

Connecting QR Codes With Consumers



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Introduction

If they were uncertain at first, over the past decade or so, marketers have come to embrace the Internet. Not that they had much choice. In the blink of an eye, wwwDOT this or that was everywhere. And, if marketers know one thing – it's you've got to be where the market is or no one will see your message.



Photo by [Marco Raaphorst](#)

Soon after, when email, websites and banner ads had become de rigueur for marketers, as technology is prone to do, the Web took another giant leap forward with the advent of social media. In a few scant years, these things called Facebook and Twitter came to rule the online world with hundreds of millions of subscribers logged into their accounts for hours on end every day. Savvy marketers knew they needed a piece of that action and companies like HubSpot, began to lead the way showing businesses how to leverage social media and, in the process, redefine how effective marketing is done.

The shift away from outbound, or push, marketing was on and the path forward to inbound marketing, where your customers seek out your brand online and do the heavy lifting of spreading the message to their friends for you via these social networks, was underway. There was one fly in that Internet ointment, however. The online world is a virtual one while the physical world remains firmly planted in real life. The challenge for marketers ever since then has been how to connect those two worlds—real and virtual. Now, the solution has arrived in the form of a QR code.

Some thought these codes were just a crossword puzzle design gone wrong; others likened them to a postage stamp designed by someone under the influence of one controlled substance or another.

In truth, they are neither. They are your opportunity to bridge the chasm between your online presence and your real-world presence. They are one more tool in your marketing arsenal, one more channel to enable you to reach your customers and tell your story while connecting them to your brand in ways never before possible. Most notably, this is while they are on the go, out and about and carrying a smartphone that lets you put your message literally in the palms of your prospects' and customers' hands.

What are QR Codes?

A Quick Response (QR) is a two-dimensional bar code which presents as a series of squares within squares. Capturing information horizontally and vertically, which allows more information to be captured and conveyed, QR codes can be scanned by the cameras built into every smartphone that comes off the assembly line today.



The 1994 brainchild of Denso, a subsidiary of the Japanese carmaker, Toyota, QR codes were originally designed for tracking parts in automobile manufacturing, but they have been an integral part of the Japanese consumer landscape for more than a decade.

Scan the QR code on a product and the image will redirect a smartphone's Web browser to the destination of the code producer's choice—a Web page with a discount coupon, a video or access to in-depth information where consumers can connect with your brand.

If you haven't yet seen one in store, you might have seen one on your airplane boarding pass. They look like tiny crossword puzzles without the numbers in the corner of the square. If you haven't come across one, you will soon.

Businesses, including heavyweight manufacturers like GM and Post Cereals, retailers like Macy's, Target and Best Buy, and fashion house Ralph Lauren, are all incorporating the funny looking, square-shaped matrixes into their marketing mix. And, even if you haven't yet scanned a QR code, multiple market research surveys show that about one-third of U.S. consumers already have.

How Do I Get a QR Code? Read a QR Code?

You can create your own QR code for free via several websites. You provide the destination URL and the website converts it and delivers a QR image file you can download.

You can then place that QR image anywhere you like—on your Facebook page or attached to your email signature, or you can incorporate as part of a print file. Companies are placing them on everything from a sticker on a piece of fruit in the grocery store to billboards in Times Square.



Some of the QR code-generating sites are [Qurify](#), [Kaywa](#), [Scanbuy](#), [QR Stuff](#) and [Delivr](#). [Google's URL Shortener](#) can also create a QR code from a shortened link.

For mobile phone users, iPhones offer a downloadable app from the iTunes store. BlackBerry, Android and other mobile phone platform users can download an app from [Scan Life](#).

Why Should I Care About QR Codes?

Cell phones were perhaps the most rapidly adopted technological breakthrough since the invention of the wheel. Why? Because while cell phones connected us, they also liberated us and mobility equals utility.

As smartphones replace traditional cell phones, the Web will ingratiate itself into our lives even more than it already has. For those of a certain age—30 years and younger—it already does. You’ve no doubt seen the Millennials thumbing their way through malls, meals, and every major event in their lives from their graduations to their best friend’s wedding chronicling their lives in 140-character tweets and 420-character Facebook posts.



Researchers at the Nielsen Company report that by the end of 2011, 50 percent of mobile phones bought will be smartphones. Marketers are taking notice. A September 2010 report from eMarketer expects \$1.1 billion to be spent in the U.S. on mobile ads in 2011. That’s up 48 percent from 2010 which was already up 79 percent from 2009.

Leading companies need to lead. “The mobile phone is the always-on device,” James Citron, CEO of Mogreet, a firm that develops multimedia messaging service campaigns told *Adweek*. Michael Becker, North American director of the Mobile Marketing association adds that “The traditional marketing funnel of awareness, learning, engagement, purchase and support is becoming non-linear” because of mobile phones. With the product on a store shelf directly in front of them and key information about that product in the palm of their hands, consumers might just buy on the spot or immediately share that information with friends or family.

Who's Using QR Codes?

Fortune 50 retailer, Target, which has been a big early adopter of the QR technology, uses the number of scans shoppers make of the QR codes to predict which items will sell best, then adjusts its inventory accordingly.



Macy's, the nation's second-largest department store chain, is using QR codes to give customers access to "Backstage Passes," behind-the-scenes videos with top designers such as Sean "P. Diddy" Combs and Tommy Hilfiger or beauty tips from brand leaders, such as Bobbi Brown of Bobbi Brown cosmetics.

Realizing there is still some education required to bring consumers up to speed on QR codes, the company embarked on a massive campaign to teach shoppers how and why to use them. They began by posting a demonstration video on their own website, Macys.com, on Facebook and YouTube. The demo videos were edited down to 30 seconds and run as national TV spots and the retailer outfitted its stores with plenty of signage and gave store associates more than 100,000 lanyards that explain how QR codes work to hand out to customers.

The results, Martine Reardon, executive vice president of marketing for Macy's, exceeded—far exceeded—expectations. After just a month, the uptake on QR codes was quadruple what the company expected. "One could say the metric we put out there wasn't aggressive enough," she told *Ad Age* in March 2011. "But we know we're on to something."

So do Macy's competitors, now that they've seen how QR codes can build a one-to-one relationship between a brand and its consumers. Since Macy's leading foray into QR codes, other high-end brands and retailers, including Gucci, Barneys, Neiman Marcus and Bloomingdale's have taken up the mobile marketing channel as well.

Why? Because "Department stores sell a wide variety of products, so codes can add a lot of value in cross-sell opportunities by providing more detailed

information and recommendations based on what they are interested in,” Mike Wehrs, CEO of ScanBuy, a provider of 2D barcode solutions, told *Mobile Commerce Daily*.

“A customer could potentially scan about getting tips on spring fashion and see information about a sale on cosmetics from a completely different floor,” he explains.

The novelty factor is also helping marketers gain from traditional media. Visit St. Pete-Clearwater, a campaign run by the St. Petersburg-Clearwater, Florida tourism board soon found local TV news and entertainment outlets scanning the codes during their programming to show locals and visitors how QR codes work. The codes were part of a sweepstakes campaign. Of the 25,000 entries received during the four-week promotion, more than 20 percent came directly from QR code scans. David Downing, the tourism bureau’s deputy director, said they were hoping for 8 percent to 10 percent. “It lends itself perfectly to what we do,” Downing told Ad Age. “People are moving from place to place and they want instant information.”

One of the earliest adopters, electronics and appliance retailer Best Buy, added them to the product tags in their stores in fall 2010. When a shopper scans the tag, it tags them to the product-detail page on Best Buy’s mobile site. Eventually, the company expects to add videos and wish lists consumers can create of the items they’re hoping to purchase. “Retail is a great place for this,” said Spencer Knisely, senior director of Best Buy’s environmental design group. “We think of [QR codes] as a personal shopping assistant.” The company has created a [YouTube video](#) to help educate consumers.

Cereal maker, Post, put QR codes on 12 million boxes of Honey Bunches of Oats cereal and is using them as the primary driver of traffic to its Web-based sitcom, *Honey & Joy*. A [YouTube video](#) helps integrate the online experience with mobile users. The codes clicked with the brand’s target market, women ages 25 to 54. More than one-third of the target audience is looking for codes, according to Honey Bunches of Oats brand manager, Katie Lay.

Dressing for Success

One of the most aggressive adopters of QR codes is, perhaps not surprisingly, Polo Ralph Lauren. The brand was among the first fashion houses to catch the e-commerce wave about a decade ago and continues to lead its peers in its use of technology with a forward-thinking approach to mobile marketing.

In 2010, Polo Ralph Lauren launched a mobile commerce platform, began using QR codes, launched the first of its iPhone apps, and in 2011, added a second iPhone app, the “Make Your Own Rugby” app for its Rugby brand, which allows consumers to customize polo and rugby shirts as well as upload a photo of themselves to try on the shirt virtually.



David Lauren, senior vice president advertising, marketing and corporate communications at Polo Ralph Lauren, explains why the luxury brand is adopting QR codes. “We want to be exploring [technology] right now, so that our learning puts us ahead of the curve,” he said. “Each learning is a brick in the wall, and we want to be at the top of the wall when the floods come.”

Many of Lauren’s competitors have been reluctant to adopt technology, but Lauren believes it gives the company a competitive edge. For Polo Ralph Lauren, technology has become an extension of the brand, where, for example, with QR codes, shoppers instantly get product information as they peruse the product in-store. Others in the fashion industry look only at the technology in front of them at the time, Lauren explains. That’s an approach he believes is backward and explains why Polo embraces the cutting edge.

Why the move to technology and to mobile technology in particular for Polo and Rugby brands? Because, Lauren says, this technology helps them tell consumers the Polo and Rugby story. It gives the brands authenticity and provides a fun, entertaining way for shoppers to interact with them.

When Polo Ralph Lauren launched their first iPhone app there were only two luxury brands in the mobile marketing space. Now, there are hundreds.

“It’s great to see all these brands innovating on the phone,” Lauren told Ad Age. “It takes shopping and really makes it a part of your life. A single ad in a magazine with a dress or two is powerful, but being able to show 52 looks to someone standing on a corner in Texas [using their phone] is another way to touch them.”

Polo Ralph Lauren adopted QR codes when they discovered them in Japan four or five years ago as they were opening their first store there. In Japan, the codes are so ubiquitous, they’re affixed on stickers to pieces of fruit, allowing grocers to explain how and where the produce was grown, or, in the case of McDonald’s, to give consumers instant access to nutrition information.

Some people question the Polo strategy, but Lauren believes in it. “I do believe in the sensibility of, if you build it, they will come, if the excitement is there. Just like when we built our store on Madison Avenue. Many people said, ‘Why does a single designer need an entire store?’” With designers from Anna Sui to Calvin Klein (who plastered billboards in New York and L.A. with a QR code that takes viewers to an uncensored ad in keeping with CK’s racy, revealing style), Vera Wang and more, all with their own shops on Madison Avenue, no one questions that decision any longer.

How Can Your Small Business Use QR Codes?

Major chains and global brands aren't the only ones who've taken a shine to QR codes. Because they're so inexpensive to produce (it doesn't get any cheaper than free, does it?), lots of small businesses are using QR codes to boost sales and drive traffic too.



Ethical Bean, a Vancouver, British Columbia coffee roaster and retailer, is using QR codes to connect with customers before and after the sale. The company placed QR codes in their commuter train ads. The ads link to the company's menu and customers can place their orders en route and pick them up at one of Ethical Bean's three coffee shops on their way from the train station to work. They also place QR codes on their packages of coffee beans providing customers with brewing tips and recipes once they get their coffee home. "Business has doubled," Ethical Bean Chief Executive Lloyd Bernhardt told the *Wall St. Journal*.

Just south of Vancouver, in the Seattle suburb of Bellevue, Washington, landscaper Adam Gorski added a QR code to his direct mail piece along with the prompt, "Scan me, I talk!" The QR code whisked recipients to Gorski's mobile website where he showed them a video describing his approach to landscaping, showed samples of his work, and offered viewers a free tree with each any installation project and links to his business by phone, email or Facebook. In the 30 days following the distribution, Gorski says he got double the normal response to his direct mail piece and had to hire two more employees to meet demand.

Further down the coast in Los Angeles, Skylight Books, a small, neighborhood bookshop uses QR codes to battle the big chains and online behemoths. Skylight posts the codes next to the staff book recommendations. If the book is out of stock, by scanning the QR code, customers can instantly order a copy from Skylight's website instead of an online or bricks-and-mortar competitor.

Mobilize the Troops

The most obvious means to use QR codes is to take in-store shoppers and connect them to your Website. But, then what? Simply driving traffic to your Web page isn't enough. As with the best of all inbound marketing tools, this is your opportunity to capture valuable information and begin to transform that real-world relationship into a virtual one you can leverage wherever your customers go.



Retailers can also use QR codes to provide shoppers with valuable information. A home improvement retailer, for example, might link to a YouTube video that explains how to complete a project. Restaurants or grocery stores can link to videos that detail how the food was sourced, how it was prepared or provide recipes, shopping lists, demos and other cooking tips. If you sell appliances or electronics, use a QR code to direct consumers to unbiased product reviews of the products you sell to help them choose which is best for them.

Direct those who scan your QR code to a landing page (preferably one optimized for mobile traffic). Once there, provide customers an incentive to provide their email addresses. It could be an entry into a sweepstakes, a free gift, a contest or any other means to motivate them to engage with your brand online.

Socialize Your QR Code

Your website is the obvious choice for connecting customers via a QR code. Better still, direct them to your Facebook page where your QR code generated by [Likify](#) can automatically “like” your brand for the consumer. This way, your virtual connection allows them to follow you and your promotions every time you post to your Facebook page. Alternately, you can link customers to your Twitter stream via a QR code scan or take them to your blog to complete the social media circle connection.



Get Graphic

If you print it, consider adding a QR code to it. Everything from your business card to your newspaper ad, menu, product labels, price tag, brochures or direct mail piece is an opportunity to connect customers and prospects to your online presence. You’ve already got their attention, you’ve already paid for the space, now leverage that print cost and use it to drive the people viewing those ads and marketing collateral to your brand online. You might take them to your Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn or YouTube profiles.



Photo by [Chris Breikss](#)

If you're a winemaker, your label is the perfect place to put a QR code. Instead of restaurant customers leaving that bottle of wine on the table, use it to engage them with information about your vineyards, a discount to try another one of your wines or a way to buy a case and have it shipped to their home. Be sure to provide an incentive to readers and don't forget to ask them to share an email address with you in the bargain.

Retailers can extend the shopping experience after customers leave the store by printing a QR code on store receipts. Link the code to installation instructions, sources for replacement parts or extended warranties, recommendations for goods and services that augment the purchase, feedback surveys, or coupons to be cashed in on their next visit to your store.

Get Some Street Cred

If you're in marketing, you're doubtless no stranger to shameless self-promotion. A t-shirt with your QR code on the front or back makes you or your employees a mobile billboard, in-store, at the mall, the ballgame, the beach, the grocery store, anywhere and everywhere you go in those specially outfitted shirts.



Photo by [Fluid Forms](#)

Expose your brand even further by putting a giant QR code on the side of your delivery trucks or your own car. Your vehicles become a rolling ad linking real-world prospects to your online brand.

Go on Tour

If you've got a corner of your store your shoppers seem to overlook, consider a scavenger hunt-type approach to get them to discover what's long been uncharted waters for them. Plant QR codes in key locations throughout your facility and offer incentives, real or digital, for those who collect all the scans. This may or may not generate revenue but it is certain to crank up their engagement with your brand and your facility.

Window Shopping

A storefront window is an ideal opportunity to continue selling even when your shop is closed. With a QR code in the store window and a link to your e-commerce pages, you can use that prime real estate to engage passers-by and sell to them 24/7. Why not? You pay rent 24/7, don't you?



Photo by [mackarus](#)

Get Dialed In

Use a QR code to make the phone ring. Because of the enhanced capacity of QR codes compared to standard bar codes, you can use a QR code to connect shoppers directly to your telesales team. You can also use QR codes to send text messages.

How to Make the Most of Your QR Codes

While the codes themselves are generated for free, the time and resources to support a successful QR code campaign are not entirely without cost. Landing pages have to be designed, staff must be educated about QR codes and how you expect customers and prospects will use them, special promotions will have to be planned and executed.



About 25 percent to 35 percent of consumers have already scanned a QR code (besides their boarding pass). Still, that leaves 65 percent to 75 percent of consumers who will need to know what a QR code is and why they should care about them. Although it may seem like ancient history, it wasn't so long ago that businesses had to educate consumers about the Internet and why they should give that a second look.

Educate your staff about what QR codes are, how your customers will use and benefit from them, what your expectations are for the technology overall, and any marketing campaigns specifically. Then, use a combination of staff, signage, and Web content to educate your customers. Take extra time to ensure those who feel flustered, frustrated or are just plain afraid of technology understand that a QR code is one of the simplest tech tools they'll ever use. It is literally just point and click.

No marketing initiative is an island. Make sure your QR code is an integrated part of your overall marketing campaigns. Develop actions in and around your marketing efforts that support your QR code activities and your marketing plan overall.

Marketing has never been one size fits all. Every business, every market is different. Don't be afraid to experiment a bit and see where QR codes are having the biggest impact in terms of their size and location. Then, be sure to make use of the analytics the codes generate and use those numbers to improve the impact your QR codes are having on your bottom line.

Analytics are key to marketing success and QR codes are no different.. Analytics on the effectiveness of QR codes are available from services such as [MyQR](#) which offers real-time tracking and enhanced reporting to help you gauge the effectiveness of your QR code campaigns.

Do You Q? See Who Does

A Q1 2011 [Mobile Barcode Trend Report](#) from ScanLife reveals some interesting facts about QR codes, who's using them, and how the technology is trending in the marketplace.

As 2011 got underway, the number of apps downloaded to scan QR codes took a dramatic turn, with an 810 percent increase from Q1 2010.



Photo by [Vitor Baptista](#)

The biggest users of QR codes were film producers and retailers, according to ScanLife's report. Filmmakers placed the codes outdoors primarily and took the audience to online videos, primarily movie trailers. Retailers were placing the codes in catalogs and magazines to connect shoppers to videos and marketing campaigns, such as sweepstakes offerings.

Not surprisingly, the people most apt to scan QR codes skew younger, with 12 percent of those 18 years of age or less, 19 percent of 18- to 24-year-olds scanning a QR code and 27 percent of 25- to 34-year-olds scanning codes. Still, 22 percent of 35- to 44-year-olds have scanned a QR code. About 13 percent of adults 45 to 54 years of age scanned a code, while 7 percent of adults aged 55 and up used their phones to follow a QR lead.

It's perhaps also no shock that 73 percent of scanners were men compared to 27 percent for women. Of more interest perhaps is the income spectrum among QR code scanners. About 54 percent of QR code scanners earned, on average \$50,000 per year and up. But that left 46 percent of scanners earning less than \$50,000 per year. Considering the younger age skew and the lower incomes of 'tweens, teens, and college students, who still have valuable discretionary spends, this indicates that QR codes are increasingly a good way to reach consumers in nearly every demographic.

Trading Up

One of the best places to make use of QR codes is at a trade show. The constraints trade shows place on time, space and resources means QR codes can help fill in the gaps of connecting with attendees while building a bridge to your online presence and your opportunity to mine those attendees as prospects after the show.

Just about anywhere you have graphics is fertile ground for a QR code. Use them in your booth, on your marketing collateral, anywhere a show attendee might look and be tempted to follow the code to learn more about your brand.

To be valuable to show attendees, QR codes have to be useful. Trade show attendees came there to learn more about their industry and how they can improve their performance.



Photo by [Augmented Event](#)

Give them more information, give them links to blogs or e-newsletters, enter them into a contest with a worthy prize. Be sure that once they scan, they are taken to a landing page that ultimately delivers on your promise and is optimized for the mobile platform.

Your trade show floor staff should not only be fully versed in how QR codes work and what your expectations are from them, but the relative novelty of QR codes is an excellent ice-breaker, a way to engage visitors to the booth in conversation, first about the ins and outs of QR codes and then about your products and services.

Trade show halls can be notoriously challenging on mobile phone performance, so be sure you test how well the codes launch inside each facility before you invest in a campaign dedicated to your QR code. There's no point in placing critical resources on a QR code campaign only to be foiled by good, old-fashioned steel girders, bricks and mortar.

Trade shows are an investment, you already know that. If QR codes are part of that investment, use the analytics available from bit.ly or MyQR.co to monitor click-throughs on show days.

Skate On!

When asked how he achieved his unparalleled career on ice, hockey's greatest player ever, Wayne Gretzky, famously responded, "I skate to where the puck is going to be, not where it has been." Savvy marketers have the same choice. You can skate where the market and the technology is now and have it leave you behind, or you can skate to where your market will be with QR codes.



Photo by [Sasky Saves](#)

QR codes are already delivering results for businesses large and small, connecting consumers' real world experiences with their online presence and extending their companies' brands and their reach further than ever before. It's a small, incremental investment well worth any marketer's time. Connect the squares inside the square and connect to your customers to drive sales higher and higher.

Resources

For more about QR Codes, visit:

[Forrester Research Founder and CEO George Colony on QR Codes—the nexus of marketing and technology](#); presented by *ComputerWorld*

[A Bit About QR Codes](#); Professor Karen Hamilton, The Psychology of Consumer Behavior, George Brown College, Toronto, Ontario, Canada

[79 Percent of Smartphone Users Want Mobile Coupons](#); Mobile Commerce Daily, Accenture, Dec. 8, 2010

[Next Wave of Mobile Marketing, NFC, QR Codes and Location-Based Technology](#); Mobile Commerce Daily, May 26, 2011

[50 Creative Uses of QR Codes for Small Business](#); Flyte Web Marketing for Small Business

Next Steps

If you are a company that is interested in growing your business and generating leads, [use HubSpot's free 30-day trial to learn how HubSpot's software can help you.](#)

