operation.

Next, consider the location of the sting, including the geography and traffic patterns. Because you pick the site for the UC operation, you retain control. By watching the area prior to establishing the plan, you can identify the most-used approach and exits for the prostitutes and clients. Set up the site where cover officers can best observe the UCs. Officers should also be positioned to identify approaching johns with a description and vehicle information. This may be two teams or one person, as long as the sight line allows officers to see the transactions. Pick one side of the road where the UCs will operate and stick with it.

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If the operation simulates an escort or call-girl business, the site will be a hotel room or UC apartment. These locations afford you time to establish effective audio and video capabilities. Adjoining rooms in a hotel allow arresting officers to enter the room through a common door without alerting other hotel occupants or passersby.

If the motel operator is complicit in the prostitution, it will be more difficult to set up the room and operation. In that case, slowly move in and set up the operation to lower suspicion. To deal with a complicit motel operator, bring charges of pimping or conspiracy and work with your municipal regulators to shut the motel down. The only concern or problem from setting up a prostitution sting would be complaints from the neighbors that could easily be handled with a telephone call after the operation ends. You want to establish those connections and "eyes and ears" within the community.

Obviously, the UC has the most important role in the sting and must reel the clients into a conversation that's sufficient to prosecute them for solicitation. Most operations of this type use newer officers with less experience, so it's imperative that you outline the law and the key points needed in a conversation to make the case.

Lastly, you must notify the on-duty supervisor or commander. This may sound counterintuitive for an undercover operation, but when things go south or you need assistance from the uniforms, some early diplomacy will go a long way. Hours of preparation can be for naught if on-duty officers decide the night of your operation will be the night they work "the strip." A trusted on-duty supervisor is a fantastic resource to avoid operational conflict and ensure he or she can assist when needed.