



When you think of outdoor interactive media, kiosks spring to mind, but now posters and billboards can be interactive too. Rob McLuhan discovers how new media is making traditional outdoor campaigns work for their money

One of new media's selling points has always been its ability to provide exact information about how many consumers see and act on ads. But being highly measurable is a double-edged sword. When the results are poor, as they often can be with banner clickthroughs, it shows the medium in a bad light.

Some argue that traditional media would be shown to perform just as indifferently if it could be measured to the same degree. Recording every 'hit' of a TV ad or poster is impossible, no matter how sophisticated tracking techniques may be, they point out.

However, that starts to change when advertisements invite a call to action, since their effectiveness can then be judged by the size of the response. Digital media has an increasing role to play in this, combining with offline formats to provide a greater level of accountability through direct response mechanisms.

That's especially the case with posters and other ambient ads on taxis, in washrooms, and on coffee cups and carrier bags. Not everyone wants the hassle and expense of holding a conversation from the street. But if they could text a message or access a WAP site and get specific information the response might be higher.

The theory has been tested successfully by Rtn2Sndr, a wireless marketing agency based in Dublin, which handles campaigns for brands such as Nescafé and Fanta. Partnering with Viacom Outdoor, which handles transport media sales including London Underground and the UK's buses, it recently

ran a poster campaign offering free cinema tickets to commuters who could identify the number by which James Bond is known. This won 2,000 responses within 14 days, five times greater than the level to be expected from a freephone number.

"Accountability is something poster advertisers are not used to, so they love it when they get an effectiveness report at the end of every campaign," says director Donald Douglas. "The traditional new-media metrics of impressions and clickthroughs can be made to apply to them as much as to the web."

One advantage of SMS is it can extend the longevity of outdoor campaigns, Douglas adds. Consumers who receive a text message back will in many cases store it and use it to access a web site as long as five weeks after the posters have come down.

But as anyone who has tried to dial into a WAP site knows, tapping in a long string of letters and digits on a handset is a frustrating process. That barrier is being addressed by Bango.net, a service which provides a numeric equivalent to web addresses in partnership with BT and operators of WAP portals.

For as little as £19 each, a company can register numbers that link directly to complicated web addresses, greatly reducing the time it takes to create a link. "Mobile users find it difficult to enter long strings of characters, and some don't even know how to enter a forward slash," says Anil Malhotra, chief alliances officer at Bango.net. "Dialling a number is second nature."

Responses are channelled to Bango, which provides detailed reports to help the client track return on investment. As well as revealing how many responses each poster achieves, it can also analyse the data to help advertisers target particular segments.

"We know how many times a number is used and what kind of device is used to enter it," Malhotra says. "We can also tell what make of phone it is by the way the browser is behaving. For instance, a Spanish Nokia identifies itself as such through the network, and we can send this information on to the content provider to help it tailor its offering accordingly."

The device is being exploited by service providers to give information as various as travel times, currency exchange rates, shop prices, and football results, with British Airways, Manchester United and Film Four among its users. It is also being used by print publications to track the response to leisure ads.

Consumers in Hull were offered a 'double for the price of a single' by Bacardi Rum in a two-week promotion at the end of November. The campaign ran on JC Decaux's network, with an interactive element handled by Flytxt. The poster invited readers to text 'Est Cuba 1862' to a number. The first 1,000 people who did so received a voucher code to show to bar staff at specific outlets.

Information from the media owner on the known effectiveness of individual poster sites can now be extended with data on the number of SMS messages and redemptions. According to marketing director Maurice Doyle this provides greater accountability than has previously been possible.

"That's why we got involved in the trial of this mechanic and it is something we would do again, as we are always looking for creative ways to communicate with our consumers," he says.

Flytxt has also helped Sony launch a PlayStation game called

t o a c t i o n

The potential for measurability in combining outdoor with new media is also starting to interest advertising and marketing agencies. "Our clients have never had the chance to track the success of their poster campaigns apart from doing market research in the street. So this is a novel experience for them," says Neil Wooding, head of pervasive media at Ogilvy Interactive.

"In the past it has been difficult to justify a poster campaign, but if you link it with a new-media element you get useful data analysis coming through," he continues. "As an agency we like to justify our costs, so if we can back up our claims with actual figures, that has to be good."

Wooding also points out that in integrated campaigns a different phone number can be used for each medium, providing an instant breakdown of effectiveness. Some Ogilvy campaigns have achieved a 13 to 24 per cent response rate with SMS, and some of them have achieved as much as 40 per cent.

Unsurprisingly, outdoor media owners are grasping the opportunities offered by new media with open arms. JC Decaux is starting to introduce an interactive element into its poster campaigns, although it is focusing mainly on the six-sheet format accessible to pedestrians rather than the 48-sheet roadside hoardings which they are less likely to see.

"The campaign opens up a whole new market for advertisers as a direct response medium," says Pamir Gelenbe, director of Flytxt, which is handling the interactive side for JC Decaux. "The mixture of texting and outdoor posters is a perfect match."

One recent poster campaign was for Bacardi Rum, offering discounts via mobile phones.

Jak and Dexter through a treasure hunt promotion. Inserts showing maps of London, Manchester, and other UK cities were placed in Playstation magazines, with details on areas such as London's Soho. Readers were encouraged to visit these locations and look for flyposters that advertised the game, each containing either a red, blue or green clue word. After collecting all three they would text the codes to compete for prizes such as a wide screen TV, DVD, and Playstation 2.

Measuring the effect of posters is just one issue: many advertisers can not even be sure they have been properly put up in all the right places. Now outdoor specialist The More Group is launching a new proof-of-posting system called Postaweb that will enable agencies and advertisers to see a picture library of their billboards.

A digital photograph is taken immediately after each poster has been put up, incorporating the time and date. Images are placed on a web site, where the advertiser can check that every location ordered has in fact been fulfilled. The method is being tried out with a campaign for Lavazza coffee, which is advertising on giant billboard hoardings in London.

"With the technology available today it's surprising that something like this hasn't been developed sooner," comments Oliver Preston, international media manager at AMS Media Group, which is handling the campaign.

As everyone involved in this development agrees, it is still early days, and this particular combination of new and traditional media has yet to prove itself. But few doubt the promise of greater levels of measurability, and the excitement is palpable.

"The SMS channel will be incredibly valuable," says Adam Butterworth, sales director of Adshel at the More Group. "As with all technologies, it will grow as the cost comes down and the knowledge of how useful it is starts to spread." □



Lavazza coffee is trying out the digital camera service which checks that posters have actually gone up



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