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Aston Martin's archives

Digitisation at the Royal Horticultural Society

Focus on public libraries

Group survey & prize winners

QR codes in HE

welcome

This issue features a new layout (see page 3 for an explanation from our Group Chairman). This is experimental and your comments will be very welcome. We would also like to thank all those who responded to the member survey -- we will be analysing all the information received and discussing it at our next committee meeting.

Catherine Dhanjal, Managing Editor

From time to time, MmIT offers space to suppliers who are developing and marketing products of potential interest to information services.Neither the journal nor the MMIT Group endorse any of the services covered in these pages. Articles published reflect the opinions of the authors and are not necessarily those of the editorial board or MMIT Group. While every reasonable effort is made to ensure that the contents of the articles, editorial and advertising are accurate, no responsibility can be accepted by the editorial board or MMIT Group for errors, misrepresentations or any resulting effects. Acceptance of an advertisement does not imply endorsement of the advertiser's product(s) by the editorial board or MMIT. ■

A plea to subscribers & Group members

We are currently checking our database of members and subscribers, and would be grateful if you could email the editor with your current email and snail mail address so that we can ensure the journal and Group communications arrive safely.

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Cover photo: John Rylands Totem © The University of Manchester

Marketing for the QRious: the beginner's guide to using QR codes for library promotions and resources

Jon Fletcher, liaison librarian at Nottingham Trent University, explains how getting library customers to access URLs on mobile devices suddenly got easier

For the uninitiated, the blocky code on the right of this text is a QR ('Quick Response') code, a two-dimensional barcode – capable of storing up to 4,296 alphanumeric characters – which can be used to transmit information to devices with the software to read them. Increasingly, this means smartphones and other mobile devices and, increasingly, advertisers are waking up to the possibility of putting information into a format which can be scanned straight into a mobile device by 'pointing and clicking' at the image (albeit via an installed barcode reader). These codes, developed by Japanese company Denso Wave (Denso Wave, 2010) in 1994, have only relatively recently started to go mainstream in Europe, with Pepsi, Siemens and several other advertisers using them in standard advertising campaigns (Hughes, 2009): you might well have seen these adverts even if you didn't notice them. The 'early adopter' phase is over, with the rise of the smartphone market pointing to the fact that an increasing amount of library customers have the technology to engage with these codes. They're here, they're easy to create and they currently remain a relatively hot topic; research around usage in libraries – especially UK libraries – is still in its infancy (cf. the excellent introduction by Walsh, 2009), and there is much left for interested parties to investigate. If you've ever wanted to deliver specific information to a user simply by them pointing and clicking a mobile device at your advert/document/resource, then QR codes are for you.

Why use QR codes in a library?

As a liaison librarian at Nottingham Trent University, I am involved – as are many other staff – in promoting services of benefit to library customers. However, as we all know, advertising a resource or a session is not the same as ensuring it is used; library customers are increasingly busy people, and one of the keys to turning interest into attendance is to deliver information to customers as easily as possible. Event posters bearing a URL usually demand that a user writes down the URL (or tries to Google it) – even those with a web-enabled device have to enact this process, and many will simply resolve to 'do it sometime later'; in short, many potential attendees will walk off and not log on, never returning to us. The beauty of QR codes is that those with web-enabled devices can (to use my example) see a library session they want to attend, scan the code, go direct to the relevant webpage and sign up without even moving from the poster. The interested user has now been converted to a signed-up attendee. Of course, QR codes can also be used to provide information at events themselves; they can hold short paragraphs of text, which can be 'snapped' and then used interactively or taken away, and this information (e.g. opening times) can also be implanted into posters for those who wish to capture it. Some care should be taken when relying on text-heavy content, as different QR readers behave in different ways on different phones, and there is no accounting for what technology your range of customers will possess. Testing is key in this respect.

QR codes, therefore, can be deployed in multiple fashions, with McKiernan (2010) providing an excellent summary of 25 uses for QR codes in libraries – these can be used to offer immediate access to online instruction manuals, guides, maps, interactive chat services and more, with the codes themselves able to be placed for use in any physical or virtual location. One of the most imaginative ideas herein is to put a QR code on bookshelves next to key topics areas, offering customers the chance to snap the code to be immediately taken to relevant ebook holdings (thereby acting as a reminder that such titles do exist). Small scale pilots should certainly be preferred to covering a library in QR codes without any real thought, but there are clear options to be explored nonetheless.

library customers increasingly have the technology to engage with QR codes

QR codes in practice

In theory, QR codes should provide an easy way for information professionals to market their services. In practice, the UK has

For my testing, I used a Nokia E71 with a Symbian operating system as my main testing device, with a colleague supplying an iPhone 3G for cross operating system testing. No Android-based phones were available, though these (and others) can process QR codes linking to URLs also. Whilst all software would transmit and open URLs, many QR readers would not read text embedded in paragraphs; the iPhone also fared quite badly due to the need to resize QR codes on the screen before they could be processed (cf. Walk, 2008), though the iPhone 4G will have an improved camera. Before I used QR codes to link to fairly dense text, I would want to test out a fuller range of phones and QR readers. own speed.

some way to go before these codes become as ubiquitous as they are (for example) in Japan, where QR codes are an everyday occurrence. Initially, the following aspects should be considered:

(1) Does the target audience have the devices necessary to access them?
(2) Are the devices possessed able to access the internet without additional charges, and do they have a QR reader installed (this must often be downloaded by the user)?
(3) Does the audience know what a QR code is, and what to do with it?

It is, of course, impossible to know what percentage of your target customers have access to the phones, software, data plans and – crucially – the knowledge and inclination to use them; as with all technology, things take time to gain acceptance, though the gradual movement of this technology into the UK mainstream means that take-up is likely to improve once customers are enabled (cf. Schonfeld, 2010 and McKiernan, 2009, amongst others). Reports still point to this technology being in an early stage of use in relation to libraries, with a recent study from the University of Huddersfield stating that 55 percent of students surveyed in Autumn 2009 had mobile internet (Walsh, 2010, p.28), though an unknown quantity lack unlimited data plans, and there was an uncertainty about whether QR codes could be useful (Walsh, 2010, p.33). With many institutions having free WiFi and the correct advertising being used, this uncertainty can hopefully be turned to engagement, though it will not happen overnight.

customers can access content at point of interest

NTU Libraries and Learning Resources have begun limited pilots of QR codes on our 'Events for Students' and 'Events for Staff' posters. Results are yet too early to evaluate (posters have only recently been put up, and the format will soon be altered slightly); however, it is proposed that – with new experience of how to produce them quickly and simply - they are rolled out more widely in advertisements for the academic year 2010-11. We used http://snapmaze.com/ to produce URLs which had first been shortened through http://bit.ly/, in order to make the URLs easier to scan and to allow hit rates to be monitored (NB: you must register a bit.ly account for this). QR codes are very easy to produce, taking a matter of minutes, and a code for a static URL can remain the same indefinitely for ease of reproduction. Various useful guides exist to explain this process (e.g. Jeffrey, 2009), and the University of Bath's 'QR Codes at Bath' blog (University of Bath, 2010) is an invaluable trove of educational-related (JISC-sponsored) pilots into the uses of QR codes. As detailed above, do make sure that you explain somewhere on the poster (near to the QR code) how interested customers can download the readers if they need to use them. All this hard work will go nowhere if no-one knows what to do with the codes. Ramsden and Jordan found that only 12-15 percent of students surveyed in late 2008 knew what a QR code was (Ramsden and Jordan, 2009, p.2) – a similar survey now would be informative, though one can hardly assume that all customers know what to do with these codes once they see them.

The future?

Whatever your information service, QR codes provide a mechanism for customers to access content easily and – importantly – at point of interest; one still has to make the product interesting and desirable, but the advantages are clear. As with all things, one must factor in the potential hurdles listed above, but the mainstream media are starting to do this already, and information professionals would be wise to join in if possible. Of course, at some point a new breed of codes might develop, which will necessitate a shift in format and some kind of rethink; it is this kind of development, however, which has brought QR codes into the semi-mainstream in the first place, and a shift to another freely accessible barcode is likely to necessitate only a small change in practice. Whilst we should cater for those without this technology (or the inclination to use it), a rich opportunity exists to offer a value-added service. Those interested in QR codes would do well to follow the increasing online noise about these codes and their usage in libraries, as well as attending professional events in the UK which discuss such issues. Personally, I look forward to seeing how my institution will use these in the future, and think that QR codes offer yet another possibility to tech-savvy information professionals who wish to raise their service profile. ■

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coming next...

Special focus on academic libraries

Birmingham Library: stories from the web

MMIT Group's social networking seminar

Planets: plan & preserve digital content

Information services in Second Life

News

Reviews

Technology roundup

Findings from the MMIT Group survey

Your articles, photographs, reviews, thoughts and suggestions for the journal are always welcome, just contact Catherine Dhanjal on catherine.dhanjal@theansweruk.com or call 01883 650434.

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