

COLUMNS

Navigating mobile 2D bar codes: Fee vs. free

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By [Laura Marriott](#)

Major department stores in London, building facades in Dubai, garbage trucks in New York, packaged goods in Vancouver, and newspapers and billboards around the globe all are using mobile bar codes to actively engage mobile consumers.

Major brands are increasing their deployment of mobile bar code campaigns every day and everywhere like never before. But which mobile bar code should you use?

It is not just a matter of choosing one type of bar code, such as QR, DataMatrix or UPC. It is about how to use and deploy them in a manner which will help to ensure overall campaign success.

It means providing an appropriate level of service and delivering the ROI that both brands and agencies have come to expect from their mobile bar code marketing initiatives.

For mobile bar codes, it is a decision between whether to leverage free bar code services or fee-based barcode services in a brand owner's deployments. What does this mean? And why should you care?

Making sense of fee versus free

For many, the first foray into mobile bar codes may be using a service on the Internet and creating a free bar code via one of the many free bar code generation services available.

We are often asked whether this simple solution is the best approach, or whether fee-based services offer a better solution and return for the brand.

This is by no means a simple question and this article will briefly outline the options for mobile bar code implementations, both free and fee-based.

Free service snapshot

Free, or "direct" mobile bar codes, which simply contain the URL address of a Web page encoded into the bar code, are available from many online services.

Consumers can simply visit one of these Web sites, type in a URL address of their choice, and generate a direct mobile bar code. These are available either free of charge or for a very limited fee.

The obvious advantage of free bar codes is that they are cheap and convenient.

However, while these free code services are suitable for experimentation, trials, or limited commercial use, they do have significant limitations.

Advantages include:

They are free or low cost

They are great for testing or trialing mobile bar code technology use within small or single marketing campaigns

They may be a good implementation method where very few scans are anticipated

They are easy to access

Disadvantages include:

Analytics associated with direct bar codes are very limited. Web site analytic tools, which tend to be used with mobile bar codes, often are not able to distinguish between mobile and non-mobile hits or gather valuable metadata associated with mobile scans, such as location based information, opt-in demographics and usage metrics

As the URL is also embedded in the QR code in direct or free implementations, the QR code size may also be physically larger in direct implementations. For a brand struggling with limited real estate in advertisements or on package, this becomes an issue

If brands wish to generate and manage a large number of bar codes, creating and printing these free bar codes can be a labor-intensive process, and therefore more expensive in terms of man hours used

More importantly, using static URLs for bar codes requires statistics to be run on each individual URL through Web analytics. If the number of codes is more than a few, the management of the data becomes unwieldy very quickly

Since these free mobile bar codes simply contain URLs, any time you want to change the URL, bar codes and collateral must either be reprinted or the content to which the code directs must be manually updated

There is no easy way to differentiate the experience delivered to the consumer based on critical context such as their device capabilities, demographics, location and date/time

In this way, campaigns are linear and generic, taking a one-size-fits-all approach.

Media-rich campaigns designed for a direct URL approach will work well for only a small segment of the consumers who are trying to access the campaign due to device or bandwidth limitations specific to the user, hindering overall uptake and ultimately the success of the campaign.

With free bar codes, the inability to easily manage the content and to easily collect and measure user response undermines the advantages mobile barcode campaigns provide.

So why pay? The fee-based approach

Providing a brand with more control to configure and customize their campaigns is one of the key benefits of a fee-based approach.

When mobile bar codes are used as a component of a marketing campaign and must be able to scale and be measurable, it makes sense to use a robust, scalable bar code management platform from a reputable bar code management provider.

In a fee-based scenario a brand or advertising agency works with a bar code management provider to create, resolve and manage the mobile bar codes which are part of the marketing initiative.

This same mobile bar code provider also collects and measures key consumer response statistics through its Web-based platform, which helps a brand to understand total value and return for its initiative and investment, something a free campaign cannot do.

The key advantages of fee-based solutions are:

Mobile bar codes provided by mobile bar code management providers are easy to generate, manage and measure using a service provider's application interface

Clients are able to leverage the expertise of their vendor to gain insight into their case studies, expertise and best practice to ensure the success of their campaigns

Indirect or partial indirect mobile bar codes contain indices, allowing linked content to be managed or re-directed as necessary, thus the mobile code remains manageable and flexible once printed in marketing initiatives

Depending upon the approach used indirect versus partial indirect the mobile code service can provide detailed metadata analytics including time, date and location of any scan, as well as valuable user metadata, including gender and age, allowing brands to better understand who is engaging with them

Clients are able to generate batch bar codes to support campaigns requiring a large number of bar codes. Analytics are then available on the basis of campaigns, or other sort criteria, not available in direct bar codes

A partial indirect implementation can be read by any universal mobile code reader, extending the reach for the initiative

Considering the context of the user, such as location, date, time and device particulars is imperative in determining the optimal content and format that should be delivered.

Rules and business logic can be quickly and easily defined on an indirect platform to determine the best way to route/handle a scan based on device capabilities of the target device and the context such as location, age, gender, date and time of the consumer.

The appropriate content can be displayed based on these particulars, therefore resulting in campaign that works on the largest variety of devices and is much more personalized to the context of the consumer.

The key disadvantages are:

Mobile code service providers charge a fee for their services. However, this is more than offset by the value that the vendor provides

With an indirect approach, a proprietary reader client needs to be installed on the phone to properly read the bar code

When we discuss fee-based approaches, there are a couple of methodologies or decoding methods being deployed which a brand can choose from:

Partial indirect (also referred to as DNS prefixed or managed direct)

Indirect (often referred to as pure indirect)

Why partial indirect?

One of the implementations of a fee-based approach is partial indirect.

Partial indirect mobile bar codes is a methodology which contains both an index number and a URL address for the bar code management service that will process that index.

The index and URL allows partial indirect mobile bar codes to be read by any mobile device with a camera and any universal bar code scanning (reading) software installed.

This dramatically increases the consumer reach of a mobile code campaign by making it accessible to all consumers with a universal reader.

Additionally, the index in the partial indirect code allows the campaign content to be entirely manageable by the campaign owner and also provides the campaign owner with the flexibility to collect the opt-in user and transaction metadata passed from the reader.

Indirect snapshot

The other fee-based approach is indirect.

Indirect mobile bar codes contain only an index number, rather than a URL, and require a user to scan a mobile code using a specific bar code reader the bar code reader of the company that generated the indirect bar code.

This special bar code reader then reads the index encoded in the bar code and routes the request to the bar code service provider for processing.

One advantage of this approach is that the software client can also collect and send opt-in user and transaction metadata to the associated service to provide a more responsive user experience.

A disadvantage of this approach, however, is that it requires installation of a specific bar code reader to process the indirect index bar codes. Therefore, the reach of a campaign can be severely limited.

WHILE IN THE short-term it may seem that free services are attractive due to lack of initial investment, they do have

important limitations and will affect the ongoing success and traceability of a campaign.

Fee-based services provide benefits including long-term campaign control and flexibility, greater consumer performance and the provision of usage data which more than offset the expense and are, ultimately, a great example of "you get what you pay for."

Laura Marriott is Victoria, British Columbia-based CEO of [NeoMedia Technologies](#). Reach her at lmariott@neom.com.

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