

MOB IT AND SELL IT: CREATING MARKETING OPPORTUNITY THROUGH THE REPLICATION OF FLASH MOBS

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By combining a marketing perspective on consumer purchasing with a sociological analysis of collective behavior, this paper lays out a conceptual foundation for the understanding and potential use of “flash mobs” in the procurement of goods and services. The paper follows the framework provided by Turner and Killian (1957) and argues that flash mobs are a form of crowd behavior that generate a sense of power. While Blumer (1951) suggests “crowd conventionalization” as one method of dealing with the power of crowds, this paper suggests crowd replication as an alternative. This strategy could provide an exciting and technologically savvy approach to reaching young people in the marketplace.

INTRODUCTION

Giving free play to his feelings, without designating to himself all of the consequences of his acts, and escaping for a time from the bonds of convention can be an enjoyable experience for the individual (Turner and Killian 1957).

A flash mob event is supposed to be quirky, whimsical, and motivated totally by a desire to produce the sort of fun that comes from engaging others in a surreal moment of wonderment (www.flashmob.info.com).

The summer of 2003 brought the “flash mob” into the public eye. Also known as “inexplicable mobs” or “flocking”, flash mobs consist of large groups of strangers summoned by e-mail, or cell phone to a designated place to perform some inane task or prank and disperse in a matter of minutes (Pohl 2003). The first citation using the words “flash mob” was June 16, 2003 on a web site called cheesebikini.com in an article titled “Flash Mobs Take Manhattan” (Savage 2003).

This “new” phenomenon is called everything from a fad to a new social revolution. Howard Rheingold (2003) is credited with first revealing these arrangements in his book *Smart Mobs*. This title is a play on words combining the term “smart mobs” (wireless hand-held devices) and the concept of mobs which he viewed as large groups of technologically sophisticated young people coordinating their activities through their wireless devices.

It should be noted here that while Rheingold (2003) is widely credited with identifying these web-enabled mobs and their ability to congregate quickly (Jennings 2003 and McGirk 2003), a 1960s version of this phenomena called “milling” was organized by a radio story teller named Jean Shepard who called for his listeners to “mill” at a specified place and time, which they did (Gillen 2003).

The first recorded flash mob was held in New York City on June 17, 2003 at Macy’s department store. The Macy’s mobbing was actually the second attempt, the first one having been foiled in May when word leaked to authorities. It was organized by a 28 year old known only as “Bill”. Bill reveals that the idea was no more than a lark to see what would happen. He says he likes the idea of people realizing the power of collective action (Walker 2003).

More than 100 New Yorkers showed up at Macy's, gathered around a \$10,000 oriental rug claiming they needed to buy a love rug for their commune. After flooding the Macy's help with questions for ten minutes, they abruptly turned and left. Since then, flash mobs and resultant publicity have proliferated all across the US and abroad.

The Flash Mob Popularity Index was created to keep track of the search hits for the term "flash mob" on Google.com. Beginning on July 13, 2003 there were 1,210. As of September 3, 2003 there were 144,000. Media reports on Google went from 97 at the beginning of August to 217 at the end of the month (www.flashmob.info/flashmobpublicity).

With increasing popularity has come the establishment of websites specifically dedicated to reporting on and discussing flash mobs (www.yahoo.com). These sites allow those interested to sign up, view photos of previous flash mob events, etc. One site has proposed a "flash mob credo" and suggests rules for conducting and participating in an event (www.flashmob.info.com).

It is the purpose of this paper to look at flash mobs as a form of collective behavior as defined by Turner and Killian (1957). Using their three continuum of crowd dimensions, flash mobs can clearly be classified as Solardaristic-Focused-Active, which is the crowd form commonly known as a mob.

Flash mobs or Solardaristic-Focused-Active crowds have an innate energy that makes them desirable if their power can be harnessed or directed. Blumer's (1951) concept of "the conventionalized crowd" was one in which societies attempt to utilize or control the force of the crowd. Turner and Killian (1957) elaborate on the concept indicating that the force of the crowd can be deliberately used by individual leaders or by small power groups while the crowd members remain unaware of this manipulation.

In the case of flash mobs, the crowd dissipates on its own and does so very quickly. It will be argued in this paper that in order to use the power of flash mobs as a marketing strategy, the collective behavior needs to be replicated and directed rather than utilized in its current form. If it is possible for marketers to *replicate* flash mobs which prove effective in promotion and sales, it would have implications both for traditional collective behavior theory regarding crowds and mobs, as well as for the marketing of goods and services.

Collective behavior theory will provide the framework for understanding the formation and inherent power of flash mobs, but it will be argued that traditional collective behavior theory neglects the concept of crowd replication as a form of conventionalizing a crowd in order for its energy or power to be of use to the society. Given that such replication is feasible, these seemingly unwieldy and innately powerful collectives might be initiated, manipulated and ultimately utilized as a new marketing strategy that is both technologically sophisticated and effective.

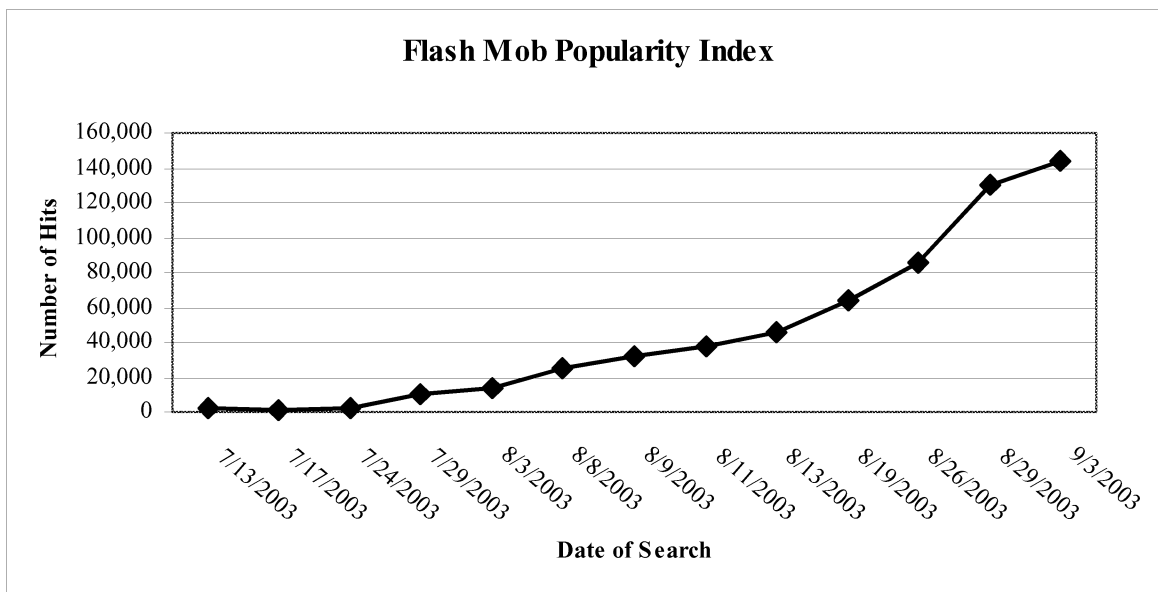
It is hypothesized that flash mobs are a form of collective behavior as defined by the Turner and Killian (1957) typology, having all the potential and properties ascribed to a Solardaristic-Focused-Active crowd. It is further hypothesized that the power of this form of collective behavior might best be utilized by an alternative to conventionalization. It will be argued that replication of the Solardaristic-Focused-Active crowd type, or flash mobs, provides opportunity for marketers given they understand essential elements of the nature of these collectives. A brief consideration of collective behavior theory as it applies to crowd behavior will facilitate this discussion and enhance the argument that flash mobs in particular may represent a mob worth replicating.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The collective behavior literature incorporates those theories that deal with a group collectively acting with some continuity to promote a

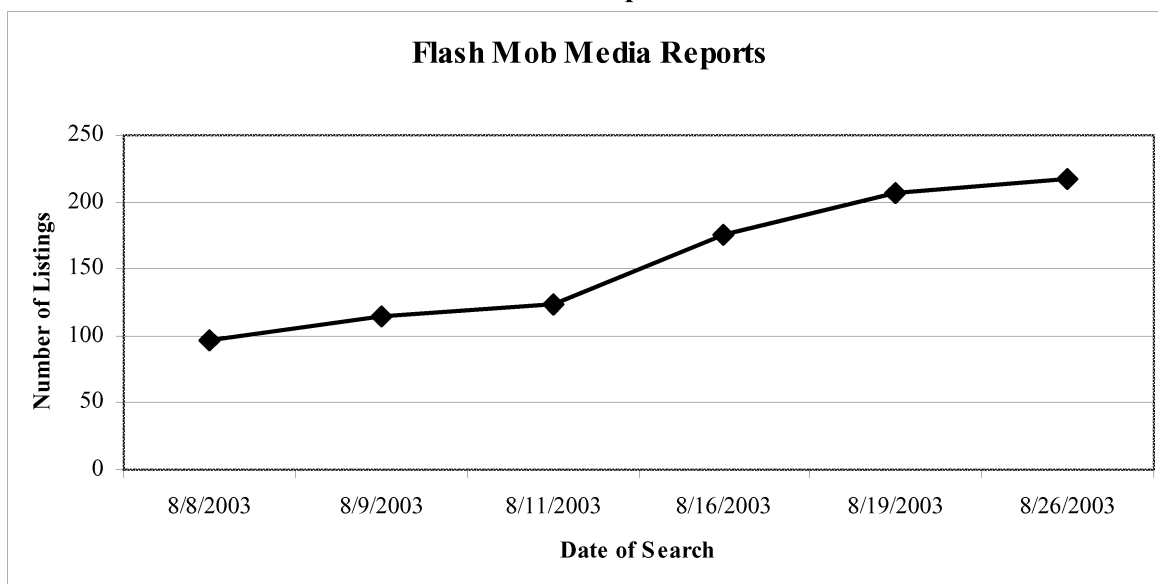
FIGURE 1
Flash Mob Popularity Index*

The below is an index of how popular the *Flash Mob* phenomenon is according to how many search hits the term "Flash Mob" receives on www.google.com. It is arranged according to the date of when the search was conducted.



*Numbers may fluctuate depending upon which database Google.com publishes.

FIGURE 2
Media Reports*



*News.Google.com Listings for Flash Mob Media Reports

change in the society of which it is a part. Gustave Le Bon (1887) is often identified as the father of collective behavior. In 1887 he wrote *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind*. While lacking specific theory, this was a significant landmark in the development of the field of collective behavior. Le Bon (1887) described crowd behavior and concluded that groups of people interacting and loosely organized could impact the social order.

Shortly after Le Bon's work, E. A. Ross devoted his writings to the concepts of crowds, mobs, fads, fashions, and mass movements (Savage 2003). Echoing Le Bon (1887), Ross noted the power for social influence contained in group behavior. This notion was furthered in the 1950s when Herbert Blumer (1951) gave collective behavior its clearest definition. Blumer (1951) saw the origin of collective behavior in a societal condition of unrest or dissatisfaction. From this atmosphere several different types of social movements can emerge. Those include consumer movements directed at problems in the marketplace, as well as social movements directed at specific institutions such as civil rights, abortion, or gay rights (Walker 2003).

Turner and Killian (1957) elaborated on existing collective behavior theory. They agree with others that certain elements are common to all crowds including: uncertainty, a sense of urgency, communication of mood and imagery, constraint, selective individual suggestibility and permissiveness (p. 83). All of these elements are present in flash mobs. Flash mobs communicate a sense of urgency simply by calling for the formation of the crowd at a designated time and on short notice. This sense of timeliness or urgency is reinforced by the participants being asked to synchronize their watches to a predetermined web site, encouraging precise movement (Talcott 2003).

The communication of mood, imagery, and appropriate action are usually emergent characteristics that come as the crowd develops. Crowd actions are clearly spelled out to the flash mob members prior to the formation of the mob, but

mood and imagery are a result of the resultant collective interaction.

The selective individual suggestibility and permissiveness refer to the tendency to respond uncritically to suggestions that are consistent with the mood, imagery, and conception or appropriate action that have developed and assumed a normative character. In one flash mob, members were asked to surround a big tree and make bird sounds. In another, they congregated at a toy store, laid down on the floor and kicked their feet in the air. The individual does what the group does.

Turner and Killian (1957) suggest, however, that the dimensions on which crowds vary must also be considered to complete the analysis of the forms of crowd behavior. The basis for classification of crowds is the crowd objective and the nature of the relations between the individuals in the crowd. Dimensions of crowds utilized in their typology include the following (p. 84):

Individualistic-Solidaristic Crowds

Crowds having an objective that no individual member of the crowd could accomplish alone, is referred to as *solidaristic*. This type of crowd requires the combined and integrated efforts of the crowd to achieve its objective. In a solidaristic crowd, the members act concertedly in pursuit of a group objective. The nature of the crowd objective is such that it could not be accomplished as well by the individual in isolation as by the crowd. In an individualistic crowd there is no group objective but many individual ones. The crowd allows one to overcome any inhibitions, but is not necessary for the achievement of the individual objective.

The very essence of a flash mob is to yield a group experience that is memorable. The impact of a flash mob is the result of the crowd engaging in some behavior, and realizing the power of the collective. Individuals engaging in any of the flash mob activities on their own, would go virtually unnoticed. The power that is produced when the flash mob forms is a po-

tent force both internally and externally. It is pointed out that such power serves to reinforce the solidarity of the group (Turner and Killian 1957).

Focused-Volatile

A focused crowd is one who's attention is concentrated on one particular object. The crowd objective is very specific. A volatile crowd may consist of sub-crowds, each concerned with a specific object of the general class of objectives. A volatile crowd is likely to shift its attention and activity (as in a race riot).

Flash mobs have very clear and specific objectives, even though their purpose is mainly to do something silly and have fun. All flash mobs have had target meeting places where the mob focuses attention on doing, saying or asking something. Invitations are passed around electronically and by word of mouth and participants have no idea about the stunt until they arrive. Detailed instructions on the invitation ask participants to synchronize their watches and divide up into neighboring bars where they await further information (Talcott 2003).

Here are some examples of typically focused flash mob actions:

- A flash mob near the American Embassy in Berlin wore silly hats, waved flags, and popped champagne to propose the toast "Here's to Natasha!"
- In New York City hundreds of people crammed into an upscale Soho shoe store. They all pretended to be tourists on a bus trip from Maryland then left after five minutes.
- Also in New York City hundreds of people burst into applause on the mezzanine of the Grand Hyatt at 7:12 PM then quickly dissipated.

Clearly flash mobs have a focused orientation with regard to their objective.

Active-Expressive

The active crowd seeks the attainment of some action upon an external object, or person(s) outside the crowd. In contrast, an expressive crowd measures its accomplishment based on the production of some sort of subjective experience in the crowd members themselves. The objective here is a feeling, an experience, an internal state of some sort. This might include seeing visions, being healed, etc.

As noted, each flash mob has an objective. Crowds have twirled on Market Street in San Francisco, linked arms in a train station in Zurich and shouted "yes" repeatedly into cell phones in Berlin. In Dallas, dozens of people carrying red balloons showed up outside a movie house to shout "Marco" at dozens more carrying blue balloons, who yelled "Polo" in return. Through web sites like flocksmart.com, cheesebikini.com and mobproject.com, flash mobs are organized to perpetrate some action on some external object. The intent is not to achieve any individual epiphany but simply for everyone to have fun participating in the event.

According to Turner and Killian (1957) the term mob in popular usage has as its referent the Solardaristic-Focused-Active type of crowd. We can conclude, then, that flash mobs meet the criteria of a Solardaristic-Focused-Active crowd and also the popular definition of a mob. But while flash mobs meet the criteria for mobs, their objective is purely social, making them distinct. This friendly, web-enabled mob, is neither pathological nor undesirable. To the contrary, flash mobs could become an important vehicle for mobilizing large groups of consumers for the purpose of marketing.

REPLICATION OF A FLASH MOB AS A MARKETING STRATEGY

Kingsley Davis (1949) characterizes conventional crowds as being "articulated with the social structure." Essentially societies provide traditional, conventional situations in which people can be free to express themselves. This is a conscious effort by the society to sponsor

socially sanctioned crowd behavior. In these situations, the experience is repeated time after time and the forms of behavior become standardized. Football rallies, New Year's Eve in Times Square and holiday crowds are examples of conventionalized crowds.

It is proposed that flash mobs be intermittently replicated rather than conventionalized. "Regularly scheduled" flash mobs is simply a contradiction in terms. The fun, spontaneity, and quirkiness of the phenomenon cannot be maintained through conventionalization. It may be possible, however, to intermittently recreate the type of situation in which flash mobbing can occur and continue. This would perpetuate the positive experience for participants while benefiting marketers in their efforts to target sophisticated, young consumers.

The typical participant in a flash mob tends to be white, middle class, in his or her 20s and 30s, technologically sophisticated and employed in a position requiring significant computer time (McGirk 2003). These consumers are commonly known as Gen X and/or Gen Y, and are very desirable to marketers.

This market is made up of 130 million people from two separate generations, X and Y. While definitions vary, Generation X consists of those born roughly between 1965 and 1978. Generation Y is often considered to be made up of anyone born after 1979. Within these generational groups are cohorts of young, active, adventurous, and fitness-oriented people. They will respond to information presented in an appropriate way, using a favored communications vehicle (Fitzgerald 2001).

The profile of a typical Gen X-er includes: a sophisticated sense of humor, entrepreneurial, risk-taking, enjoys new experiences, comfortable learning new technological skills, attuned to Internet style communication, have developed their own system of values, value fair play and honesty, and demand truth in advertising. Gen X-ers are all about innovation, speed, and themselves. They live in the present and are looking for immediate results.

Flash mobbing attracts these consumers and their love of technology, new ideas, spontaneity and fun. Creative marketers could benefit from the flash mob phenomenon by examining the type of situation in which such an experience is likely to happen. Beyond the actual flash mob experience lie related marketing possibilities. It has been suggested (somewhat factiously) on one flash mob web site that street vendors will soon assemble selling "I was mobbed" t-shirts, and stores and malls will post "flash mob friendly" signs. Mobs might be sponsored by manufacturers, or staged for commercial purposes. Flash mobs could be the theme of a popular movie with product placements invaluable for those who participate. Even the possibility of an MTV induced flash mob or a documentary are posed on the site (www.flashmobs.info.com). The strategy could be put in place almost immediately at the retail level.

A department store might begin by collecting email addresses from its web site visitors, charge customers, or target audience. At some point these people would receive an invitation from the retailer to participate in the store's flash mob. They would be given instructions to assemble quickly at a particular spot, receive further information, then move on to the event. The event could focus the group on a special sale lasting only a very short time and available only to flash mobbers. Every effort would be made to keep the event spontaneous, fun and quick.

By engaging in this kind of flash mob, young people can have fun, feel unique, and develop a relationship with a store that they feel understands them. Flash mob sales could become an integral part of a store's promotional strategy. Given that fact that fairly large numbers of young people can be mobilized quickly through the web, the possibilities now exist for special sales needing no advanced notice and no traditional media expense. Flash mobs literally allow a retailer to call a sale anytime for free. The central elements however, will always be spontaneity and fun. Without significant plan-

ning to make the event a positive experience, the strategy is doomed.

A flash mob that becomes conventionalized is no longer a flash mob. At that point, the event looks like any other preferred customer sale. In order to succeed, flash mobs must be held intermittently, on short notice and have the elements of whimsy, and fun. Only then will retailers benefit from the power of these web-enabled collectives.

IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

While the collective behavior literature is extensive and rich, there is an underlying assumption that collectives often are pathological, disruptive or in need of being controlled. It is commonly held that collectives have power which is enhanced during the crowd or collective experience. Clearly, this might suggest the potential danger of any gathering. For this reason, theorists pose crowd conventionalization, manipulation or other strategies to control crowds. Flash mobs meet all characteristics in the Turner and Killian (1957) typology for crowds and more specifically mobs. The only difference is that these are what might be called friendly mobs. Their own credo includes the phrases "do no harm" and "have fun".

It is suggested in this paper that *mob replication* may represent a new addition to the collective behavior literature. There may be cases in which gatherings are beneficial. This possibility should be explored. In the case of marketing, the power, energy and attitude innate in a flash mob could motivate sales under the right circumstances. If successful, flash mobs could be the promotional vehicle that connects marketers to the typically hard to reach audience of young people in an exciting and effective way.

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