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> Mobile Coupon Trend Beginning to Pick Up Speed

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Jun 1, 2009 12:00 PM, By DAVID ORGEL Editor-in-Chief david.orgel@penton.com

Observers of retail technology are always searching for the next innovations that will transform how companies do business.



Some believe that mobile marketing falls into this category. This digital trend has been anticipated for some time and is just now picking up speed with new retail initiatives. It holds the promise of reaching customers in new ways, including with coupons, based on the fact that mobile phones with texting and Internet capabilities have become ubiquitous.

It's too early to tell how mobile technology will rank on the retail-impact meter. At this point the influence is relatively small but growing through a series of milestones around in-store tests, particularly on the coupon front.

[The latest experiment is profiled in this week's SN](#). Unilever and ShopRite are conducting a program in conjunction with mobile marketing firm Samplesaint, Chicago.

In this initiative, consumers use their cell phones to select coupons with rich images for a range of Unilever products, and the coupons are scanned at the front end directly from shoppers' phones. The on-phone scanning capability is what makes this experiment different. ShopRite is limiting the test to a single New Jersey store whose customers are relatively young and affluent professionals likely to have cell phones capable of texting and connecting to the Internet.

It wasn't long ago that we heard about another milestone. About a year ago Kroger Co. tested a program with Cellfire, San Jose, Calif., that enabled shoppers to receive coupons on their cell phones from a range of CPG manufacturers. After shoppers made their choices the information was sent directly to their loyalty card accounts, and savings were given at the checkout. Cellfire said Kroger's test represented the first time a company achieved a direct mobile-phone-to-POS integration.

Other vendors, including Shortcuts.com, are making strides with their own mobile coupon efforts.

Look for another possible milestone down the road: future cell phones may enable shoppers to scan and bag products even as they examine mobile promotions.

How will we know if mobile marketing and couponing meets its promise? The rates of consumer sign-ups and usage will be key indicators.

Another important factor will be the ability of mobile coupons to support both supplier and retailer needs. The Unilever-ShopRite venture makes good progress on this front by offering not only coupons from the supplier, but also private label ones from the retailer.

Another challenge ahead is building an infrastructure at retail, which varies by program, said John Morgan, executive director of the Association of Coupon Professionals.

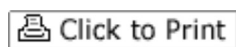
◆ But the bottom line is consumers want the convenience of getting offers on their cell phones, so marketers and vendors must meet that challenge, ◆ he said.

Ultimately success will also hinge on whether trading partners are able to reach consumers that don't respond to traditional marketing approaches. That's a crucial goal for supermarkets at a time when they're trying to prove their relevance to younger generations.

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