Flash mobs – a hit?

A group of people appear out of nowhere, embark on a choreographed routine and end it with a flourish, revealing a message and then melting back into the crowd. All through, the surprised crowd is held captive by the performance and more susceptible to the brand message. These are flash mobs, for the uninitiated.

From movie launches to TV shows, flash mobs are being used more often now to promote the events. It's only a matter of time when marketers too would tap this alternate marketing tool in a big way.

Related Stories

- Video: Innovation is not one person's job, but that of the entire organisation: Anuradha Aggarwal
- 45% of people interested in cricket on Facebook are from India
- Maxus wins media mandate for ICC Cricket World Cup 2015
- Sale of FMCG products online to see 50 times growth from current level: Google and Bain study
- HT Media Ltd restructures senior management, increases digital focus
- Standard Chartered Bank appoints Lakshmi Goyal as Regional Head, Brand & Marketing, South Asia

According to Krishnadeep Baruah, Director - Marketing, Research In Motion, India (RIM), the parent company that owns the popular mobile brand Blackberry, "The concept of flash mobs has been a popular phenomenon in the West. It has recently gained popularity in India."

There was the flash mob at Mumbai's Chhatrapati Shivaji railway station, the video of which subsequently got over two million views on the Internet. The flash mob though didn't have any agenda and was organised for fun. Next in line was the Kolaveri Di flash mob, organised by Mumbai Mirror for the promotion of actor Dhanush's movie '3'.

Ashish Patil, VP and Creative Head, Y Films and Brand Partnerships, felt that every Bollywood song, typically, was a flash mob, where a bunch of random people started dancing in public plac-es with full synchronization. "So, as a concept it's not very new," he noted.

Y Films used flash mobs for the promotion of the production house's first film – 'Luv Ka The End', an anti-rom-com movie about a girl who takes her cheating boyfriend down, all in the course of one night. Flash mobs were orchestrated simultaneously across five cities in over 100 high-traffic, youth-friendly locations. "These were regular looking boys, who were seen carrying a sign around their necks that said 'I cheated on my girl, this is my punishment!'," Patil added.

Flash mobs are ideally organised at well-populated locations. "Socialising outdoors today is a popular culture among the urban population in India. Availability of a variety of eateries and in-creasing presence of malls has enhanced this trend," Baruah pointed out.

And that, according to him, had helped marketers build the trend to promote their products, ser-vices and activities in a fun way.

Speed and Surprise
Flash mobs have a high recall value owing to the nature of surprise element within it. The surprise comes with speed. Here you come, and here you go. And couple it with new media – digital – the video recording has a potential to go viral and earn word-of-mouth publicity. Patil of Y Films, said, "Flash mobs by design work on the element of surprise and entertainment. A lot of them are done as an expression of fun, joy and as a cultural movement almost."

Agreeing with this is Ambika Sharma, Managing Director & CEO, Pulp Strategy Communica-tions, the agency that organised flash mobs in association with Microsoft for the promotion of Shah Rukh Khan starrer, 'Don 2'. The theme was - 'Meet The Don 2: Mission Berlin'. The rec-orded videos of the mobs got over five lakh views on social media. "The module came as a sur-prise to consumers, as a group of goons picked up a heated argument with some 'mall goers' demanding 'Kahan Hai Don?'. We had astonished reactions and bewildered faces as the inquisi-tive crowd gathered. Speed was of essence on order to ensure this," Sharma informed.

Zee TV, on its part, had organised a flash mob in parts of Mumbai last month to promote the third season of its popular reality show, 'Dance India Dance' (DID). The timing was perfect – people were in a holiday mood and were out shopping and partying. "Hence, it becomes easier

for us to reach out to more people at one go," said Akash Chawla, Marketing Head - National Channels, Zee Network.

Get the frequency right

However, one pertinent question is whether we over-abusing flash mobs? What should be the frequency? Marketers say that it's just the beginning, and many people still have to have a taste of flash mobs. The uniqueness and appeal would diminish if this is carried out consecutively. According to Baruah, the frequency of flash mobs should be checked in order to sustain excitement amongst viewers and participants. "Brands should have a definite strategy in place before rolling out a flash mob campaign to ensure that consumers don't sense monotony in the content or style. It's important to span out such activities not only on the basis of time, but also according to audience, location and content."

An effective marketing tool?

Y Films' Patil has a word of caution for marketers. While flash mobs have all the ingredients of magic, surprise, buzz and recall value, he warns against using flash mobs to market anything. "The minute a consumer smells a sales message, it could be a big put-off and be detrimental to a brand. But if done seamlessly and smartly, it could potentially work like magic."

At the same time, the activity may not be suitable for heavier investment/ high ticket products like financial institutions. Patil believed that it would be silly to jump on to the bandwagon because 'flash mobs' or 'social media' were the buzz words these days. "But something lighter, more fun, entertainment linked – think apparel, colas/ energy drinks, TV shows and events, a light snack – may be best suited for it. One should be taking a decision or choosing the correct tools basis the brand, product's own unique tone, marketing requirements and objectives," he noted.

But how does one overcome the limitation of reach of a flash mob? The best solution, Patil pointed out, was to hope that it got ploughed back into social media and got a multiplying affect through PR.

The biggest limitation though comes in the form of the inability to measure the ROI or the success. However, marketers try and get a sense of the reach through clicked pictures and subsequently uploaded on social media or through people who as a part of the promotion got a chance to win a movie ticket or the like.