

Technology QR codes

All aboard the QR express

To remain a viable part of the marcomms mix, print needs to embrace the opportunities presented by interactive content

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We've had this conversation, but this time, you really have to listen. This time, it's not enough to just say 'that's interesting' and forget about it. Because this is an opportunity that, as an industry, we should not be missing. This is something we should be pushing. This is print's route into the digital world. A route that puts print in the driving seat with the keys in its hand. We just need to get moving. This year, 2011, is the year that so-called 'quick response' (QR) codes might just make it. For its own sake, print needs to make sure it does.

You see, there's never going to be a better time for QR codes to flourish. These little black and white boxes, which when scanned by a mobile phone camera take the user instantly to a pre-set weblink, are popping up more and more. This is because of the huge take-up of internet-enabled phones on which the QR code relies. The technology is ready. Meanwhile, big brands like Waitrose and Marks & Spencer are starting to use QR codes on marketing material (the former has even started featuring them in its ads on TV). The market is ready. And, finally, the public is ready having learned to use the mobile phone as an information tool, a multimedia platform on which they rely. But is print ready?

The marcomms mix

Not yet, apparently. Despite the fact that, in print terms, a QR code is nothing more than a simple monochrome image that is easy (and free) to generate, printers are not pushing QR codes to their customers. As a result, print risks losing out to other media in the future of marketing communica-

tions. Marketers are bombarded with non-print communications options and, if it is to play a significant role in the marketing mix, print needs to get its voice heard.

This is a message that Duplo International has been trying to get across for some time. QR codes were developed in Japan (where else?) in the early 1990s to track items moving around a car components factory, but grew into a marketing tool that has become part of everyday life for the country's 127m residents. Hence, when Duplo UK marketing manager Peter Jolly visited the Japanese arm of the company, QR codes featured prominently in the marketing discussions and Jolly saw an opportunity to use them to make a point he believes is key to print's future.

"We wanted to get across the fact that the web can enhance print – QR codes seemed to be a tangible way of doing this by connecting print to the web," he reveals. "You don't have to boot up your computer or search on Google, where you may get distracted. It is an instant connection via your phone and, for printers, it's a fantastic opportunity."

It is an opportunity that is so much more than just connecting a piece of print to a website. Jolly cites an example of a code that meshes with the functionality of the smart phone itself; when a phone is used to scan the code on a business card, it automatically records the owner's picture, email address and phone contact details into the phone's address book.

He adds that you can also personalise QR codes so that they link through to personalised URLs (PURLs). This enables marketers to see when someone uses it, if they download anything and what phone they are using – all in real time. So from an



accountability point of view, for marketing campaigns it is incredibly transparent and highly flexible – you can monitor the results and, if the content doesn't have the desired effect, try something different.

Behind the QR code...



Incorporated into the main image is a scannable QR code. Scan this code and you will be taken to a series of videos featuring Scan And Go's John Reynolds in which he talks you through the best ways that print can use QR codes. If you haven't already got a QR scanner, there are multiple free scanners to download from your smart phone app store – our personal recommendation is simply called QR Reader. Alternatively, type scanit.tv/19 into your smart phone internet browser and it will take you to a handy website set up by Reynolds that recommends the best QR reader for every mobile operating system. If you're still in need of some assistance, Reynolds has prepared a tutorial video on how to download a QR scanner and how to use it, which you can watch along with the KitKat augmented reality video at the online version of this article, just type <http://bit.ly/fKnb2> into your web browser.



If you don't have a smart phone, you can still watch the videos, visit printweek.com/go/qrcodeol

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This changeable content option is something that John Reynolds, owner of the company Scan And Go that assists companies wishing to get into QR codes, has picked up on. With his company's help, Babbacombe Model Village, a tourist attraction in Devon, has printed 250,000 promotional fliers featuring a QR code that links to an online voucher. A note next to the code informs the recipient that this voucher will change as the year progresses, so by keeping the code and scanning regularly, new savings can be made.

"You essentially have 250,000 fliers with changeable content over the course of 12 months," explains Reynolds, no doubt making litho printers eyes brighten with a possible way to compete with digital print's flexibility.

Slow take-up

So with all this potential, why are we not seeing QR codes on every piece of print out there? Jolly says the technology has previously not been up to it so take up was slow (even now, some scanners still have problems with certain QR codes), but he adds

that print companies also have to do more to push QR codes to clients.

"Printers have to be pro-active," he says. "Marketers have got hundreds of different opportunities; print has to make itself heard and QR is a great way of doing that."

The message seems to be getting through, but very slowly. At the start of

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2010, Duplo was ploughing a lonely furrow in using QR codes on its advertising material in this magazine, but in the past few weeks the likes of KBA and Heidelberg have started incorporating them too. Meanwhile, Arjowiggins' new brochure for its Cocoon range has a QR code prominently on the front cover. As for the printers themselves, Exeter print firm Pollards Print is a model of how things ought to be.

Mark Burnett, sales and marketing director, explains that all the company's stationery now carries a QR code that links to videos and information relating to the company's recent rebrand. It is also pushing QR codes to its clients. When Burnett first proposed the idea, however, the response was typical of the wider industry.

"The main question asked was, 'Isn't this a gimmick?'," he reveals. "But it is all about finding an application for the QR code; finding something useful it can bring to the table, otherwise it is just technology for technology's sake. As soon as we found something where it added value and was useful, people jumped on board. It's about how we use them."

If QR codes are going to be a success, the latter point is crucial. It is not enough for printers to just put a company website URL into a QR code generator on the web and to have your code link straight to that. For starters, most businesses don't have a website designed specifically for mobile phones, and normal websites tend to look bad on a mobile's tiny screen, so you may wind up doing more harm than good. The →

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link has to have stimulating, useful or innovative content like the examples given above, be that video, data or a smart phone application.

Obviously, finding that innovative link is easier said than done, but printers don't have to take on full responsibility for the creative side and the execution of a campaign. Having an idea of the types of things that are possible should be enough to get the marketer interested, then, by working together, the right solution can be reached. Alternatively, companies such as Scan and Go can help in providing the ideas, technical expertise and tracking capability in partnership with the printer.

"We would 'white label' our product for printers to use as their own, or if they want to tell us what they want, we can do it on their behalf, but the brand ownership is always that of the printer," explains Reynolds. "We really believe that QR offers a completely different dimension to the print offering. Any printer that doesn't offer this as an added-value package to their clients is missing a trick."

The danger is that this trick may have been missed already. Although Reynolds is confident that QR will remain key to print and the wider marketing mix for at least the next 18-24 months, others are already looking at the next big thing: augmented reality (AR) – and this doesn't necessarily need print in the long term.

The next step

With AR, digital information is overlaid onto 'reality' and accessed via a digital device such as a mobile phone or webcam. At present, the augmented reality content is triggered by a printed logo or picture. So, if, for example, you held up a Kit Kat wrapper, on which is designed a special logo, to your webcam, and then viewed the webcam video stream live, out of the wrapper would fold a small bedroom and in that bedroom the pop group Scouting for Girls would be playing their new single, complete with floating kites and birds in an odd miniature 3D experience happening in front of you (don't believe us? See the box...).

Jolly has already singled out AR as the next area Duplo will be looking to move into, citing the example of a business card that, when viewed through a mobile, has that person pop out of the top of the card and explain personally what he or she does. Pollard's Burnett says he too sees massive potential in the process. But the digital creative agency Skive, which is behind the Kit Kat campaign detailed above, is not sure whether print will remain part of the process for long.

"AR is beginning to move away from having to have a mark," explains Anthony Somerville, a managing partner at the agency. "For example, with the mobile app



The use of QR codes in advertising has mushroomed

Layar, you could scan the London skyline and it would tell you what the buildings were using GPS technology."

He adds that AR glasses are being developed to render the use of a printed 'mark' redundant by using recognition technology instead – so, for example, it could scan someone's face and tell you who they were. Hence, the real world becomes the 'mark' rather than something created and printed.

ment ceases. The world around us is full of print and hence print is the easiest and cheapest format on which to embed those 'real world' marks, be they pictures on posters or company logos on signs. So rather than a threat, AR may actually be a new print channel to explore – depending on whether print can state its case strongly enough to be part of it.

And crucial to that case will be wide-

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AR is very much in the early stages of development, however, and Somerville says that, at present, it tends to be used to deliver quirky concepts such as the KitKat idea, rather than the marketable, accountable and genuinely useful functions that QR is cornering. There is also an education problem in that it has taken around 15 years for QR codes to reach the UK, for the technology to catch up and for people to understand how and when to use them. AR is only at the start of this process.

However, if it does assert itself and develop beyond printed marks, that does not necessarily mean that print's involve-

spread adoption of QR codes. Printers need to get on board and take the opportunity they are being given to stake a claim right at the heart of the digital communications world. If they are slow to act, and QR codes never establish themselves, the door to that opportunity may well close for good with a non-print solution filling the void. But if print embraces QR codes and from them establishes itself as integral to the emerging and complementary AR market and those that come after it, it may well mean a change in the whole way digital and print interact – digital may be turned from the vanquisher of print into its saviour. **22**