The Social Dimension Of QR Codes

By Rio Akasaka

The three most common reactions to QR codes are confusion, disdain and optimism. Many people look forward to their demise, some don’t know how they work and others, like myself, see vast opportunities for their use. I hope to be able to address at least two of those reactions while exploring the many new approaches available in the crossover between physical and virtual interaction.

At least in the United States, QR codes have been strongly associated with branding and marketing as a way to add technology to print and offline media. In this ‘one-way’ interaction, the consumer remains passive as the provider generates new ways of exposing its content in a variety of formats. With the popularity of social media, as well as an increase in the uptake of smartphones capable of doing much more than making phone calls, that one-way path can be quickly replaced with a two-way line of communication, a dialog in which the consumer can engage with his surroundings and the product much like providers seek to engage with their customers.

The direct appeal to QR codes is that they serve as the only existing technology that invites an individual to explore a virtual space while in a physical environment. Whether it’s a sticker on a wall or a barcode on a business card, the code not only acts as a gateway to interactive content, its unique configuration signals to the user that the opportunity to explore such digital content exists. That content is simultaneously visible and hidden since the codes occupy physical space but their contents need to be decrypted.

How can we leverage that curiosity even further? It is one thing to reward the user with a discount coupon or an informative brochure, it is quite another to allow them to explore their ‘space’ even further by using the very social technology that brings life to space and content. The space defined here is very much dependent on context. A QR code within a newspaper generates space around the article, a code at a museum generates space around the artwork. Since the people who occupy that space are very likely to share some common interests or passions, there’s a fantastic opportunity to encourage dialog and forge new and previously undiscovered relationships among them.

This is where social media can add a powerful dimension to any object or content. The massive amounts of information available online take on new meaning when contextualizing it within a common theme or location. The static nature of QR codes, then, becomes a springboard for discovery of highly relevant, user-centered and user-curated media. Coupled with the sensing capa-
QR codes like this wallscape in New York can link to a mobile app. I like to imagine QR codes not as media, but as a salient means to reaching the most appropriate form of media.

From a technology standpoint, QR codes make a lot of sense, too. They cost nothing to make and can be attached to or printed on anything virtual or physical. They are remarkably robust: Up to 30% of the code can be occluded, modified or removed entirely without affecting the data contained within it, allowing for creative designs to be included within the code itself. Takashi Murakami has done some amazing work in this area, in one case embedding a purple anime character into a code for the Louis Vuitton brand.

Codes can be scanned sideways and upside down with exactly the same decoding speed, they can be as small as a postage stamp or cover an entire billboard. Any smartphone with a camera can also decode them. In short, there are countless ways to explore the use of QR codes above and beyond content delivery, and if it’s so easy to use, it’s at least worth trying for yourself.

QR Codesters

Bold Hat Productions, an event planning company in Seattle, has been using coasters with QR codes to promote some of its events. The Hop Scotch event included beer, wine, tequila and whiskey tastings. The QR code on the coaster resolves to details about a Scotch seminar, sponsored by Johnny Walker and Oban, including the whiskies to be tasted, the schedule and a brief description of the event. The QR code on the Fremont Fair coaster resolves to a call for musicians to perform at the solstice festival and closer to the event will showcase the music lineup. “The goal for the Hop Scotch coaster was to showcase our sponsor, Johnnie Walker and Oban, and our Fremont Fair coasters encourage people to check out the music lineup on the Redhook Main Stage,” said Lacey Lybecker of Bold Hat.

Future events will also feature QR codes. “The QR code on our Fremont Oktoberfest 5K rack card scans through to a YouTube video of last year’s run, and our Fremont Oktoberfest poster will feature a QR code that jumps directly to the purchase tickets tab on the event’s Facebook page,” Lybecker said. “We’ve added QR codes to all of our print advertising to track impressions and even to our onsite programs, to encourage people to announce their arrival on Twitter.”

Adding QR codes to the coasters helps Bold Hat keep track of how many people are reading the coasters, Lybecker said. “They are one of our most expensive pieces of collateral, and adding the QR code reassured us that people are picking up the coasters and interacting with them and our event brand. We now know better than before that the coasters are worth the extra expense.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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