

India - Chennai Floods: As Chennai sinks, the difference between genuine charity and corporate storytelling becomes clear

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City companies take a leaf out of Mark Zuckerberg's book to pass off self-interest as philanthropy.

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Like a few million other people in Chennai, I've found myself stuck in the house these past few days without electricity, water, fresh food or the Internet. That's the price of living in a city that has grown so fast and with such irresponsible planning.

The main story these days has been all about the resilience of the people of Chennai – the political crimes at the root of this disaster notwithstanding. The town has discovered its altruistic soul, it seems. Forgive me for being cynical, but something doesn't quite square with me.

There's an interesting story developing here in flooded Chennai, and it is actually connected to a wider international trend. It deals with allegedly charitable contributions that actually seem more like public relations stunts.

As soon as the going got really tough here in the city, so tough that people would miss a meal, the food service website Zomato, together with a group of local restaurants, announced that for every order customers made, it would offer a free extra meal, to be delivered to anyone stranded in the floods. That sounded good. Yet, it isn't the charitable act that some people interpreted it to be. Charity would be free meals for everyone stranded in the flood. Free. Not a way to keep business going in days when business would otherwise be completely halted. This idea sounds like communicating to the public: "Yes, we're still open and if we don't give a 50% discount we might get stuck with a lot of unsold produce and food here in our kitchens."

Sure, this is the reality of how a business works. There's nothing wrong with a business initiative like Zomato's. What's wrong is how it's packaged: as charity.

The day after

It all got more suspect considering that Zomato decided to go back on its word one day later. Here's what one report said: "Zomato halts 'Meal for Flood relief' service in Chennai." The strapline added: "Zomato says it has decided to pause the programme to avoid its restaurant partners from getting

overwhelmed.”

If you're cynical like me, it would seem that once it had milked the event for publicity, the presumed charity was withheld.

CEO and founder Deepinder Goyal has already addressed the criticism with a great deal of delicacy. Here's what he said:

"However, the issue isn't that the company is making money directly, but it is getting free publicity during a calamity by attracting attention while selling its products at 50%. Selling it, not donating it to people in need, in what you might call "a captive market."

Discounts are one thing, food donations to flood victims are another.

Meanwhile, on the road...

Then you have Uber, the taxi app service, determined to #keepchennai moving. Considering that people are being electrocuted in the water left and right, that seemed like a good idea. "Getting around the city is tough and the rains are expected to get worse over the next few days," Uber said in an official announcement on Wednesday. It promised that it had "disabled dynamic pricing and all rides taken in Chennai" on Wednesday and Thursday would be free. But this was a day on which residents were being discouraged from going out in traffic, when the roads were waterlogged or blocked in gridlock. Offering free rides just seemed like another attempt to get free publicity.

The funniest initiative of all has been BSNL announcing it would "Emotionally Connect with People of Tamilnadu and Chennai". It was just "A Small Contribution", said the telecom provider when it promised Local and STD calls free to any network for a week starting Dec. 2. It also offered free mobile prepaid calls, text messages and data usage for the same period.

Yet, as many people observed on social media, offering free service didn't seem to make much sense when most landlines were not working, or working one day and then next collapsing? What's the point of not charging for mobile phone services when towers are down and mobile phones are only post-modern sculptures to stare at in silence, considering there's no electricity to turn them on.

The new narrative

But the executives and managers can't be blamed for trying. All they are doing is engaging in the very contemporary trend of "storytelling", the new urge among corporations to create a warm image for the company, not just convince clients of the necessity of their product.

The master of them all, this week, has been Mark Zuckerberg and his wife Priscilla Chan who, in honour of the birth of their daughter Maxima, officially announced they would donate 99% of their Facebook shares over the next 10 to 15 years. There was applause and admiration for the magnanimity of the Internet mogul's soul. What only emerged later is that the so-called donation will be made to a Limited Liability Company owned and controlled by Priscilla Chan and Mark Zuckerberg. This private company can make investments for profit, with significant fiscal advantages compared to being a simple share-holders.

As the water stubbornly refuses to recede here in Chennai, I've begun to be less disdainful of the blackmarketeers who are offering milk at 25% more than the original price, and selling idlis at Rs 80

instead of the regular Rs 20. At least they're not pretending to be doing philanthropic work.

Carlo Pizzati

P.S.

* Scroll.in. Dec 05, 2015 · 08:15 am:

<http://scroll.in/article/773686/as-chennai-sinks-the-difference-between-genuine-charity-and-corporate-storytelling-becomes-clear>

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