

ARE YOU A FLASH MOBSTER?

There is something very appealing about an instant, unplanned party. I remember as a teenager in Guernsey, the buzz of a call from a friend announcing a barbecue on the beach - in an hour's time, and being part of a chain to round up a few others. As no-one lives further than a 30 minute bike ride from anywhere on the island, it didn't take long to assemble scores of raving youngsters clutching beer and burgers purloined from the parental fridge.

We were, it seems, ahead of our time. The latest urban phenomenon is 'Flash-mobbing', described as 'the spontaneous gathering of people in once place for a particular purpose -usually meaningless'.

Which definition might be applied to a thousand conferences, but let that pass. It's a phenomenon we should take note of.

The universality of mobile phones and the popularity of SMS allows those with an organising gene to rally hundreds, if not thousands, to a central location in very short order. We have seen this with the anti-capitalist riots and hear about it from police reports of raves in the countryside. Fortunately, 'Flash mobs' seem to have a benign intent since they are designed as random acts of pointlessness. (There's that sense of deja vue, again.)

Apparently flash-mobbing involves getting lots of people to converge somewhere public, like a shopping mall, to do something surreal. One of the first in the UK, in July, involved a well known furniture store in London and some sofa worship. Sometimes the purpose of the gathering isn't revealed until most people are assembled. The happening (now there's a 60s word) is always very short-lived.

I understand that the craze is sweeping America, (don't they always) and has attained cult status in Italy and Germany. Yes, Germany.

But I sense a threat to the established order in the conference business. Flash mobbing sounds so much more fun than the traditional meeting and it offers excellent networking at negligible cost. No wonder conference attendances are falling. Perhaps this is what people want - instant gatherings; they are, after all, the logical conclusion to ever shortening lead times.

Since the early 70s (when, incidentally, an American author, called Larry Niven published a sci-fi story, 'Flash Crowd', which forecast the concept), our industry has striven for recognition and respectability, are we to allow this anarchic fringe to undermine our hard-won position in society?

We have some options. We can turn our backs on these unqualified stunt punters and ignore their absurdities, or we can welcome them into the industry and absorb some of their ideas and tactics. (I particularly like the concept of a

conference programme containing 'Flash workshops' devoted to some absurd and pointless activity.)

PCOs are uniquely qualified to organise flash mobs and, of course, are continually seeking new business; here is a potential opening. But is there any money in it?

To put it another way: if 500 under 35s all converge, after work, on the courtyard of Tate Modern where they play 'dead ants' and sing the Marseillaise for 10 minutes, who stands to benefit?

First off, mobile phone companies get a blip on their profit charts and London buses carry a few extra 'pax'. More noticeably, the pubs and restaurants in the area would do a roaring trade - if they're able to cope with the unexpected demand. Ice cream or hot dog vendors should make a similar killing and if I ran the Tate Modern cafe, I'd hand out discount vouchers. Come to think of it, a few day's warning should be enough to run off a few hundred commemorative tee shirts.

Most importantly, the event must be newsworthy (the surreal and ridiculous usually are) so that it attracts lots of media coverage.

The secret to exploiting this phenomenon is advance warning. With that, I can think of several potential sponsors for a flash mob. And if I had access to the database.....

From there it's only a short step to offer an inclusive package that includes, travel, theatre tickets, a meal and overnight stay. Or am I missing the point of flash mobbery?

Of course, sordid commercial interests always intrude on bright ideas in the end, so before you can say "text message" the brains behind these gatherings will be setting up their own association (watch the web), describing themselves as event organisers and promoting a certificate in Flash Mob Planning. There'll be a magazine any moment now, - look out for 'The Mob Flasher' - well, perhaps not.

Tony Carey.
August 2003

753 words