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Flash Mobs and Viral Marketing

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Introduction

Unsuspecting commuters at the Liverpool Street Station could not have predicted the events that would take place on what seemed to be a normal mid-morning commute January 15, 2009 at 11:00 am. As music began playing from the PA system one traveler broke into a choreographed dance. As the music continued more and more dancers joined in until over 400 dancers were performing to a mash up of songs ranging from hip hop to disco to ballroom style dance. Then the music ended abruptly, the participants simply dispersed into the crowd and they continued their morning commute as if nothing had ever happened. Hidden cameras captured it all! As it turns out, T-Mobile organized this random series of events, known as a flash mob, to be aired on local TV in London and to launch on YouTube.

This was just one example of how in recent years, of how companies have turned to flash mobs as a unique way to launch viral marketing campaigns for new products. Although the idea of flash mobs is not new, using them for marketing campaigns is. The idea of flash mobs began as a meaningless act of gathering together, then shifted into a non-violent expression of beliefs, and briefly disappeared altogether before making its way into the marketing world. With the current population's dependency on social media and other forms of mobile communication for day to day life it is no wonder that unique forms of viral and guerilla marketing using these technologies have become the norm over the past decade. Flash mobs are no exception. The history of these seemingly pointless demonstrations of the power of a group can provide some insight to how flash mobs can be active in our viral culture. This paper begins by defining flash mobs and then dives into the brief history of the phenomenon. Next, it looks at how the development of the idea of flash mobs and using mobile technology to form them has

encouraged viral practices and has led to employing these tactics for viral marketing campaigns in recent years. Finally, this paper provides examples of flash mob marketing, how organizations use flash mobs in viral marketing campaigns, and what makes them successful.

Flash mobs defined

What is a flash mob? Kaulingfreks & Warren define the term as "groups of people who congregate in public spaces to carry out incongruous acts and dissipate after a giver (usually very brief) period, as quickly as they came" (2010, p. 212). They are often organized through viral means such as email, text messaging, word of mouth, and more recently, social media. There are many different types of flash mobs including atomized, interactive, performance, political, and advertising. An atomized flash mob occurs when a group of people are mobilized through email and text messaging to come together in a public space, perform the same activity, and disband within about ten minutes (Molnár, 2009). Interactive flash mobs are said to be the most popular type. These bring activities such as pillow fights, follow the leader or other children's games into an urban setting and are set up via text message and email, just as an atomized flash mob would be organized (Molnár, 2009). Next, performance flash mobs which "follow the age-old script of performance art but spice it up with innovations made possible by new communications media," differ from other flash mobs because they often have an plainly stated artistic intent to "theatricalize and celebrate urban live" (Molnár, 2009). Political flash mobs, sometimes called, smart mobs, are pretty self-explanatory and exist to make a political point; usually to test the limits of free assembly is public places (Molnár, 2009). Finally, the main topics of this paper, advertising flash mobs, seem to be generating a lot of attention. These usually include a performance type flash mob (a choreographed piece) organized by an organization to promote a product. Then the organization follows up by using viral and guerilla tactics to continue the

campaign. All of these different types of flash mobs originated with one man who was ironically inspired by boredom to create mass confusion among crowds.

History of flash mobs

Bill Wasik, a senior editor of Harper's Magazine is credited with creating the first flash mob in May 2003. It was not until Bill identified himself and released his book *And Then There's This: How Stories Live and Die in Viral Culture* in 2006, that research on flash mobs had been collected and explained. The first successful flash mob took place in Manhattan, New York on June 17, 2003 (Nicholson, 2005, p. 1). Between 7:27 pm and 7:37 pm about 100 people gathered together and entered the home furnishings section of Macy's. The flash mobbers then all approached the sales people telling them "they all lived together in a free-love commune and that they wanted to purchase a 'love rug'" (Nicholson, 2005, p.1). After about ten minutes the mobbers dispersed rapidly. This was the first of a series of eight flash mobs led by Wasik for what he called the MOB Project.

The inspiration for Wasik's project, he says, was pure boredom (Wasik, 2009, p. 16). The goal was to use email to get people to come together for "some sort of show, where something surprising would happen" (Wasik, 2009, p. 19). He then decided that the point of the show would be that there is no point, just a group of people coming together for no reason at all. He calls this a "self-conscious idea for a self-conscious culture, a promise to create something out of nothing" and the goal was to attract a crowd (Wasik, 2009, p. 19). Wasik's first MOB attempt was to send a group to Claire's Accessories. He sent an email that he crafted and then forwarded from an anonymous account to about 60 friends and acquaintances. Participants were instructed to enter the location from all four cardinal directions, based on their birth months. This was to take place

at 7:24 pm on Tuesday June 3, 2003. Unfortunately the flash mob failed when someone leaked the location. The group was met at Claire's Accessories by cops guarding the door.

MOB #2 was a success however. As mentioned above it took place at Macy's in New York City. This time to eliminate location leaks, Bill arranged for mobbers to meet at various bars around the area where a slip of paper stating the mob location were distributed within minutes of the scheduled flash mob. He knew he had been successful when the headline "Email Mob Takes Manhattan" appeared on *Wired News (Wasik, 2006)*. Bill continued to launch MOB #3 email responses began to come from all over the country and the blogosphere began to send praises his way. By MOB #6, the best attended of Wasik's project, one thing became clear: if hundreds of people would show up for no good reason, then clearly there is a "potential for artistic or political expression here".

Flash mobs were soon catching on in large cities and Wasik was surprised how they grew into a "global fad nearly overnight, and casting their spell on large cities from Toronto to Tokyo" (Molnár, 2009). Flash mobs began to take more of a political turn in many cases. This became more common in Eastern Europe and Asia where "unannounced free assembly in public spaces is still likely to be perceived by authorities as an imminent political threat" (Molnár, 2009). Political flash mobs do not always end positively. Furthermore, Wasik had crafted the flash mob to result in nothing and for participants to dissolve back into the public. Bringing politics into the mix loses the original meaning of a flash mob in his opinion. He says "You don't go and make a political statement and then wilt in to the background. That doesn't really work symbolically" (Heaney, 2005). When Bill offers his advice to others forming a flash mob he tells them that the mobs should be "absurd or funny, they shouldn't be explicitly political" (Heaney, 2005). In 2005

Wasik declared that flash mobs were dead (Molnár, 2009). Flash mobs, in his view, no longer served their original purpose.

New media, Viral Marketing, and Flash Mobs

Flash mobs indeed use viral marketing techniques in many ways. Viral marketing would involve an effort to spread an idea by encouraging others to pass on the message. The message is contagious, like a virus. When Bill began organizing flash mobs in 2003 he primarily used email to spread the word. Eventually he began using text messaging as well, but today's technologies present even more tools that are being utilized for flash mobs and flash mob marketing campaigns. Blogs became increasingly important to the success of flash mobs "during the trend's popularization and even after its demise" (Nicholson, 2005). Social media outlets such as blogs, Facebook, MySpace, and Twitter are now just as common in spreading the initial plan for a flash mob (Molnár, 2009). When it comes to spreading the word about a flash mob, "the main organizational platforms all exploit one of the key novelties of new media: the possibility of offering an effective one-to-many communication channel" (Molnár, 2009). Nicholson adds to this notion explaining how mobile communication has made a shift in recent years from direct one-to-one communication to indirect one-to-many communication and this has contributed greatly to the flash mob trend (2005). This is not to say all attempts of organizing flash mobs are successful.

Even more interesting, these viral techniques are not only used in forming flash mobs. In the case of an organization using a flash mob as a marketing tool, these mediums are important in promoting new products by way generating online and mobile responses following the flash mob. YouTube is the most successful medium in this effort. In an interview, Wasik talks about a person he considers a smart thinking on viral phenomena, Jonah Peretti. Peretti, he says, "things

that go viral have a 'social hook' - they speak to specific relationship that we have with people in our lives" (Gidman, 2009). He continues by explaining how we tend to forward viral messages that we have an invested interest in. "We use the Internet memes as extensions of our conversations" (Gidman, 2009). Wasik himself also believes that "if there has been a single most important trend in marketing during the first decade of the 21st century, it has been corporate America's slavering over viral culture" (Arkdorfer, 2009). Keep this in mind as examples of flash mob marketing are highlighted below.

A company looking to organize a flash mob marketing campaign would do so by staging a flash mob, filming it, and then launching this footage on the internet. The goal would then be for the advertisement to go viral. Roumen writes in his blog *Viral Ideas & Social Trends* that "the best way to get free publicity and free attention is by doing something remarkable and highly entertaining" (2009). Vellar explains how flash mobbers use mobile technology and then social media to aid the viral process. He says that Flash mobbers use camcorders, digital cameras, and camera phones to record the flash mob events and then to share it on SNSs (social network sites) to document their participation (2010). The following examples of flash mobs used in marketing campaigns provide additional information and insight.

T-Mobile

T-Mobile has had one of the most successful flash mob marketing campaigns to date. They first created a message, and used a flash mob to convey that message. "Life Is For Sharing" became the foundation of T-Mobile's marketing campaigns when they launched their first flash mob advertisement. The flash mob, appropriately titled [The T-Mobile Dance](), took place on January 15, 2009 at the Liverpool Street Station and was set to air on local TV and was launched on YouTube the following day. Currently the video sits on T-Mobile's *LifeIsForSharing*

YouTube account and it has accumulated over 24,000,000 views. The advertisement was created

by the world renowned advertising agency, Saatchi & Saatchi and was named a Gold Winner at

the prestigious 56th Annual Cannel Lions advertising awards (Lim, 2009). The ad was also

named TV Commercial of the Year at the British Television Advertising Awards (Thomas,

2010).

There are specific reasons as to why this ad was particularly successful. First, the shots

included in the video ad include many images of bystanders taking pictures and video with their

phones to forward on to friends (Thomas, 2010). Not only does this give the flash mob

credibility as being completely unexpected, but it also shows first hand how the message is

already being sent from person to person instantly. The fact that T-Mobile is a phone company

only further illustrates the ideal that indeed *life is for sharing*. Wasik agrees that this ad had the

right marketing goals in mind. He says it is important to "keep the element of surprise without

alienating your audience – or your participants" (Gidman, 2009). People do not want to show up

to a flash marketing event only to find out they are part of a publicity stunt. Wasik says ads such

as T-Mobile's will be more successful because they use flash marketing as "an image of in

advertisements, where it gives that sense of instant togetherness, rather than as a viral marketing

campaigns (i.e. creating mobs that try to market participants)" (Gidman, 2009).

T-Mobile continued their campaign in April, 2009 when they used social media and other

mobile mediums to advertise their next flash mob adventure. This time they announced 4 days in

advance that an event would take place at Trafalgar Square in London. When the 13,500

participants arrived a sing-a-long for the whole group began and they passed out microphones

(Hargrave, 2009). Singer Pink appeared as well. They again used the Life Is For Sharing

platform by bringing a group together in one activity. Over 11 million people viewed the ad on YouTube as of May 2009 and millions more on TV (Hargrave, 2009).

Now, in October 2010 their latest series of flash mob dances are titled "Welcome Back" and include groups of singers and dancers greeting passengers at busy terminals such as those at Heathrow in London (YouTube.com, 2010). The YouTube videos have millions of views as the company seems to be generating quite a buzz on the social media scene.

Ford

Before T-Mobile gave mob marketing a try, Ford explored their options by partnering with Sony to market the new Ford Fusion in 2005. They produced a series of Fusion Flash Concerts where they let the public in on a series of secret concerts at the last minute. The goal of this project was look "for cool ways to connect with their target audience" which was said to be mid twenties to late thirties. Wasik actually was able to visit one of the concerts but did not feel that strongly about the mob advertising approach Ford took. Emails had been sent almost a week in advance, radio stations were plodded with advertising, and the newspaper had the concerts listed in their calendars (Wasik, 2006). Although large groups responded to the mobile campaign and game to the concert, there was nothing spontaneous about the operation and no one was there to buy a Ford Fusion. Although maybe a successful concert, this is not an example of successful flash mob because it does not fit the definition of a flash mob.

More examples

- The Oprah Winfrey Show: Last year when Oprah had the Black Eyed Peas on her show to kick off the new season, she never expected to get a surprise flash mob of 20,000 fans dancing to "I Gotta Feeling'". As a result the Black Eyed Peas received numerous air time on YouTube and dramatic increase to their website and social media spaces (Thomas, 2010).

- <u>Ray-Ban</u>: In 2008 the company sent a street team of about 100 people to the corner of 31st Street and 6th Avenue in Manhattan. The group froze for about 20 minutes and stared a six story billboard for Ray-Ban while wearing multi-colored Ray-Bans (Molnár, 2009). Was it successful? Well it caused quite the traffic jam!

- <u>Samsung</u>: Samsung did not plan a spontaneous flash mob event as T-Mobile did. They instead filmed an advertisement using the performance flash mob concept of more and more people joining in. The ad shows cute little girl dancing in a pre-school setting as she is joined by more and more people in the community mimicking her dance moves (Thomas, 2010). Soon the whole neighborhood is dancing and the ad reads "use your influence". This video had well over 2 million views on YouTube and can be seen as successful viral marketing, although not a traditional flash mob (Thomas, 2010).

Why flash mobs?

How do flash mobs reach marketing niche in viral campaigns that were not being reached before? Hargrave, using T-Mobile's Trafalgar Square event as an example, says that "these are the lengths companies must now go to to get you to feel like you are part of their fun loving brand. In a sense they now use us to help advertise their products they want us to buy" (2009). Isn't that so with much social media today though: advertisers relying on us, the consumers, to "Like" their products and brands on Facebook and "tweet" about our favorite consumer findings just to spread the word? Pink, who appeared at the T-Mobile stunt, believed that her appearance would give her a stronger showing on YouTube and other social media outlets. She says that she can recognize consumers moving away from buying CDs and moving toward online means of getting their music (Hargrave, 2009).

Another way flash mobs are reaching new markets is just good ole' fashion fun. Successful marketing flash mobs have to have a sufficient "shock and awe" element as well as build the positive image of one's brand (Lim, 2009). Successful campaigns are finding ways to do something in the real world that prompts people to share it in their virtual world (Burcher, 2009). What bad things can you find to say about 3 minute choreographed dance shaking up your morning commute to work in London? Burchman even argues that in such hard economic times, such a spontaneous outburst brings "happiness to people [and] creates a positive feeling – a good context for an advertiser message" (2009). In all flash mob examples it is evident that both participants and unsuspecting passersby are having fun and sending smiles across the globe.

One company, Visible Measures, has gone into the business of measuring the effectiveness of viral video campaigns. Their research provides concrete evidence of flash mob marketing campaigns' successes. Visible measures tracks the viral status of over 200 million videos across more than 150 sharing websites. They give every video a rating that takes into account video placements, video views, and sentiment analysis (True Reach, 2010). Placement includes the instances a video is placed with a unique URL. This can be both original placements and viral placements, meaning they do not come from the original source (True Reach, 2010). Video views measures the "aggregate audience reach across all of the campaign-related placements" (True Reach, 2010). Lastly, sentiment analysis takes into account the posted comments on campaign placements. They gather the 50 most frequently used comment terms to gauge an emotional response for the campaign (True Reach, 2010). The total score shows the brand impact of an Internet video campaign on an audience. Some notable clients include Crest, American Idol, Warner Brothers, and Ford. It is interesting to look at T-Mobile's rating considering the popularity their Life Is For Sharing campaign has generated. T-Mobile's flash

mob ads, the T-Mobile Liverpool Dance, Trafalgar Square, and Welcome Back, all have ratings and have all been in the Top 10 Viral Video Ads Chart for the weeks following their release (True Reach, 2010). This further confirms their success in launching a viral marketing campaign.

Conclusion

Flash mobs, an idea coined by creator Bill Wasik just a short 7 years ago, started as a social trend and are now the new niche in viral marketing. Wasik developed flash mobs as an outlet to boredom and was just looking to create something surprising for no real reason at all. It proved right away to be a viral concept as the word spread around New York City of Wasik's flash mob antics. In 2005, flash mobs were declared dead by their creator because they had lost their meaning, which was to have no meaning. Many were organizing political flash mobs and this was not the original intent Wasik had envisioned. It was just a few years later that companies such as Ford and T-Mobile recognized the viral effect flash mobs could have on an audience. Social media and advancing mobile technology is no doubt a contributor to the viral effect. Marketers have already learned however what it takes to launch a successful viral campaign. It is important that participants and the audience do not feel as though they are a part of a publicity stunt, but that they instead feel engaged, part of something big, and that they too are getting something out of it such as enjoyment and fun. This positive PR for the brand is just as important as creating an engaging video to launch on YouTube. Through the use of flash mob marketing brands have already seen increases by the millions of viewers and visitors on their social networking spaces and websites. The truly viral aspect of these campaigns is what makes make flash mobs an effective form of marketing and promotion.

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