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Contact: Patricia Licata
202-268-2783
patricia.licata@usps.gov
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Direct Mail With Mobile Technologies Is Changing the Way People Shop This Holiday Season

WASHINGTON — Direct mail remains a medium of choice for holiday shoppers and marketers alike. And enhanced with mobile and web technologies like QR codes, personalized URLs and augmented reality, it's engaging consumers like never before.

"Long lauded for its ability to provide consumers with personalized and tangible information about products, promotions and sales, today's direct mail, combined with Web technologies and smartphone apps, is offering holiday shoppers a media-rich experience that connects with them on a deeper, more personal level," said Gary Reblin, vice president, Domestic Products, U.S. Postal Service. "Direct mail that includes personalized QR codes or personalized URLs, which link consumers to individualized discounts and special invites — usually with their names — tells recipients that the retailer knows who they are and what they want."

Direct mail enhanced with augmented reality (AR) technology allows shoppers to view products from all angles or interact with 3D-embedded videos and animations. "People love the idea of being able to demo a product before they make a purchase, and now they don't have to leave home to do it," said Reblin.

Circulars and catalogs always have motivated customers to get to the store, and now they are driving consumers online to make purchases. According to Reblin, an increasing number of mobile-enabled circulars and catalogs will be the launching point for many holiday purchases this season. "More and more retailers are creating mobile-optimized sites for their direct mail campaigns to allow their customers to shop whenever and wherever they are."

Direct mail also can do double duty. Retailers now are incorporating digital coupons — which can be saved on a mobile device — into their hard copy mail. If a consumer prefers to visit a brick and mortar location to purchase a product and realizes on the way that a coupon was left at home, there's no need to turn around; a digital coupon can be downloaded from the mail when it's received.

Today, 34 percent of smartphone users have made a purchase using a mobile phone compared to 19 percent in 2011 (source: DC Financial Insights, 2012). That number will rise as technology continues to evolve.

One technology gaining traction is image recognition (IR), which allows a consumer with a smartphone to scan a picture of a shirt in a catalog and be connected immediately to mobile shopping features. Also on the rise are smartphones enabled with near field communications (NFC), allowing the user to simply tap the device on a printed page to make a purchase — without an app.

“As more and more consumers become aware of mobile technologies, use will grow and shopping from a catalog and a smartphone will become as commonplace as driving to a store is today,” said Reblin.

“Although consumers are becoming familiar with this technology, one thing I still recommend to retailers is to devote some of their direct mail real estate to consumer tips on downloading apps and barcode readers,” added Reblin. “Customers will appreciate the information, and the effort will help build brand loyalty.”

Basic instructions for downloading QR codes on smartphones:

1. Make sure your smartphone is Web-enabled (one that can access the Internet and has a camera function.)
2. Go to your phone’s “app store” and search for “QR” or “QR Readers.” Depending on the phone, there are usually several available. Look for the “star ratings” and read the reviews to decide which one is best for your phone.
3. Once you download a QR reader, open it and scan a QR code. It may take one or two tries to get the hang of it.

The Postal Service receives no tax dollars for operating expenses and relies on the sale of postage, products and services to fund its operations.

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