

Square deals

Operators turn to data-packed QR codes to engage, entertain customers ● BY ALAN J. LIDDLE

If marketing and advertising typically are intended to build relationships between businesses and consumers, then quick response code technology can heighten the engagement of both parties, according to some restaurateurs.

Developed and first popularized years ago in Japan, QR codes, or square bar code-like images, increasingly are being used for marketing in America. Consumers with camera-equipped smart phones can download free software, such as NeoReader, to scan QR codes for instant access to information, such as product details and business card data, or a quick trip to an Internet website with specialized content.

Edina, Minn.-based Parasole Restaurant Holdings, operator of 12 restaurants built around 10 concepts, is one of a growing number of restaurant companies testing QR codes. Parasole last month employed a giant QR code on a billboard to draw smart phone users to an introductory Web video for the ambitious and racy “Lord of the Hot Zones” marketing campaign at Chino Latino in Minneapolis.

Other recent examples include:

- At Taranta in Boston, management confirmed that chef-restaurateur Jose Duarte is working with QR codes on table liners, among other applications, and gaining attention for it. A Boston Herald feature noted that Duarte, as part of an outside celebrity chefs event, used edible squid ink to screen print on a plate a QR code that led curious smart phone users to Taranta’s website, where they found recipes for the dishes on which they were dining.

- Chicago restaurants — including Blackie’s, Jimmy Green’s and Trattoria Caterina — are putting out special offers via giant QR codes placed in public areas by startup Scanfordeals.com. A recent Jimmy Green’s coupon delivered to consumers who phone

Right: Chino Latino restaurant is using QR codes, or square bar code-like images, to support the “Lord of the Hot Zones” campaign, which includes online videos.

Below: At Mesob Ethiopian Restaurant in Montclair, N.J., the codes can be scanned by phones to launch educational videos.



VICKIE SMITH-SICILIANO

scanned a QR code billboard at 739 S. Clark St. entitled holders to a large, two-topping pizza and domestic beer for \$10, or 57-percent off normal prices.

- Since November, Mesob Ethiopian Restaurant in Montclair, N.J., has received “a very positive response from tech-savvy customers” and increased website traffic through the use of QR code cards that link smart phone users to videos on such topics as Ethiopian coffee production and in-house food preparation, according to marketing manager Vickie Smith-Siciliano. She said QR codes in the restaurant are also used to

move patrons to the restaurant’s Facebook page and Fishbowl e-mail marketing program sign-up site, while a QR code on window signage takes interested consumers to OpenTable.com, where they can reserve a table.

For Chino Latino, a 10-year-old concept featuring street foods and exotic cocktails from tropical climes, or ‘hot zones,’ QR codes are serving as the consumer entry point for the promising Lord of the Hot Zones campaign, officials said. They noted that Chino Latino rings up \$6.5 million in sales annually.

“What we’re doing is not about couponing; it is about energy and

experience,” said Kip Clayton, Parasole vice president of business development and marketing.

In part a coming out party for Tuan Nguyen, who took over as executive chef of Chino Latino last fall, the Lord of the Hot Zones campaign, which launched Jan. 7, attempts to draw consumers into Nguyen’s sometimes naughty and bawdy quest to become ‘Lord.’ Among other exploits, an animated likeness of the chef — in video and still imagery — ingests a hallucinatory habanero pepper and encounters a skeletal woman who winds up his wife, all the while following the spiritual guidance of a magic chicken.

Parasole management said the campaign is a collaborative effort by the company’s marketing team and three Minneapolis area ventures: Intercom Agency, a creative content provider; MixMobi, a software-as-a-service and mobile marketing technologies provider; and Sterling Cross Communications, a social media marketing consultancy.

To connect diners to the campaign, Parasole has placed QR codes throughout Chino Latino, including in its restrooms and on flags in its specialty cocktails, including the El Orgazmo. The initial call to action for QR code scanners was a digital coupon for a free order per table of \$7 Habanero Hell Poppers, which gave way Jan. 29 to a 50-percent discount on \$12 El Orgazmos.

T-shirts with QR codes have been

given out to Chino Latino guests and worn by staff. And to really immerse employees and patrons in the QR code phenomenon, Parasole had 1,000, 9-square-inch temporary code tattoos printed up, said Jodi Schoenauer, director of marketing.

The Lord of the Hot Zones campaign is slated to wind down in March, but its characters may resurface again, said Phil Roberts, Parasole’s chief executive.

Sarah Nerison, Parasole’s social media marketing manager, said that in its first 20 days, Lord of the Hot Zones spurred 976 YouTube video views and lured 1,618 visitors to the campaign’s Internet landing page, including 1,390 unique visitors. She said those visitors generated 2,280 page views and 577 clicks on associated outbound links, while spending an average of 1 minute and 54 seconds on the site. Another 219 visitors arrived via a social media connection.

Given that Parasole limited promotion of Lord of the Hot Zones to two uptown billboards, in-restaurant nudges, the Chino Latino website and Twitter and Facebook updates, “the [response] numbers we’re seeing are huge,” Nerison said.

Clayton said Parasole likely will spend \$15,000 to \$25,000 for the Lord of the Hot Zones initiative, but believes it will get more bang for its buck through viral sharing of intentionally attention-grabbing content.

Tim Alevizos of Intercom Agency said QR codes open up new marketing opportunities, because they drive consumers to websites at which “content can change at a moment’s notice.” Such “hit-and-run” content options “will allow us to be cheeky and edgy in a way we really can’t be in billboard or print” because the story arc can move on “before they [critics] can gather their pitchforks,” he added. ■

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