

If you meet a Green Bay SCORE volunteer and are handed a business card, you'll find it easy to learn more about the organization. That's because Chad Heath, SCORE volunteer and an account executive with Alliance Insurance, is a firm believer in the value of QR (Quick Response) codes.

When he assumed the position of Marketing Committee chairman last year, one of his first recommendations was to include the code on all of the business cards and marketing materials. "It goes directly to a YouTube video," Heath said. "I wanted to let people know what we're about, and am a big proponent of video. The younger generation especially responds better to video."

With almost six in 10 Americans now carrying a smart phone, the use of QR codes has exploded. On Black Friday, it was reported that the use of codes increased by 50 percent over last year. More and more, businesses are finding that codes are an fast route to sales and marketing information. "It's designed to be an expressway," Heath said. "The scan takes you past all of the other distractions and gets the results right to the consumer. If your customer is going to Google, there's so much other information that they could end up anywhere."

About 99 percent of the QR codes are scanned using mobile phones making it important that a website is designed for mobiles. That means cleaner website design with less information to read. However, Heath cautions that you don't want to get in the mindset that a QR code means linking to the website.

At his insurance company, he has three QR codes leading consumers to information on the company, price quotes, and service. He has a code on his mobile phone for his business card so that another user can quickly scan the code instead of entering the information.

Whatever it's used for, Heath emphasizes the need for creativity. "You want to give the consumer something memorable and different. You want them to click on it and say, 'That's pretty cool.'"

The codes are finding their way to billboards, posters, T-shirts, coffee mugs, pillows, key chains, and all sorts of interesting mediums. The novelty is more apt to motivate a consumer to scan it. Yet, despite the growing popularity among mobile users, the codes themselves have not made their way into the majority of marketing plans. Heath thinks that will change as businesses realize how easy the codes are to generate and use. There are hundreds of QR code generators and the majority are free.

"Most companies think it's going to be really tough, and that they have to pay someone to do it," he said. "You can hire someone to create it but more often than not, you can find a 13-year-old to do it."

For Heath, it all started with a marketing article, and a few instructional videos.

"It's gotten to the point where there is so much stimuli coming at consumers," he said. "The QR code helps you get them in the first few seconds, because if you don't do that, you're going to lose them."

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