

Bar Code Sales Tool Is Failing Campus Test

Elizabeth Olson

IN parts of Asia and Europe, marketers have been using bar code technology to help sell things to people on their cellphones. A consumer can point a phone at something intriguing that bears a signature black-and-white square, then get information about a product or service or an offer to purchase it.

In the United States, the spread of this technology has been slow, in part because cellphones here are not equipped with the necessary software. There have been a few small-scale tests, but judging from the experience of one under way at Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland, the technique is nowhere near ready for widespread use.

A company called Mobile Discovery, based in Reston, Va., is conducting the test at Case in conjunction with the university's engineering school, whose students are helping to manage it. Students and other people affiliated with the university can download software to their cellphones and then can get campus bus arrival times, order magazine subscriptions, enter a sweepstakes sponsored by QVC and get text alerts from USA Today, among other applications.

Twelve Case engineering management students, working in two teams, helped design the trial and are marketing it as part of their new product development course, said Gary E. Wnek, who teaches the course. Students have plastered bus shelters and other locations with posters, which have bar codes imprinted on them that can link, via the Internet, to mobile content like pictures, music and videos.

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But interest in the pilot project, which started Feb. 1 and will run at least through May 15, has been tepid, according to students on campus, in part because of the cellphone fees associated with it. (It costs 2 cents or more to check when the next shuttle bus arrives, for instance.)

Then there was the presentation by the chief executive of Mobile Discovery, David H. Miller, whose slide show in Professor Wnek's class devolved into sexist banter after he showed an image of a topless woman, back to the camera, who had a bar code on the back of her blue jeans.

The photo evoked a few titters, but then a student bantered with Mr. Miller about the technology's use in meeting girls.

"So I take a picture of a broad, you know, a good-looking girl, and her name and phone number are loaded in my phone — I'd pay five bucks a month for that," a male student commented, according to the university's recording of the class in February.

Mr. Miller replied that it might work as a marketing technique to post a woman's picture with a bar code underneath that said, "sign up to a service to get more girls like that."

The classroom exchange gained wider notice when Catherine Vermeersch, a fifth-year engineering student who was in the class, wrote an article of complaint for the campus newspaper, objecting to "slapping bar codes on women as if they were six-packs of Budweiser from the local grocery store."

"I think one reason people in the class didn't react at first was because the ad was sandwiched in a series of ads that were not like that," Ms. Vermeersch said in a telephone interview. "But I was surprised to see something that dehumanizing."

Alison Dietz, news editor of the campus paper, The Observer, said that along with apathy and cost, the classroom episode may have influenced the willingness of some of the university's 4,200 undergraduates to enroll in the trial. "It may make people think more about whether to

take part," said Ms. Dietz, who added that she could not name a student who was participating.

Mr. Miller, formerly of Sprint, would not say how many people had enrolled in the trial, saying that was confidential information, and he would not say how much the pilot project was costing. He said that five phone carriers, including Sprint and AT&T, were cooperating in the trial — but not contributing money for it.

Mr. Miller said that the advertisement with the bar code on the woman's behind came from a French company, Denim Code, whose jeans carry a tag that allows access to a free audio/video recording via mobile phone. Despite the controversy, he said that he would not remove the image from his presentation because he was "trying to create awareness by showing examples from around the world of how bar codes are used."

According to Ms. Dietz of the campus paper, the biggest downside of the Mobile Discovery trial is that the technology is not free. The price for each transaction varies by participating carrier (the others are Verizon Wireless, T-Mobile and Alltel Wireless) and by whether the phone owner has an Internet access plan or pays by the data download.

The posters around campus list a range of carrier fees, and information is also available on the Mobile Discovery Web site, but Mr. Miller said that students had complained they were afraid of running up big cellphone bills.

"This is a real issue not only for students but for everyone around the country," he said. "It's one of the reasons more people around the country are not using mobile Internet. The costs are complex even for a technical person."

The Mobile Discovery trial aims to test possible uses of bar codes before any mass commercialization, which is still years away, in part because there is no standard technology in the United States.

The software being used in the Case pilot project, EZcode, was developed by Scanbuy, a mobile marketing company that is conducting a separate trial involving restaurants and other stores in its home city, San Francisco.

In Japan, code-ready phones are used to retrieve information on everything from street signs to food packaging, but American consumers must download code-reading software to participate.

So far, the most popular use of the technology at Case has been real-time arrival information for campus buses, called Greenies.

"You come up, scan the code, then the site connects to a G.P.S. that tells you when the bus is coming," said Melissa Paradise, 23, one student who has been managing the trial. "The winter's pretty cold here, so why walk when you can wait inside and know when the bus is coming?"

She and others have been staffing information booths to drum up student interest, but she said that participation appeared limited so far. The student newspaper has run a few bar codes, including one for a movie trailer, and Ms. Dietz thinks that interest could increase if links were offered to more campus events, like a coming Springfest where various bands will play.

"Students would be interested in accessing schedules for their appearances, and voting for who they like at Battle of the Bands," Ms. Dietz said.

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QVC, the shopping network, introduced a campaign last month called Make It or Break It, inviting participants in the trial to create codes on mobicodediscovery.com, then post them around campus for others to scan. Each scan gives the student an entry into a QVC sweepstakes, increasing the chance of winning a prize.

QVC also put up banners around campus with bar codes that people could scan to become eligible for daily prizes, like beauty products and a flat-screen television, said Jeffrey Charney, a QVC marketing director. "Bar codes are the next killer app," he said. "We want to be a pioneer because we see everything changing in the next five years."

Ultimately cellphone carriers would like to tap into the 30 million households that Forrester Research estimates have camera phones, and encourage them — and the millions of others who will be upgrading their phones — to add the pricier Internet access service plans necessary for bar code reading.

Ms. Vermeersch, for one, does not share that vision. "Students don't perceive it as practical," she said. "Why would anyone actually pay for advertising?"

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