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Print Magazines Quietly Testing Barcodes for Mobile Phones

Billboard, Car and Driver, Wired first in U.S. to experiment.

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Magazine publishers love to talk about their mobile initiatives, but asking users to type even the most basic URLs into their phones has proven to be a challenge. Now, some are offering an alternative: cellphone-readable barcodes.

Billboard, Wired and Car and Driver have been the first American magazines to test publishing the barcodes in their pages.

Billboard was the first in October when it ran two ads for Sprint—a cover-wrapped ad with a bar code linking to the Billboard Top 10 list and a two-page ad with codes linking to music downloads and artist information via Sprint's deck. Wired ran a barcoded Sprint ad in December.

Car and Driver published more than 400 barcodes in its annual Buyer's Guide in late December. Each car in the guide had a corresponding barcode linking to a microsite with pictures, reviews and a link to the full road test, says Olivier Griot, managing director, mobile, at Car and Driver parent company Hachette Filipacchi.

All three have partnered with mobile marketing solutions company Scanbuy. Users download Scanbuy's free software—compatible with 130 different camera phone models—and then use the camera feature as a scanning device, directly linking from the barcodes to the magazines' WAP (wireless access protocol) sites.

At this point, the magazines pay nothing to Scanbuy, according to the company's CEO Jonathan Bulkeley. In the next phase, Bulkeley says the pay structure will likely be a cost-per-click model.

Right now, the goal at Hachette is to educate and build an audience of mobile readers—all of which is "indirectly monetized," says Griot, as users are bounced to the ad-supported WAP sites. The next step is to open the opportunity up for advertisers to link to their sites and for the company to include barcodes in other Hachette titles magazines.

Griot says all signals are positive in this test phase—a "healthy number" of readers have

downloaded the Scanbuy software, and the WAP site has seen "quite a bit of return usage," as users scan multiple bar codes in the guide.

"The magazine is portable, and the cell phone is too," says Griot. "[The platform] helps readers navigate seamlessly between the two."

Bulkeley, naturally, thinks barcodes could be ubiquitous with magazines—and everything else—within the next three-to-five years, appearing in "every magazine ad," revealing a reader's demographics—even his or her location. "It brings advertisers back to print," says Bulkeley. "It makes it measurable. If it becomes ubiquitous, it will change the magazine business forever and, in my opinion, it needs to change." For example, Bulkeley says a reader could scan a pair of shoes in Vogue magazine, find out which retailers in a five mile radius carry the shoes and even pay for them, all via cellphone.

"We think of it today as a communication device. It will become a content access and transaction device," he says.

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