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Mobile Tagging with QR Codes

Mobile Tags are now mainstream with the Quick Response (QR) code format grabbing the spotlight. Each new development raises the question of whether and how this technology should be applied in our industry.

These two-dimensional matrix bar codes, originally designed to track auto parts in Japan, are now being used to market everything from gym memberships to vacation getaways. And they are fast becoming a trend in the property management and real estate marketing arenas.

Determining if mobile tag marketing is right for your business will depend on a number of factors, including your willingness to embrace and learn to use this new technology and your ability to use it effectively.

HISTORY OF MOBILE TAGS

Most of us are familiar with the bar codes on supermarket items (UPC) and the back of printed materials (ISBN). These linear one-dimensional patterns encode up to 20 numerical digits. Significantly more information can be contained in a two-dimensional (2D) matrix, with meaningful information in both the vertical and horizontal directions. By representing information in both directions, 2D codes can carry up to several hundred times the amount of data carried by an ordinary bar code.

The two competing 2D codes are the open source standard (QR code) and Microsoft's proprietary solution (MS Tag). The QR was invented in 1994 by Denso, a Toyota company, to aid in automotive production. It was approved as an ISO international standard (ISO/IEC18004) in June 2000. Although Denso Wave owns the patent rights on QR codes, they have chosen not to exercise them and hence QR codes are free of any license. Microsoft developed the MS Tag in 2009 based on their High Capacity Color Barcode (HCCB) standard. They have guaranteed there will be no charge for their services until after 2015 at the earliest.

With the QR code commanding most of the current buzz we will focus this discussion on the QR code, although most of the ideas will apply to both formats.

CORRECT QR CODE USAGE

At least half of Americans will own smartphones (such as the iPhone, BlackBerry or those based on Google's Android operating system) by the end of this calendar year. Couple this with the growing number of prospective renters, and using this mobile marketing technology can be a smart way to turn leads into leases.

"That is, if you use them correctly," says Agi Anderson, a Florida real estate broker and ePro Advisor who consults with property management companies on how to use technology to better market their properties.

"Don't say 'scan here' just to be cute. That's hurting QR codes. They really are valuable business tools and should be used in that way," she said. "Putting it on your business card is fine, but the whole point is to allow people to access information they would otherwise not have."

For property managers, that means directing prospects to web pages that feature specific property details, photos, virtual tours, etc.

Just as a flyer with photos of a listing is a take-away for prospects, so can a QR code be. If the prospect can't get in to see the property immediately, the QR code strategically placed on signage or in a window can deliver them the information they want – and deliver it to them quickly (hence the name "quick response").

To be effective, there should also be a clear "call to action," Anderson says, such as an online application, special promotion or other way to capture the visitor's contact information.

Mobile tags are used to provide additional information using a different media channel. Examples include placing a tag on a:

- Real estate sign to initiate a text message with basic rental information;
- Refrigerator magnet to queue up a service request;
- Lease document to show a video outlining your resident handbook;
- Facebook web page to provide contact information to a mobile phone;
- Property flyer to open a web page with more pictures and amenity details.



Use abbreviated web addresses (url) when generating the QR code. The more data you include in the code, the smaller its modules (black squares in the code) will be, making it more difficult to read accurately.

MOBILE CONFIGURATION

When a smartphone with a QR code reader scans a code, the code directs the user to a specific URL of a website, so the content returned by that URL should be optimized for mobile delivery, since it's being viewed on a mobile browser.

Most websites are designed in the 800 to 1024-pixel-wide range. Mobile sites are designed in the 480-pixel-wide range (though the newest iPhone has a 640 x 960 resolution and Toshiba is scheduled to release a phone that has 720 x 1280).

"If you're using a QR code to drive traffic to your site, your site needs to be optimized for mobile viewing," says Ken Knight, our internal technical wizard. "This is especially true when web site interaction is required, such as keying in information."

Knight recently developed a QR code generating application that allows users to specify the dpi (size) and output format, as well as include a tagline under the code. This can be particularly useful for property managers who want to use QR codes on property signage.

SIZING QR CODES FOR CELL PHONES

As a general rule, every inch added to the size of the printed code gains you an additional foot of distance from which the code can be captured and scanned with a smartphone, said Knight. For example, a 3-inch code can be scanned from 3 feet away; a 7-inch code can be captured up to 7 feet away. Results may vary based on lighting and the type of camera on the phone being used.

Anderson suggests keeping an inventory of codes at your disposal and assigning each a numerical value in order to track their usage, especially if using codes on signage.

"What people may not realize is that QR Codes are transferable, much like a lockbox. The code itself can be moved to another property," she said. Once a property is no longer available, you can transfer the coded signage to another property. Just be sure to update the page that code points to.

"Agents and property managers are just starting to realize the value in them. I know a year ago this time, I didn't get these little codes, but then the light bulb came on," Anderson said. "And when it comes on for everyone, there will be a tremendous surge in utilization of these valuable tools."

The light came on this fall for Barrett Klutts with Klutts Property Management, the first property management company to begin using QR codes on signage to advertise available properties in the Charlotte, NC area.

With 700 rental properties under management, and 100 to 130 listings available at any time, Klutts made the decision to direct viewers to his company's homepage rather than individual listing pages. "It was partly economics and logistics, but we also want them to come to our site and see all of our listings," he said. "We are really excited about using the codes to market our properties and are excited to see more traffic generated to our website."


IN CLOSING

As a final tip, Anderson says just remember to apply the same rules with QR codes as you do with your overall marketing: generate traffic to create prospects, to convert prospects to clients and convert clients to closed sales (or leases in the case of property managers).

Here are a few other helpful tips to keep in mind when considering the use of mobile tags to market your properties:

- Direct prospects to pages optimized for mobile devices;
- Maintain a consistent brand on your mobile site(s);
- Provide valuable content beyond the information presented on the material with the code;
- Have a clear call to action on the page(s) where your codes direct;
- Inventory your codes to reassign them to different properties.

Here are some things to feature on the pages your QR codes direct to:

- Property details;
- Photos;
- Virtual tours;
- Special promotions;
- Rental applications. 

Scan any of the QR codes above for easy access to information referenced in this article, including the QR Code Generator, and other Technology Matters articles by PropertyBoss Solutions.