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[TradeOnlyToday](#) > [Columns & Blogs](#) > [Marketing Insight](#) > QR adds a dimension to marketing portfolio

QR adds a dimension to marketing portfolio

Posted on April 12th, 2012 Written by [Wanda Kenton Smith](#)



To QR or not to QR? The first question for many marine marketers, however, may be what is QR and how might I use it to successfully engage with my customers?

A quick primer for the uninitiated: QR is the abbreviation for “quick-response code,” a two-dimensional, stamp-shaped matrix bar code that Denso-Wave developed for Toyota in 1994 to enable the automaker to quickly decode vehicle contents and track every stage of movement during the manufacturing process.

This industrial initiative eventually caught the fancy of consumer marketers and has emerged as a trend du jour, thanks in great part to the explosion of smart-phone sales. Scanlife, the mobile bar code technology company, says digital bar code scanning was up 700 percent in 2010 and that by January 2011 28 percent of all smart phones had scanned a bar code. No doubt, the percentage has soared since then.

Today, QR codes are used by individuals and businesses — from small boutiques to mega-marketers such as Starbucks, Target and Victoria’s Secret. They’re used by airlines for boarding passes, Whole Foods for promoting in-store recipes and Hollywood for launching movie trailers.

To understand how a QR code functions, first consider the traditional bar codes scanned in supermarket checkout lines. They’re imprinted on everything from Granny Smith apples to packaged steaks and soda cans. They’re one-dimensional and have a limited storage capacity, but they allow fast and efficient processing of data.

QR codes scan in similar fashion, but they are two-dimensional and capable of storing boatloads of data.

When consumers use a camera-enabled smart phone to scan a QR code, they can link directly to advertiser-generated digital content. It’s the ultimate in instant gratification.

Imagine you’re at a boat show and all the salespeople are busy with other customers (some problem, right?). A sexy boat catches your eye and you notice the QR code affixed to the hull or maybe on the adjacent signage. You scan it with your QR code reader and voila! You’re immediately transported to an exciting new dimension ... maybe to a YouTube video where you watch a walkaround, or maybe you catch great action footage and running shots. Maybe you hear a customer’s testimonial about the boat or

you touch down on a website landing page featuring detailed specifications, pricing and sales highlights.

Half the fun of scanning the code is discovering where it takes you. I read about a marketing guy who was testing QR codes and scanned one that was on a bus stop bench. He wound up with a coupon for free wings at a local restaurant.

To create a QR code, conduct an Internet search for QR code generators. There's plenty of free help out there not only for creating your QR code, but for tracking it as well. Check out bit.ly and goo.gl for creating QR codes that target URLs. For creating other QR codes, linking to Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, etc., check out and consider a user-friendly website such as www.qrstuff.com. Odds are, anything you want to create with a QR has been done and someone on the Internet has a site to show you how to do it.

If you're ready to dabble in QR codes, start by doing some local research. Seek out QR codes and I bet you'll be surprised at what you find. They are in all sorts of places, used by all types of businesses. Download a free QR code reader from your phone's app store. You'll find QR codes in print ads and at point of sale, online, on billboards and toilet stalls. No kidding, they're everywhere. I even saw a photo of a geek wearing a T-shirt with a huge QR code promoting himself.

QR codes are in use in our marine world. We just produced 74 business cards for one of my clients with a QR code on the back. For the sales team, the code links to a unique greeting from the particular salesperson, welcoming viewers to the dealership. The rest of the crew's QR code links to the dealership's URL.

My own personal business card features two QR codes on the back in my trademark color of purple — one to my website and one to my LinkedIn site. I've also directed efforts to produce QR codes for boat show sales signage, fliers, military marketing initiatives and direct marketing campaigns.

Last year, we worked with the regional Cox media affiliate to produce a major Four Winns promotion. It incorporated QR codes with a texting campaign as part of a scavenger hunt promotion that drove TV viewers to multiple dealership locations to register for a major prize package. We scored contact info on every participant for remarketing purposes.

At last fall's Marine Dealer Conference & Expo, the innovation award for top dealer practice in 2011 went to Eric Splatt of Woodard Marine in Vermont. This dealership uses QR codes for multiple marketing and sales applications, as well as for parts sales and service. The service team, for example, shoots video to quickly demonstrate recommended work on specific areas of a customer's boat. Physically pointing out what needs to be done provides instant credibility and resonates with the customer. The same practice is used to show completed work.

Why not use QR codes to link to quick videos on maintenance and preventive measures, or to offer special parts and service deals and discounts?

Another great idea is to cross-promote across social media platforms. Link a QR code to a Facebook page welcome tab to secure coveted "likes," or to a well-established blog or your Twitter site. Wow — bring your prospects to your Facebook, blog or Twitter site in one easy scan and tie in a simple opt-in form. Your QR code also can link to brochures or newsletters, and can be applied on service vehicles or boat wraps — even on sales or service receipts, or maps to your business. Get creative! Remember: you're in the driver's seat with QR codes, so throttle forward and deliver a cool ride and customer experience while this technology is hot.

A few words of caution: Remember, smart-phone screens are significantly smaller than those on a PC, laptop or tablet, so the content should be tailored to this more compact environment. It must be designed specifically to work within mobile applications and across all mobile platforms. File sizes, format (html vs. swf/flash, for example), display configurations and other anomalies can degrade the end user experience.

By all means, test and triple-check the QR code, using a handful of smart phones before final execution. Unfortunately, many people are learning at their own expense without taking the necessary precautions to ensure success. I spoke with a fellow marketer at the Miami boat show who had tested QR codes in several manufacturer and dealer displays and found that half failed to function or load.

So proceed with caution. Be thoughtful and strategic about where and what you link, and avoid sending viewers to content that has no impact or interest or duplicates something they have seen. You might consider working initially with an experienced pro to get started or, if you're a DIYer, perform your due diligence. There is a sea of white papers and some really good self-help material available at a keystroke.

Good marketers are all about measuring performance. The good news is that there is no cost associated with QR codes, but unlike other forms of advertising they require strategic planning to successfully track the return. Trend your traffic weekly to see what is working and what isn't, and shake things up if you're not seeing any traction.

Where are you positioning the QR code? Does one location or placement deliver greater traffic than another? Also, if you have multiple marketing sources feeding into your website, for example, try to isolate the QR code and create custom landing pages for each, tracking via Google Analytics. If you host a contest or initiate a specific call to action, integrate an opt-in mechanism to capture your prospect's highly valued contact information.

I'm not a QR expert, but I do consider myself an enthusiast. I enjoy the creative process and I'm stoked to test new concepts and see what sticks. It's just so totally cool that we can craft messaging today that literally lands directly in the hands (and phones) of our prospects.

No doubt, the QR code eventually will morph into a newer, more cutting-edge technology. There is already some rumbling in marketing cyberspace about the advent of normal images replacing QR codes via a visual search platform. I don't quite grasp that yet, but for today I don't have to. At the moment, there's more than enough to keep my curiosity stimulated, so many new and exciting alternatives to attract and engage the customer like never before.

This article originally appeared in the April 2012 issue.