

Marketers play tag with 2D barcodes

Growing technology full of promise, challenges

BY MARY E. MORRISON

B-TO-B COMPANIES are beginning to dabble in 2D barcodes to link their off- and online marketing, but it's not yet clear if or when the codes will prove truly useful in connecting with prospects.

The technology behind 2D barcodes isn't new—the first, called the QR [quick response] code, was created in Japan in the mid-1990s by Toyota subsidiary Denso Wave for use in managing automotive component inventories. Now, the codes are increasingly being used in print ads, direct mail pieces, trade show materials and on billboards by marketers that hope smartphone users will scan them to be linked via their mobile device to additional product content online.

"The opportunity is great to move people from one world [print] to the other [online], and also to move people further down the purchase decision path," said Roger Marquis, editor of 2D Barcode Strategy, a consultancy that publishes a blog by the same name. "You're taking a pure prospect and inching them ever closer to becoming an actual client."

RIDGID, a manufacturer of tools and software for the pipe working and contracting industry, added 2D barcodes to its entire ad schedule in September. The ads, created by b-to-b marketing communications agency Sonnhalter, Berea, Ohio, used Microsoft tags to direct readers to a unique landing page when scanned. Once at the landing page, users could schedule a demo, watch a video or request more information.

"It makes print interactive," said Steve Dyer, director of marketing communications for RIDGID. "Many in the market have been questioning if print is dead. ... We certainly believe that print is not dead. With these tags, we're making it easier for the reader to go straight to a website that gives him all the data he'd ever want."

The tags present the opportunity to track a new form of user engagement, said Rachael Zahn, national account executive at interactive agency Terralever, Phoenix. "We can track pretty much anything a consumer does online, but not offline," she said. "This provides a way to show how consumers are engaging with a brand when they're not behind a computer."



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Yet awareness and adoption of 2D barcodes remain low, said Julie Ask, VP-principal analyst at Forrester Research and author of the report "2D Bar Codes: Learn Why There's No Urgency," published in September. According to the report, only 1% of U.S. mobile phone owners and 5% of smartphone owners had used a 2D barcode scanner in the previous three months.

Still, Ask said, now is the time for marketers to experiment. "People are going to become more conditioned to the fact that there's rich content that they can get no matter where they are," she said. "There are go-

ing to be many different ways that consumers are prompted to engage with that content, and 2D barcodes are one of them."

One challenge early adopters face is that the 2D barcode market is highly fragmented, both in terms of the types of codes that can be used and the readers a mobile device owner must download to interpret the code, Ask said. As a result, marketers will have to take some risks when choosing codes and vendors, she said.

The danger, 2D Barcode Strategy's Marquis said, is that marketers risk turning users off. "If the code is scanned and doesn't work, the experience gets disrupted and the prospect potentially loses interest," he said.

Marketers and ad agencies taking the plunge believe the rewards justify the risks. In particular, the ability to quickly link smartphone users to online video is generating interest. "People are becoming so inundated with so much information that they think, 'I don't have time to read through 12 pages on why your product is better; give me a 30-second video,'" said Matt Sonnhalter, president of Sonnhalter.

Accounting firm Citrin Cooperman recently ran a series of print ads in New York-area business publications featuring Microsoft tags that connect readers to online video created by vendor Intelligent Video Solutions. Citrin Cooperman was in the process of relaunching its brand and wanted to position itself as innovative and creative, said Anca Munteanu, the firm's marketing director. "We wanted to be distinctive and stand out from the crowd," she said. "One way we thought we'd do that was to do unusual things in launching the brand."

Results from the first wave of ads "haven't been overwhelming," said Shannon Mayforth, Citrin Cooperman's senior marketing manager, but the firm tentatively is planning a second wave of ads later this year that will have mobile tags as well. "We are waiting to see if the second wave brings better results," she said.

Zahn likens 2D barcodes to social media two or three years ago, when marketers were only beginning to experiment with networking sites. "We're pushing clients to adopt them as an emerging medium knowing that [down the road] they'll be in the medium when consumers are ready to seek them out," she said. □

newcampaigns



American Express OPEN

"Heroes"

Agency: Crispin Porter+Bogusky, Boulder, Colo. **Target audience:** Small-business owners **Campaign objective:** Celebrate small businesses by showing their success stories **Media:** TV ("83rd Annual Academy Awards"); print (*The New York Times*) **Budget:** Undisclosed

Duff & Phelps

"Sweet Spot"

Agency: Doremus New York **Target audience:** Financial professionals **Campaign objective:** Show how Duff & Phelps can help financial professionals find the right balance between instinct and analysis **Media:** TV (CNBC); print (*Bloomberg Markets, CFO, The Deal, Corporate Counsel*) **Budget:** Undisclosed



ALSO BREAKING THIS MONTH

■ **Manta Campaign:** "You Do What?" **Media:** Print, online **Agency:** In-house **Target audience:** Small-business owners

■ **Gannett Co. Campaign:** "It's All Within Reach" **Media:** TV, print, online **Agencies:** The Farm, New York; Scout Marketing, Atlanta **Target audience:** Readers and advertisers



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