

QR codes put businesses in touch with cell phone owners

July 22, 2011 BY Tim Kridel

The QR code on J. Scott Christianson's business card looks like a piece of abstract art, and it often prompts the same question: What is it?

Short for "quick response," the QR code is a thumbnail-size graphic that, when scanned with a cell phone camera, automatically provides Christianson's contact information.

"If you can get people to integrate your contact information into their CRM [customer relationship management] with one click instead of just putting your card in the pile until they have time to enter the information, that is a clear business advantage," said Christianson, owner of Kaleidoscope Videoconferencing. "QR codes are very cheap and easy compared with other means of electronically transferring your contact info: smart cards, mini CD-ROMs in the shape of a business card, magnetic strips, etc."

QR codes are showing up in a variety of places around Columbia, including print ads, digital signage and TV commercials, where they provide more information than would fit in the ad. They're still a rarity, so consumer unfamiliarity currently limits their effectiveness, but local companies using QR codes say that novelty is also a way to grab attention.

"This looked like an innovative way to get people to a website while standing at a gas station," said Paul Smith, a Realtor with House of Brokers Realty. "I also use them on listing flyers so people can go directly to a website for the house and see more photos than I can put on the flyer."

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QR codes are best known as a way to virtually take a cell phone to something, such as a website. Like a barcode, it contains information that the phone uses to launch its browser and then automatically navigate to a website.

But QR codes can do much more. For example, instead of going to a website, the QR code could:

- Tell the phone to dial a phone number so the user can talk with a salesperson.
- Send a text message to a server that responds with an electronic coupon redeemable in the store where the user saw the code.
- Create a post on the user's social networking site saying that he or she is at a particular store.

QR codes also enable businesses to collect information about, for example, the people who scan the codes or the effectiveness of an advertising medium. The breadth and depth of that information often depends on whether the business creates and manages the codes on its own or hires a third party to handle those tasks.

Using a free online code generator such as www.createqrcode.appspot.com, a business could create a unique code for print ads, another for billboards and yet another for digital signage. By

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tracking the number of times each code is scanned, the business could determine which ad medium has the greatest reach.

By working with an ad agency or a QR code specialist, such as New York City-based Scanbuy, the business could collect additional information. By polling the phone's GPS system, for example, the business can identify exactly where the user was when the code was scanned.

"We can give you where they were, what time of day it was, what device scanned it, what operator's network they were on and what operating version was on that device," said Scanbuy President and CEO Mike Wehrs.

A third party also could give a business the option of creating a contest where five random people who scan the code win a prize. The system could be configured so that a certain amount of time passes before another winner is chosen, with everyone else getting a message thanking them for participating. But before finding out whether they've won, the system could invite them to provide their mobile number to opt into future promotions, an inexpensive way for the business to build a database of potential customers.

"The most important thing is to drive them to some kind of online action," said Matt LaCasse, account manager at KimberMedia, a Columbia-based agency. "[That could be] your contact information they can download to their phone, an online coupon to show at the register, a link to discounted tickets, whatever. A link to a website with no kind of action is a complete misunderstanding of what a QR code is and should be used for."

More than smartphones

One common misconception is that only smartphones such as the iPhone can use QR codes. But there are several options for less sophisticated feature phones, which are still the majority of all models in circulation. That means businesses can use QR codes to target a wider range of demographics instead of just smartphone owners.

A feature phone owner — or a smartphone user who doesn't have a QR code app on his or her handset — could take a photo of the code and then send it via multimedia messaging to 43588. Scanbuy then would decode the image and respond with the information, just as if the phone had an app to handle that task.

So what does a QR code cost? For businesses that create their codes themselves, the cost is in time spent creating the QR code. For those that work with a third party, prices can start around \$250 for a single code and some basic user analytics. For a large retailer that wants thousands of codes and granular analytics, fees can run \$50,000 a month, Wehrs said.

"It really depends on how comprehensive a solution you're looking for," Wehrs said. "Generally you can get into this for incredibly cheap."

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