

You'll find them in newspapers, on tickets and food packaging. Even on graves. In Japan, Quick Response (QR) codes have been part of everyday life for more than a decade. They've also taken off in the US, where they are now seen as integral to many advertising and brand-building campaigns. In the UK, however, it's a different story. Although a few big names have dipped their toes in the water – Pepsi stuck them on 400 million cans in 2008 and since then the likes of Waitrose, Absolut Vodka, Wilkinson Sword and Rowntree have all dabbled – take-up has been poor.

So are retailers and brands missing a trick or is cracking the QR code not all it's cracked up to be?

Originally created as a tracking code at Japanese car company Denso-Wave's parts factory in 1994, QR codes are printed squares of information-laden black and white dots that when read by a mobile phone take the user to a website or other content (as those who scan the one to the left will discover). They soon entered the mainstream in Japan when they were adopted by marketers and it's now rare to find a product, poster, billboard or magazine without a QR code.

Their use is growing in the US too. Having been displayed on billboards and in retail there for some time, codes have recently started popping up on food and drink packaging. Heineken was one of the first to adopt the technology, last year, and Pacific Natural Foods, a natural and organic food and drink company, is set to follow suit.

This summer, the brand will launch food packs featuring QR codes that when scanned will link users to online content such as recipes, shopping lists, coupons and ingredient provenance.

"We've been watching the technology grow in popularity and believe it is on the cusp of entering the day-to-day lives of mainstream shoppers," says the company's marketing communications manager Jennifer Herrick.

The latest statistics suggest two-thirds of US smartphone users have seen a QR code and of those, half have used one. The technology, she believes, has come of age.

With the arrival of 4G networks looming and rapid growth of smartphone own-

ership, the UK may not be far behind. At the moment, though, smartphone usage is high, but code awareness low and there is little data available as to the extent of its usage or effectiveness.

Many food and drink retailers and brands are understandably reluctant to dive in before consumer interest has been gauged or the benefits understood. A quick straw poll of Premier Foods, United Biscuits and Cadbury underscores the challenge faced by QR-code evangelists – none of them have plans to introduce QR codes.

Not everyone is holding off, however. Waitrose used QR codes for its Christmas ad campaign as part of a "test and learn" experience. It put codes linking to its app and mobile website on print promotions

razor in action and offering the chance to enter a prize draw. In December, Absolut Vodka put a QR code on its neck labels that resolved to the iTunes store where users could download the free 'Drinkspiration' app. The brand claims it used the code because its target customers like to be first to spot new trends and that downloads of the Absolut Drinkspiration app doubled during the promotion.

QR codes won't work for everybody though, say experts, and companies should resist the temptation to slap a code on everything. QR code campaigns have to be carefully thought through – content, as ever, is king. If a code links to a website that is not enabled for mobile browsing, or if the link adds no real value, you may be doing more harm than good.

Brands also have to consider whether QR codes are really suitable for their customers, says Kelly Wright, partner at creative agency Fold 7. "Employing the latest technology before it is adopted in the mainstream is the domain of pioneering, tech-savvy, fast-paced brands, but can be a mistake for those whose core customer base is not receptive to or educated in the technology," she warns.

Other potential flies in the ointment are lingering technical issues hindering the effectiveness of QR codes.

At present, nobody has developed a universal QR reader – while some codes work with a particular reader others do not. 3G connections are also still patchy and slow in some parts of the UK, which can

render codes useless. There are significant drawbacks that need addressing, admits Tom Ollerton, senior marketing manager at digital content agency Skive.

However, he warns, those that don't get on board with QR now could be missing an opportunity.

The tipping point could be closer than people realise. The UK already boasts the highest number of smartphone users in the world, according to Vodafone. Even if only a third are happy to scan QR codes, that still presents a compelling proposition. Google and Sky certainly think so. The former is using QR codes as part of its Favourite Places service and Sky launched Sky Atlantic with a series of print ads featuring QR codes. Where they lead, others will surely follow. ■

AUGMENTED REALITY SCOUTING FOR GIRLS – DIGITALLY

QR is not the only stepping stone to the new digital world: Augmented Reality (AR) is hot on its heels with the likes of Nestlé leading the way. Instead of the printed code linking to a URL or download, AR codes are a launch pad for a layer of digital information that can be seen overlaid on to reality when a user views that code through a mobile phone camera or a webcam. So, with the Nestlé Kit Kat AR campaign, when you viewed the printed code on the Kit Kat packet through a webcam or camera phone, out of the Kit Kat folded a room in which pop band Scouting For Girls played their latest track. It's easier to understand in action: www.youtube.com/watch?v=2Z_z8wYGv5g Nestlé last month announced that it will be using AR on 26 million of its cereal boxes – though none in the UK.

and also became the first UK retailer to use a code on TV (although the need to pause the TV so the code could be read means it may be the last).

It was an enlightening experience, says Fiona Hall, innovations manager at Waitrose ecommerce. "We gained insights into which media performed best, what devices people were using and how to manage our redirection process," says Hall. "The results were beyond our expectations, with one in three scans of the QR code resulting in a download of the Waitrose app."

A number of brands have also been keen to grab first mover advantage. Last November, Wilkinson Sword announced it was using QR codes in its £20m campaign for the new Hydro Razor 5 connecting the user to a website showing videos of the