[Technology + Management Smarts]

[QR Codes: The Secrets to Those Little Black and White Squares]

Customer Engagement Goes Mobile.

Mobile marketing has its shiny new toy: the QR code. But what, exactly, is it? How does it work? How can it help your business?

QR Codes, or "Quick Response Codes," are Japanese auto industry imports. They were used to track automobiles in the production line. They have come to America as a fast and easy way to direct people to your web site, your vCard, or even in place of an airplane boarding pass.

The technology is gaining traction, thanks to the popularity of smart phones. QR codes can be used with a free QR scanner app – available for iPhone/iPad, Android, Blackberry, Windows Phone, and Nokia's Symbian operating system. All you really need is a device with both a camera and an internet browser, plus the free app.

QR Codes hold more information than standard bar codes, because while a barcode holds data in its horizontal plane (scanners read the width and distance between the vertical lines), QR codes hold data both horizontally and vertically in its grid, allowing for robust data to be encoded in a small space.

By way of comparison, barcodes require specifically programmed scanners to read the barcodes and match them to products, prices and inventory. That is all they do.

Comparatively, QR Codes actually embed information in the code itself, and can trigger a website or file download with almost any smartphone. And they can be read from any angle, whereas barcodes must be aligned properly.

Where are QR Codes being used?

- The codes are appearing in advertisements, tradeshow booths, signage – and even t-shirts and temporary tattoos.
- QR Codes are growing popularity on

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business cards, as an on-the-go vCard.

- The Washington Capitals professional hockey team used QR Codes to build a marketing database.
- Black Rock Spirits put QR Codes on its vodka bottles in a game-like environment where customers can earn badges for purchasing new bottles, trying a recipe, or passing the bottle to a friend at a different location.
- JC Penney is utilizing QR Code gift tags, letting gift givers record a voice message of up to 60 seconds. When the recipient scans the QR Code, the voice message will play.
- First American Equipment Finance is offering QR Codes on leased assets, so that the customers can easily track the asset via a mobile asset management solution, known as Customer Connect.

What are the challenges?

Despite the growing popularity, many people are still not familiar with the technology. According to an October 2011 survey from Russell Herder, 72% of consumers say they have seen a QR Code, but nearly 30% don't know what it is.

The other challenge is content. QR Codes will be scanned with a mobile device. Content connected to a QR Code must be properly formatted for all smartphone web browsers. QR codes are a great way to prompt users into action, but it is crucial to connect the code to the right content.

Get Started

Building a QR Code is free and takes about 30 seconds on sites such as QRStuff.com. You simply type in a link to a website, You Tube video, Google map location, Facebook or Twitter page, phone number, e-mail message, vCard, vCalendar, or even a PayPal Buy Now link. Then choose the color – black is recommended for the easiest scanning. Finally, simply save it as a downloadable image, print it out, or e-mail it.

Advanced users may be interested in custom QR Code design from a vendor such as QRlicious.com that can include colors, logos or other imagery, and even a liquid look instead of squares. Custom QR Codes can be made in a week or less and cost less than $50.

Ultimately, QR Codes may or may not be made for the long term. But they are hot right now, and are so simple to make and use that there is little risk in setting them up – as long as you think through the content you will be providing.

About Technology + Management Smarts

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