

Flash Mobs: A branding tactic?

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On the heels of email and digital cameras, comes a wacky phenomenon that could be easily subverted. But see what happens when ordinary people resort to extraordinary communication methods!

In the pre-Internet days, the technique of the flash mob was called Guerilla Marketing. Famous cases of Branded Mobs have included a beer company buying hundreds of seats in a football stadium. These 'spectators' suddenly put on branded T-shirts and wave flash cards at the TV cameras. Presto! Instant branding –and news coverage.

by the numbers

38.4%

Percentage of organizations using the Net as primary tool in data collection.

63%

Percentage of adults who say design elements influences the direct mail they open.

56%

Broadband penetration in the U.S.

Not since the 1989 Tiananmen uprising, when Chinese protesters used faxes to mobilize mass support, has technology empowered people like this. We're talking of email, digital cameras, text messaging and 'Blogging' that have become today's smart tools. To many, technology today equals 'people power', because unlike printing presses and TV stations that could be owned by governments and corporations, these new tools have levelled the playing field.

Camera phones are quickly taking the place of video cameras in undercover operations, and consumer resistance groups.

These cameras can capture and upload images of an event to the media, law enforcement authorities or a protest Web site. The first case of a camera-phone being used to catch a criminal has been just recorded in the U.S., when a teenager in New Jersey who was accosted by a molester, whipped out his phone, and snapped pictures of the fleeing car. Though grainy, the photos of the license plate of the car helped the police trace the driver.

Or consider the PR power of Blogging and SMS. In Iran, a journalist called Sina Motallebi was arrested this year for Blogging –the act of maintaining a Web site devoted to recording Web Logs. In short time the world media was alerted, triggering off protests. How did the word on this get out? Through a diligent network of scribes, whose Blogs are now closely monitored by the mainstream media for breaking news!

From South Korea comes the amazing story of how SMS was used to swing votes in the 2002 presidential elections. The mainstream media, leaning more conservative, was bashing the more progressive Moo-hyun Roh. His chances were very slim, and until election day, trailed the conservative candidate. Thousands of young Koreans, resorted to SMS and Internet bulletin boards to friends and friends of friends, urging them to vote. They did. Within hours of the aggressive cyber campaigning, the margins were reversed, and

Roh won, giving a new interpretation of a government for the people by the people. Or, as one Korean writer likes to put it, this was "Cyber Korea, Cyber President."

Mobs Rule!

But the most bizarre use of personal communications is the still unfolding story of what's known as 'Flash Mobs'. It's almost like a field experiment being conducted worldwide, with email as the culprit. So far it's a harmless phenom-



enon, essentially an email call to action that mobilizes hundreds of people who 'obey' someone's order and descend on a location for about ten minutes –hence the term 'flash mob'. This flash operation is often quirky and funny. The 'mob' disperses as quickly as it assembles. Downtown Austin, Texas, reported an unusual Flash Mob on a warm July evening. People sat by bus stops, and a nearby Starbucks with umbrellas. Suddenly, at a preordained time, they assembled as a small 'mob', and walked twice up and down the street crossing, singing "supercalifragilistic-expialidocious" from the movie Mary Poppins. And their calling? They had responded to an email from an odd group calling itself the Austin Chapter of the International Mary Poppins Fan Club.

How weird is that? Similar Flash Mobs have been sighted at the Macy's New

York, and more recently in Toronto, Dublin, Berlin, Rome and Brazil.

Don't laugh it off. Like many Internet-generated hobbies and fads, it could spin off in unthinkable directions. I foresee two key developments of Flash Mobbing. The first will be Real-time Mobs: a very short window between a call-to-action and the flash event itself, using text messaging. The second will be the Branded Mob, where the benign Flash-Mob technique

would be perfected by marketers, who will 'stage' events to gain media attention, and create street level interest around products and services. All for a tiny fraction of the cost of a newspaper ad or a radio spot!

In the pre-Internet days, this was called Guerilla Marketing. Famous cases of branded mobs have included a beer company buying hundreds of seats in a football stadium. These 'spectators' suddenly put on branded T-shirts and wave flash cards at the TV cameras. Presto! Instant news coverage. But Flash Mobs are different in that they can target smaller locations, and not necessarily for mass media attention, but for the local people's attention. Imagine what would happen if 500 people in a bar suddenly had their phones ring simultaneously, with a specific ring tone? It's easy to see how advertising agencies might set up flash mob units to generate buzz for a product launch. Instead of an odd collection of umbrellas, and the silly 'expialidocious' refrain, it could easily be a red branded caps for Virgin airlines, some street musi-



What if 200 people showed up at Einstein's Bagels to promote a gym, or protest a cause?

cians and a jingle. Instead of walking down a street, the 'mob' could stand in formation, in the shape of a logo. People from tall buildings might then capture this interesting footage on digital cameras. Of course, all this Flash Mobbing could be subverted into a unmanageable and even risky activities as well — *a la* the anti-globalization protesters, streakers at sports events, or those planning mischief against individual companies.

But consider the positive versions of such 'mob' behaviour, as well. Small disenfranchised groups would no longer need to woo the mainstream media at expensive press conferences. Local government candidates could quickly dispatch groups of various demographics to many parts of a city to conduct targeted campaigns. Self-published writers could organize book signings without resorting to overpriced publicists. All it would take is a small team of SMS-savvy friends to summon a mob on your behalf. What a lovely media event that would be — minus the media!

Jargon Watch

Electronic Benefits Offer (EBT) --the term given to USDA food stamps which look --and work--like debit cards. Ninetes states are approved to issue EBT cards.