Speed Reading

'Quick Response' Barcodes Make It Easier to Give and Get Nutrition Information

By Matt Alderton

If you've seen them—and if you haven't yet, you will—you've probably wondered what they are: pixilated black and white squares that look like bleary crossword puzzles or kaleidoscopic postage stamps. Popping up on shirts, signs, television commercials, business cards, billboards and even the occasional body part (thanks to some creative temporary tattoos), these high-tech graphics may look like Rorschach blots, but they aren't tests at all. They're tools. A new generation of "quick response" barcodes, or QR codes, makes it easier to access online information about individuals, companies and products—including food—using only your smartphone.

What Are QR Codes?

Designed to be scanned by smartphone cameras, QR codes are two-dimensional barcodes that contain electronic instructions for your phone.

Here's how they work: Using a QR code-reading app, focus your phone's camera on a QR code when you see one. The software scans the QR code and automatically performs the code's function. For example, a QR code might open a web page in your phone's Internet browser or make a phone call to a designated phone number.

How Can I Use QR Codes?

For consumers, QR codes offer information, engagement and convenience. For example:
- Posted on storefronts, QR codes can link to store websites so customers can quickly access store hours, read customer reviews or link to special coupons, giving customers an incentive to come inside.
- Printed on advertisements, billboards or direct-mail pieces, QR codes can link to an online shopping cart so customers can immediately buy the advertised product, to an online video that demonstrates how to use the product or to the advertiser's Facebook page where customers can "Like" the company.
- Printed for an election on T-shirts, campaign posters and yard signs, QR codes can link to an email sign-up page where voters can join a candidate's mailing list or automatically dial the phone number to campaign headquarters so supporters can make a donation or volunteer their time.

For creators, QR codes offer opportunities to enhance messaging. For instance, here are a few ways registered dietitians could use QR codes to promote healthy eating or nutrition services:
- In restaurants, QR codes on menus can link to lists of ingredients or nutrition information.
- In grocery stores, QR codes can link to information about where food was sourced or to interviews with the farmers who grew it.
- On RDs' business cards, QR codes can link to a list of rates and services, to a LinkedIn page or to a contact form where clients can schedule consultations.
- Printed on disease-specific pamphlets and brochures, QR codes could link to meal plans optimized for patients with diabetes, heart disease, celiac disease or food allergies.
- Posted at gyms, supermarkets, hospitals or clinics, QR codes can link to recipes, trivia or tips that promote healthy eating.

Lingo Lesson

App: Short for "mobile application"; a piece of computer software that's designed to run on mobile devices. While many QR readers are free, different apps are designed for different phones. Check out mobile-barcodes.com for a list of QR code reader apps.

Smartphone: A mobile device that combines the functionality of a cellphone with that of a personal computer. If you're not sure whether you have a smartphone or a regular cellphone, ask yourself: Can I access the Internet on my phone? Is my cellphone synced to my email? If you answered "no" to any of these, you likely cannot scan QR codes.

What Do I Need to Get Started?

To scan QR codes, you need:
- A smartphone—such as an iPhone, Blackberry or Android phone—that has a camera.
- A QR code reader downloaded from your phone's app store (the iTunes Store if you have an iPhone, the Android Market if you have an Android phone or BlackBerry App World if you have a BlackBerry). Open the app store from your phone's menu and search for "QR code reader."
- Internet service, courtesy of a cellphone data plan.

To create your own QR codes:
- From your PC, use Google to search for a free "QR code generator." Popular generators include Kaywa, Qurify and Delivr.
- Follow the instructions for inputting your content, whether it is a website address, phone number or text.
- Click "Generate" to create your QR code graphic, which can be saved to your desktop as an image file for use in printed materials.

Although not everyone is using QR codes, it's only a matter of time before they are ubiquitous. Being an early adopter can put you on the cutting-edge of mobile marketing by allowing you to access a world of value-added information when you scan them, and to more actively promote yourself, your services and your cause when you create them. (Even if mobile marketing isn't your thing, at least you can stop wondering what those funny little stamps are.)

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