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New Technology:

QR Codes Bridge Gap Between Print and the Web

by Peggy Gordon

One of my many jobs here at EBSCO Media is to test the water when potentially cool and useful technology surfaces. I'm happy to report that this time the "water" was highly useful, easy to learn, and practically free to implement. A rare moment indeed!

Introducing QR Codes

You may have noticed in recent months the appearance of mysterious, bitmap-like symbols (see right) in print ads, signage, and product packaging. Well, brace yourself to see even more of these cuties in the near future; now that smart phones equipped with decent cameras have taken the U.S. by storm, the stage is set for yet another marketing revolution — QR Codes.

What Are They?

QR (short for Quick Response) codes are a type of two-dimensional barcode that has information embedded in its many boxy "pixels." Because the codes can be read both horizontally and vertically, they can contain *much* more information than old-school barcodes with their skinny vertical lines read left to right. More information means more capabilities for marketers.

Originally developed in the 1990s by the Denso Corporation of Japan as an inventory management tool, QR codes have become the darlings of marketers in Japan and Europe, largely because their creators opted to make them open source, allowing anyone to use QR codes for free.

Finder Patterns (Orient Code)
Version Info
Quiet Zone (Keep Clear)
Data
Alignment Pattern (Corrects Skewing)

Reading a QR Code

To read one, simply point your phone's camera at the nearest QR code and snap a scan. The QR code reader ap on your phone processes the code and follows its instructions — all without your having to type a single character on your phone's tiny keyboard. This is really the key to QR code success...they make interacting with advertising easy and even fun. That's marketing gold.

What Can QR Codes Do?

QR Codes are all about function, and accordingly several service types are available. From a marketing standpoint, some of the more useful types of QR Codes are those that:

Show Text – You can display a short message, such as an address or a special offer. *Example:* "Get 20% off when you show this message at the register!"

Initiate a Browser Session – You can launch a web page on the user's phone, thus driving traffic to your web site while improving your ability to track a print piece's performance.

Initiate an Email – You can initiate an email message with the "send to" address and subject line automatically pre-populated.

Share Contact Info – You can share contact information as a QR code. *Example:* Print a QR code on the back of your business card that contains all of the contact info from the front of your card, allowing people to scan and store (at their option) the contact info directly into their phone's address book.

Initiate a Text Message – You can initiate a text message as part of a larger campaign. *Example:* Encourage people to scan a QR code to vote for their favorite flavor, product name, contestant, etc. or even donate to a cause.

Initiate an Audio Stream – You can download an audio track. *Example:* A music venue could include a QR code on a poster advertising an upcoming performance that plays a 10-second sample of the featured band's music.

Initiate a Video Stream – You can display a video stream. *Example:* Savvy agents could include a QR code on a real estate sign or flyer that when scanned streams a video of the home's interior features, enabling shoppers to determine on the spot whether they'd like to schedule a tour of the property.

What Does It Cost?

Don't have a QR Reader ap on your phone already? No problem. There are many FREE applications available online and numerous souped up, low-cost varieties that will allow you to *create* QR codes as well. Once you've secured the software, you're ready to zap to your heart's content. I was able to research, purchase and install my QR reader in less than five minutes, and it only set me back $2.99!

More good news — pre-installed readers are already coming standard issue on many of the latest smart phone models. Since reader software is the only significant barrier to mass use, it makes sense to start planning now to incorporate QR codes into your marketing mix.

Tips for Designers

Since QR codes are read by cameras on mobile phones, many of which have limited functionality, you need to strongly consider readability when designing with QR codes.

Size — As a rule, the bigger you can make the code, the better the odds that it will be read accurately by most phones. Try not to go smaller than 1-inch square. If you can print your code 2-inches square, all the better. Don't shy away from giant codes either...20-*foot* square codes on billboards have already hit the streets. Go for it!

Colors — You are not limited to a black and white interpretation — colors, even gradients, work too. What you need is enough contrast between the foreground and background for the reader to interpret the code accurately. The number one rule when playing with the design is: test, test, and test again!

Environment — Consider where the code will be read. Low light environments can be a real problem. So can glare from a laminate overlay or glass. Also consider the surface your code is applied to...if it is curved (a code on a bottle or mug, for example) or irregular (like a T-shirt, which can bend, fold and wrinkle), size and place the code to account for possible distortion and test it. Remember, if people can't read your codes, your campaign will fail, so always plan ahead to minimize obstacles to readability.

Creativity - Because QR codes have some built-in redundancy among the quadrants, it is possible to include a logo or graphic in the center of the code. Not every combination of image and QR code will work, so plan on extra testing. This is an exceptionally cool way to show off your codes though so it's well worth the effort. If you are really adventurous (and have a lot of time on your hands), you might experiment with the

medium. I've already seen QR codes constructed from Lego blocks, cut into pasture grass, molded into beach sand, and applied as temporary (I hope) tattoos.

The best advice I ever received regarding design was, "Steal from the best." With that thought in mind, I encourage everyone to Google for images of QR codes and get those creative juices flowing. In no time you'll have several fun and intriguing ways to bridge the gap between your own printed collateral and online presence.

EBSCO Media can help you create QR codes for your printed projects and incorporate them into your integrated marketing campaigns. Contact **Peggy Gordon** for more information at pgordon@ebsco.com.

The Easy Button linking the printed page to the online world is here and its name is QR Code.

Codes can also contain contact information. Just scan the code and opt to import the info directly into your address book without typing a word!
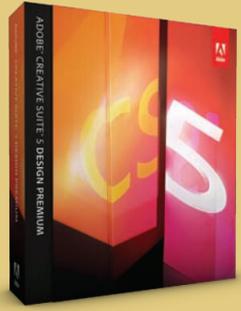
Congratulations to Jim Basinger of Basinger Design! Jim was the lucky winner of a FREE copy of Creative Suite at our most recent Adobe wrokshop.