Print is not dead. In fact, it is evolving and expanding. Print has even begun to bridge the gap with digital media with printed 2D barcodes, which when scanned with a smartphone, trigger a digital experience on the mobile Internet that can be tracked and measured.

Incorporating QR codes or other 2D barcodes into print publications makes both offline and online content more valuable and, in an integrated media campaign, possibly even symbiotic. Essentially a printed, scannable Web link, QR codes add an extra dimension to the static print experience.

Unfortunately, many print campaigns are hesitant to adopt mobile barcodes for aesthetic reasons, fearing that these “ugly” squares do not reflect the prestige of a brand or that they might mar a designer’s beautiful page layout. To overcome the aversion to ugly barcodes, QR codes can be converted into a branded “designer” barcode that is more aesthetically appealing.

Mobile tags, including QR codes, Microsoft Tags and other formats, can be modified and stylized to seamlessly represent the graphic identity of a brand. A few agencies, including QrArts, have begun modifying codes to make them attractive, using colors instead of just the usual black and white splotches, and blending them into objects and logos while maintaining their core functional integrity. The end result is a mobile tag that adheres to branding guidelines, stands out from standard codes and creates a wow factor, and provides an opportunity to extend a company’s creative vision to the online world.

Branded codes lend a sense of validity to a printed design. When a consumer recognizes a familiar brand’s use of a logo or color palette in a code, the consumer psychologically extends the brand reputation to the customized code and more readily accepts the mobile content that the code leads to. This can make the difference between someone not scanning a code versus having a great mobile user experience that encourages the consumer to form a relationship with a brand.

From a printer’s perspective, think about branded 2D barcodes from a cost-benefit standpoint. Whether you are approaching QR codes from a volume (pURLs) or single-use standpoint, your clients could accrue more value out of their media buy for the same cost by extending the printed message to an online interaction that can be engaging and elicit an immediate consumer response, whether it’s making a purchase using a coupon or delving deeper into the advertiser’s mobile website. From a brand standpoint, this helps a printer create a halo effect of appearing to be more progressive than competitors. With 2D barcodes starting to pop up everywhere, would you rather be the first or the last vendor in your network to use this tool to add value to your services?

For designers who wish to experiment with creating their own branded codes, here are a few suggestions. The following apply specifically to QR codes.

**TECHNICAL**

- A code can only be modified so far before it is “broken.” QR codes can have up to a 30% error correction built in. If you alter or block 50% of the pixels, the code will not scan. No matter how great it looks,
if the code is not functional, the design solution has failed to deliver the user experience intended for the code.

- Try to test on multiple handsets and apps. The Android and iOS devices use different code libraries/languages to scan codes, so they will function slightly differently. A successful scan on one app does not guarantee that it will work on every scanner and handset combination. For example, inverted codes don’t work on all scanners; this is a good design consideration to think about. If a large number of people cannot scan a code, the negative reaction can be counterproductive and might even deter that person from scanning codes in the future.

CREATIVE SUGGESTIONS

- As with any mobile tagging format, give the user some directions and an idea of what to expect when he scans. A clear call to action and a hint of the content behind the code, such as, “Scan this code for a special offer or a free music video,” will go a long way to boost the success rate of a campaign.

- Literally think outside of the box and don’t feel compelled to stay within the lines. Even though the data region is inside the box, shapes and logos can spill out of the active scanning area. Do not block the three alignment squares, however.

- Logos generally work best in the middle.

- Adding color is an easy way to make your code stand out and at the same time blend into the look and feel of a print ad. If a user has scanned several codes over a period of time, a colored code will stand out in a phone’s gallery and can remind the consumer what content is behind it if they want to revisit a mobile site.

- Codes can be big. Don’t be afraid to use a code as a focal point rather than an afterthought. Making a code bigger does not affect scanning unless something physically impedes the code. For example, if a code occupies an entire spread, the center fold might impede scanning. Otherwise, typical resolution concerns would also apply to printed codes. Microsoft Tags and QR codes can both be generated in high resolution formats per any size (bitmap or vector).

PRE-PRESS AND PRODUCTION

- Like any other print job, be aware of how paper haptics and color shifts can affect the contrast levels of a piece. Just because a code scans on a monitor does not guarantee that it will work in print. Keep in mind that these are two different color systems (RGB vs. CMYK).

Remember that mobile marketing and 2D barcodes are fairly new to most consumers and even to most design professionals, and their value is still largely unproved. But the potential for increased impressions and consumer interactions is too powerful to ignore. In some organizations, creating a branded code might make the difference between it being approved by the creative team and not being used.

Branded codes literally speak to people and a scan might lead to a new sale, a new level of customer engagement or a social share function that allows your printed ad to be disseminated among hundreds of friends.

Given the relatively modest cost and the significant potential upside of extending a static print message to an interactive digital engagement, a company can hardly afford not to make an interactive QR code-enabled marketing piece.

The key is assuring your clients that a QR code (branded or not) adds value to their campaigns rather than complicates the process or diminishes value. A branded code is a great approach to satisfying both internal stakeholders in creative and consumers to enable a worthwhile mobile experience behind the code. Designer QR codes can connect people to your brand and encourage them to enter into the mobile user experience to further develop a relationship.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Patrick Donnelly is CEO and Founder of QR Arts LLC. Patrick’s work focuses on creating mobile engagement strategies through 2D barcodes and integrated media campaigns. His work has been featured on ABC news, NBC news, Mobile Commerce Daily, and in blogs from the United States to South Korea. Patrick holds an BSA degree from Carnegie Mellon University and an MBA from The George Washington University.

QrArts is an integrated media consulting agency based in Washington, D.C., that specializes in mobile user experience with respect to mobile tagging and 2D barcodes. The company creates brand engagement strategies that help move consumers from impressions to interactions and specializes in the design and implementation of QR code campaigns.

Please visit www.QrArts.com for creative case studies on Mobile Tagging and QR implementation strategies.

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