

QR Code Best Practices for Print

by Judd Wheeler on OCTOBER 11, 2011

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QR (or quick response) barcode scans grew 1200% from July to December 2010. comScore released its findings that, in June 2011, 14 million Americans scanned QR codes on their mobile phones. These numbers show the importance of QR codes and a need to get it right now rather than later. Although the list of QR code guidelines seems listed below seems long, it's not really that hard of a task to do it right. The first step is knowledge and understanding of what to do and what not to do.

Materials

- QR codes cannot be read on highly reflective or highly curved surfaces, especially when the light hits it just right and whites out the dark squares

Color

- Print on white or soft pastel color background
- Don't print on a dark color
- Do not reverse or invert in print. The black must be black or a dark contrast color for scanners to appropriately pick it up. The scanners use the three dark corner marks as reference points
- If you're going to colorize your code, make sure there is at least 55% contrast difference between the squares and the background.



example, what not to do: QR Code - not enough contrast

Size

- As small as $\frac{3}{4}$ inch on business cards (best 1 inch square or larger)
- Most all camera phones can properly read a 1.25 x 1.25" code. The latest models have been known to read codes that are less than 0.4"x0.4" but why take the risk?
- Minimum focal distance of some camera phones can be 3-4"
- The more complex the code, the larger it should be. vCards are notorious for having a lot of information, so the larger the better.
- Shorten the URLs – use something like bit.ly or goo.gl. This reduces the amount of data the code needs to hold and makes it much easier to scan. An additional benefit to URL shorteners is that they generally have some tracking capabilities.
- Give it a small border of white space (at least 1/8" gap)
- Think of the medium and how it's going to be viewed. It can be smaller on a business card or coffee mug, but needs to be much bigger on a poster or billboard. Don't put a postage stamp sized QR code on a bus and expect anyone to scan it. To be honest, I don't think a bus is the best place for a QR code to be scanned anyway.
- Rule of thumb: 10:1, a QR code that is 1 inch could be scanned about 10 inches away.

Format

- Use PNG format when developing/saving your QR code. PNG is a scalable vector graphic so it suffers no loss when being resized. After it's resized, you can save it to a different format like jpeg or gif.
- Make sure when you're resizing your graphic to scale it proportionately. Don't stretch or distort the code.



example, what not to do: QR Code - stretched

Position

- When in print, keep away from the fold, this improves the ability to scan without reflection of the other facing page
- Also, know the binding method of the magazine and keep it far enough away to avoid part of the code not being visible
- In direct mail, keep it away from the edge (remember the white space boarder that is needed) and don't get it caught in the crease



example: good positioning in a printed product

Testing

- Test in different lighting scenarios
- Test with Android, BlackBerry, Windows and iPhones and different versions of these as sometimes older iPhones read it differently due to the camera resolutions
- Test for signal strength across different networks. Don't put your QR code on a poster that's in a subway where there's no signal. What's the point if they cannot get to your content?
- Make sure the thing you're linking to works and displays properly on as many phones as possible



example: ensure your code is readable in as many formats as possible

Usage

- Explain how to scan, include where to download a reader app. Possibly include a short code that responds with a URL to a QR code reader
- Print the URL near the QR code as a fallback measure
- For those without a smartphone, you could also provide a shortcode to text them information, when appropriate
- Tell them about the “bonus” material they will receive
- Know why you are using the code. QR codes are a tactic. They are a simple gateway to reduce typing in URLs, text messages or phone numbers. They are a way to make purchasing something, downloading music or apps, get directions or access information. There is a greater strategy behind why you are using QR codes. QR codes aren't the strategy.

Content on the other end of the code

- Mobile friendly web page. This means no Flash!
- Send users to a web page that adds value, like a special offers or discounts, time-sensitive promotions or exclusive content that make it worthwhile for them to scan. In other words, motivate the user to take their smartphone out of their purse or pocket, open the app and scan it by giving them a **strong** call to action.
- Make sure the landing page has a redirect, just in case the page is ever removed or changed

Metrics

- Metrics are a must for any campaign
- A simple way to track is to use Google analytics on the web page
- Use different landing pages to track those who type it in versus those who scan
- If you cannot or aren't good at adding analytics to your web pages, look for QR code tracking services to manage your campaign like the following:
 - <http://tappinn.com/>
 - <http://scantag.com/>
 - <http://tagomobile.com/>
 - <http://www.scanlife.com/new/index.html>
 - <http://beqrious.com/>
 - <http://www.scanvee.com/>
 - <http://www.i-nigma.com/CampaignManager.htm>
 - <http://orangeqr.com/>
 - <http://www.sparqcode.com/>
 - <http://www.qrmirror.com/app/qrmon>
 - <http://www.avmore.com/qr>
 - <http://delivr.com/>

This is only a partial list of QR code management platforms.

