

COLUMNS

## When do QR codes work?

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Are QR codes all hype, or are they a valuable mobile marketing tool?

I recently read the contributed **post** by Joe Gillespie about why quick response (QR) codes are a waste of time. In some instances he is right on and certainly makes a compelling argument, but I respectfully view QR codes a bit differently.

One thing is certain: consumers are using QR codes.

Setting it up

In June 2011, 14 million people nationwide used them. This number is impressive given the fact that QR readers must be downloaded, not to mention the confusion created by different types of codes and tags.

It is clear that QR codes have their place.

Like any marketing channel, they are not a sure way to reach every single person. And just like effective marketing leverages many channels and tests those channels to determine the right mix and pace for best engaging a particular target segment, so too must mobile marketing.

So when do QR codes work? They work when consumers have control over time.

The following settings are perfect for QR codes:

- Print
- In-store
- Billboards around town in settings where people are walking around
- Public transportation

QR codes do not work when time is fleeting or the QR codes are moving. QR codes simply are not worth the money in these settings:

- Television
- Highway billboards

Code language

There are three tenets marketers must consider before implementing QR codes.

First, they should understand that like most pieces of the mobile ecosystem, which include text messages, applications, and mobile sites, QR codes have their niche.

As always, first, consider your audience.

For example, QR codes are not the best vehicle for reaching people over 50.

A QR code is an opportunity to grab consumers who have smartphones and are interested in checking out new brand experiences with these types of cool, new tools.

Second, only use QR codes where they actually work.

You can basically boil my list above down to print media – and print media alone.

I know that I, personally, am not going to scan a QR code while it is on my TV screen.

I absolutely have my phone with me when I'm watching TV, but I am not going to walk up to the TV, scan a code and get some information.

Consider this example: I was watching TV during the World Series and GoDaddy had a QR code on one of its commercials.

Though I took the time to rewind my DVR and pause it for the perfect picture, I just did not see this as an effective use of a QR code.

I can barely find the remote when I want to turn channel, let alone get my phone and open my QR reader app in time to capture something in a commercial – not practical. And are we not all fast-forwarding commercials by now anyway?

QR codes will not drastically alter your company in a day, but they are, however, important to consider because of the benefits when used creatively and effectively.

The good fight

One nice thing about QR codes is that they are customizable. You can design a QR code to

reinforce your branding in a unique way.

QR codes can be designed in the form of logos or any whim of your own creativity. They can fit into your marketing collateral.

I recently saw a great example of a QR code using relevant imagery in a campaign for the fight against cancer.

The ad invited people to scan the code to find out more information on [canceritspersonal.com](http://canceritspersonal.com) and incorporated the iconic ribbon directly within the QR code. That is recognizable and impactful.

QR codes are also immediate. They provide an opportunity to bring consumers directly to a rich experience, but that means they must have control over time.

Think about consumers reading magazines.

Consumers have complete control over when they flip the page and how long they spend reading articles. The experience is completely in the hands of the individual and that's great for QR codes.

You are more likely to reach someone during that time because QR codes create user-initiated experiences.

Similarly, for situations such as strolling through the airport or waiting at a bus stop, I am likely to scan a QR code if something catches my eye on a wall poster.

QR codes are also the new, shiny object. Everyone wants to seem innovative.

While we know that QR codes reach tech-savvy consumers who are interested in using new tools and interacting with brands in new ways, they are also branding-building tools.

For companies looking to maintain a hip public image, QR codes inherently project a tech-savvy imagery of a forward-thinking brand.

During my last visit to the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago, I noticed that next to some of the paintings were QR codes.

For some of the paintings, the QR code would bring you to an audio description of the artwork by the curator. Others you would scan to watch a video about the artist.

The most interesting usage, in my opinion, was the QR codes that allowed you to see what was on the back of the painting.

Who ever thought to allow museum-goers to see the back of the painting? That, I believe, is a fantastic and creative use of QR codes.

In the end, it is all about strategy: knowing your customers and knowing how they want to be reached.

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