After enjoying years of popularity in China and Japan, QR—Quick Response—codes are gaining steam in the U.S.

Try to flip through a catalog, magazine or direct mail piece without spotting one of the little square (bar)codes. Users can download a reader for their smartphone, scan the code, and be instantly delivered to a website providing more information or opportunities to interact.

Colleges are experimenting with ways to use the technology, too.

“It’s becoming more popular, although I wouldn’t say it’s widely adopted yet,” says James Roberts, director of marketing and communications at Misericordia University in Dallas, PA. “We see it as a good way of making our print materials interactive, and to offer audiences additional content, like video, that elaborates on what they’re reading.”

An early adopter, Misericordia has been using QR codes in their admissions materials since 2008. “For example, while reading a mailing with a list of our offered majors, students can scan the QR code with their smartphone and go to a YouTube video of a day in the life of one of our students.”

When the University unveiled a new football program, a QR code was included on a promotional poster. “When you scan the QR code, it takes you to the press conference video.”

QR codes are popping up frequently in alumni magazines, too. York College in Pennsylvania has added a code to the class notes section, linking alumni to a mobile web form to submit their own news. Saint Leo University in Florida is experimenting with using QR codes for advertisers in the alumni magazine.

While publications—from viewbooks to event announcements—are natural fit for the technology, it’s not the only way QR codes are being used on campus.

“We’ve started using QR Codes as a banner for our College Center construction project,” reports David W. Shapiro, director of information technology services, Lebanon Valley College, Annville, PA. “Each code, with an associated image, allows the user to instantly retrieve information. Some of the QR Codes we’ve placed on this banner are linked to dining updates, parking information and construction schedules.”

“We think these codes give our campus easy access to readily available, but often hard to find or hard to remember, information,” says Shapiro. “It’s our hope we could produce a series of QR Codes for campus locations and information hotspots. For example, a student could walk up to a studio, take a picture of a QR code and instantaneously have a webpage that shows the schedule for that room.”

“When information is hard to present, a small QR code can give the user everything they need and quickly,” he says.

Coker College in Hartsville, S.C. uses QR codes on the backs of its business cards for faculty and staff. They send readers directly to the cardholder’s personal directory page, which includes a bio, contact information and a photo.

“We develop special content to go with our QR codes,” says Tracy Syler-Jones, vice chancellor for marketing and communication at Texas Christian Uni-
versity in Fort Worth. “A QR code must lead people to value-added or compelling content. You can’t post a QR code and just send people to a website. If they’re going to take the time to download a reader and scan the code, the reward ought to be something unique or interactive.”

For example, when TCU played in last season’s Rose Bowl, it developed a print ad for the Los Angeles Times, which included a QR code linking readers to video highlighting TCU traditions.

“It was pretty exciting because we actually had people from Los Angeles email to tell us that they’d never even heard of a QR code before, and how great it was to download the video and be able to see TCU online.”

TCU—and many other colleges—often include an explanation of what the code is and how to use it.

“We’re still a few years away from the average consumer even knowing what to do when they see one,” says Casey Paquet, director of web services at Eckerd College in St. Petersburg, FL. “The U.S. has been really slow in adopting this technology. Many of the newest phones are shipping with QR code readers, but the vast majority still requires the user downloading an app to read them.”

And just as users might not always know how to use them, colleges are still figuring out how to measure their results.

“This technology is so new that tracking it, and saying it did or didn’t work, at this point is extremely premature,” says TCU’s Syler-Jones. “We might see just a few dozen people use the code from a mailing sent to a thousand people,” says Roberts. “But the level of engagement is much higher.”

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