QR codes quench thirst for instant wine information

Wineries can now tell their story beyond the traditional tools of label and packaging. Thanks to the advent of a new technology, consumers can scan a barcode on a wine bottle and gain direct access to a winery to make purchases and source more information. But there’s work to be done before wineries are ‘QR’ ready.

Known as Quick Reader (QR) barcodes, these new online content dissemination tools are the buzzword in the wine industry. New they are, but are they fad or a fabulous conduit to more wine sales?

QR codes are now being displayed on wine labels that can be scanned by smartphones to launch a webpage that gives users immediate access to information about a particular wine. They are also being used on wine lists in restaurants and in promotional campaigns, such as for new vintage releases. These codes are being touted as a communications tool that pre-empts the immediate need for wine knowledge before purchase. Information is literally at your fingertips at the time of sale, or while browsing the shelves and wine lists.

If you own a smart phone (and who doesn’t these days!) and don’t already have a QR reader on your phone, all you need to do is open the ‘App Store’ icon on your mobile phone and search for ‘QR code reader’.

You can download your choice of free applications, point your camera phone at the code, scan the barcode, and will be navigated through to a winery’s website.

The technology was initially created in 1994 by Denso-Wave (a Toyota subsidiary) in order to track vehicle manufacturing parts. However, in recent years the QR two-dimensional barcode has found a wider application in distributing information through mobile phone users. Today, their usage is widespread in Europe, Canada, Chile, USA, New Zealand and Australia. Based in New Zealand’s Marlborough winegrowing region, Fromm Winery has recently implemented this new marketing tool on its wine bottles.

“QR codes are a significant step forward for the NZ wine industry as they allow wineries to communicate with the wine consumer in ways that weren’t possible previously,” Fromm general manager and winemaker William Hoare said.

“This makes the back label come alive and allows people to interact directly with the winery. When accessing the QR code, it should almost make you feel like you are standing in the vineyard with us.”

Get website ready

While wineries around the world are starting to embrace QR codes, Wine Assist’s Dan Traucki says it is imperative
producers set-up their websites so they are compatible for the format required by mobile phones and that work with the QR scan.

"The major expense for producers lies in the creation of a QR-compatible website," Traucki said.

"At present, there aren't many mobile phones around that can scan the images properly and most websites are set-up for wide screens, such as laptops. If a QR code is going to work for your business, your website needs to be compatible with a phone screen, otherwise it will detract rather than attract potential customers.

"These codes can provide consumers with an instant link to your winery and the information you would like to pass onto them. This can range from how the wine is made, where it is available in retail outlets; what the vineyard looks like; or even what sort of dog the winery has. It personalises the experience of that wine for the consumer."

Traucki says wineries can also offer special price offers associated with the website.

"This technology makes it more likely for the consumer to remember the winery—and the wine—which may lead to a repeat purchase, if they liked the wine," he said.

"Thus, the winery can stand out from the crowd on the duopoly supermarket shelf."

Australian digital agency, Reactive, was selected to build the mobile optimised pages that sit behind the codes on all smartphones.

"QR codes are being used worldwide and are starting to gain momentum in New Zealand and Australia, plus mobile websites are growing rapidly due to the convenience they provide," Reactive joint managing director Tim O’Neill said.

"QR codes are cost-effective and can produce immediate consumption outcomes, as they help consumers make the best choice for themselves. There are opportunities to link these codes to social media and promotional campaigns."

Media strategy needed

It sounds simple, but is QR coding all it is cracked up to be? According to US social media consultant, Rick Bakas, from Bakas Media, they are simply a tool that saves users the effort of typing in a URL address on their mobile phone's browser.

"They are free to create and track, and give some metrics about who's scanning the codes. However, there are some limitations," he cautioned.

"Businesses are limited by the number of customers who have a smartphone and an application that can scan barcodes. The number of smartphone users may increase, but of all the potential consumers of your brand, a small percentage will be your QR code users."
The bigger dilemma, he says, lies in a winery’s ability to successfully capture the business that is generated from codes that are scanned.

“Wineries need to have a media strategy in place to engage a community and create the ‘return on attention,’” he said.

“The wineries that do have a solid strategy and team in place will be in a position to nurture the leads through the sales funnel to conclusion. But the sales funnel is now an hourglass. The brands that have built the bottom half of the hourglass will win with QR codes.”

According to Bakas, many wineries don’t have the social media infrastructure in place to capture those interactions.

“There is big potential for QR codes, but it has to be done the right way,” he said.

“Anyone can slap a code onto a product, but what happens after the code is scanned is where I think marketers aren’t ready.”

While wineries around the world are jumping on this technological bandwagon, Bakas warns QR codes could become visual spam.

“QR codes are the gateway drug to the real technology, which is photo recognition. They are ugly and, once everyone starts using them, will become a nuisance rather than a useful tool for engagement,” he said.