Digital business cards move networking off paper

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With more than 40,000 direct professional contacts on LinkedIn, Steven Burda wants to ensure he always has up-to-date information to maintain his network. He couldn't resist signing up for a digital business card, where users' information is constantly updated and spread across multiple platforms. That means no more outdated phone numbers or lost business cards.

"The keyword here is real time," Burda said. "If I go to a networking event and exchange business cards ... in a month from now that person might switch jobs, switch positions, leave the company altogether, go on a special assignment. His contact information might change."

Burda uses BusinessCard2, one of many digital business cards where users can deliver their information to contacts through mobile technologies across smart phones, text messages or emails directly to an online address book. Users can choose which information they want to include, whether it's their LinkedIn username or cell phone number, and never worry about losing or forgetting someone's contact information.

Often, it's unnecessary for the person on the other end to use the same program as long as they have a smart phone, or with BusinessCard2, which can post information as ads on Web sites, access to the Internet.

According to a survey by business BPM Forum, a performance management group, about 80 percent of leads are typically lost, ignored or discarded, which hurts revenue growth. In BPM's study "Gauging the

Cost of What's Lost," 73 percent of respondents say their company has no process for digging up lost business leads.

Still, VistaPrint Ltd., a small-business focused printing company, saw a 24 percent increase in customers compared to the year-ago period.

"We're seeing a lot of crossover between physical and digital," said VistaPrint Chief Marketing Officer Trynka Shineman. "I don't see business cards going away; I think the electronic forms will be a complement."

She also stressed the personal aspect of handing over a business card, and cited business-card growth despite new media applications.

"On the small-business side, I think it'd be harder for someone to subscribe or link to your plumber," she said.

Yet Steve Ennen, managing director of University of Pennsylvania's The Wharton Interactive Media Initiative, said these digital business cards will survive and move forward.

"There's a real world, practical application for it, but I do think we're a bit ahead of the curve now because it's not something we're used to," he said. "We have decades and centuries of learned behavior to overcome."

Hundreds of thousands of people have opted to pass on paper and move to digital, especially in the real estate and entertainment industries that bank on solid networking, digital-business-card-company leaders said.

Swapping electronically comes in a range of forms and services, but entering information and starting up is usually free. Many companies have short codes that people use to translate their information, typically through a [text message](#) or email. For example, with Contxts, texting the

code 50500 to a contact will send your information digitally and update on the receiver's phone address book.

Some companies, such as DubMeNow, work across platforms on iPhones, BlackBerrys, Windows Mobiles and Androids as opposed to iPhone- or BlackBerry-specific applications for digital data exchange.

Chris Hopkinson, Dub's head of business development and marketing, said the company found the biggest challenge when swapping contact information boiled down to actually entering data.

Jared Hendler, chief investment officer for the Indian billionaire Bajaj family, uses Dub because people pitch different investments to him daily and he has to follow up. Instead of throwing a card in a drawer or searching through a pile of papers, Hendler, 32, said he "shoots them a Dub (and) they hit me back ... it automatically updates in my Blackberry."

The person on the receiving end doesn't have to have a Dub account -- the information is updated to his or her digital address book -- though Hendler said contacts tend to set one up after.

And Eric Schwartz, who studies interactive media at the University of Pennsylvania's Wharton School, said it's a myth that business cards work effectively.

"The worst part about simply giving people my paper business card or dropping someone my number or business address is 'Oh thanks, I'll contact you soon,' and never hearing from them," said Schwartz, who uses Dropcard, another digital business card company.

Many companies bridge partnerships or string together relationships with smart-phone companies or social networking sites to optimize their use.

Dub has affiliated partnerships with Research in Motion's Blackberry and LinkedIn.

Other companies, such as Dropcard, work with Fortune 500 companies to eventually generate revenue, but haven't turned away general users. Dropcard has paid contracts with real estate, fabrics, banking and hospitality companies that use its beta site and remain anonymous to have an edge on competitors, said Dropcard President Paul DeJoe.

BusinessCard2, which has thousands of users internationally, is in talks with Best Buy. The card works with a single control panel to update or change information, and users can opt to pay between 10 cents and $5 based on how often others interact with their information or contact them after it is delivered as an ad on targeted high-traffic Web sites, said founder Lief Larson.

Companies like Contxts focus solely on text messaging. The company has upwards of 100,000 users, all sprouting from a test run in the Austin, Texas South by Southwest music festival. Contxts banks on its viral spread, especially through real estate and music and entertainment, "where the sharing of contact information becomes paramount," said Contxts adviser Micah Baldwin.

But these digital-business-card companies do share one priority: privacy.

All stressed specific security and privacy agreements with users' information, which is stored on those companies' servers or secured on retrievable databases. In fact, most companies could only pass along users' names and contact information based on those who opted to fill out feedback forms.

"Data is secure, (there's) no spam and we're not selling to any third parties," Dub's Hopkins said.

While companies insisted they wouldn't be closing any time soon, BusinessCard2's Larson said he would ensure there's a "full-on information pact" to customers if any data would be retained. If the company would get acquired, Larson said they would do as much as possible to keep with current protection policies.

And as these digital business cards spread, users are hitched. Hopkins said his company's user base almost doubles every week.

"More people...are becoming so comfortable with the idea of the application on their phone and using their phone for more than emails and calls and texts," he said. "It's on the verge of exploding over the next 12 months."

Before Hendler started using Dub, he estimated 3,000 of his 4,000 contacts had outdated information, where emails could have bounced back or phone numbers were useless.

"This is the kind of technology where it takes a little investment the day you get it set up, download and input your data," he said. "But once you do that initial set up, it's all gravy."

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