Episode Book

EPISODE #5472

Can Anyone Scan a QR Code From a Landing Plane?

PUBLISHED	22 September 2026 at 19:11 UTC
DURATION	18:26
LISTEN	myweirdprompts.com/episode/qr-code-airplane-banner-roi/
HOSTS	Corn, Herman, Hilbert
SCRIPT MODEL	deepseek-flash
VOICES	chatterbox-regular (chatterbox-local)
PIPELINE	V5.2
BOOK GENERATED	19 October 2026 at 17:36 UTC

SYNOPSIS

A friend of the show wants to launch a printing business in New York, and his marketing plan involves an airplane towing a QR code banner along the approach path into the airport. We take the idea seriously enough to ask the obvious questions: can a passenger actually scan a code while landing, what are the legal limits around airports and highways, and where does physical advertising in extraordinary places actually pay off? Along the way we get into QR code sizing math, motion blur at a hundred miles an hour, the landowner problem, and why the train might be the only location that works.

TRANSCRIPT



Corn

Okay. So a friend of Daniel's is trying to get a printing business off the ground in New York, and he asked Daniel for zany marketing ideas.



Herman

Zany.



Corn

Zany. That's the word on the tin. And Daniel, being Daniel, wrote back a whole thing. He starts with the honest answer, which is that in-person meetups and a QR code pointing at your site is still the most genuine way to connect with people. Then he immediately abandons that and starts specing out an airplane.



Herman

Of course he does.



Corn

The headline idea is a banner towed behind a plane. Not over a stadium, over the approach path into an airport. The banner reads, and I'm quoting him here, "Don't Forget To Frame Your Visit!" which he himself flags as a totally lame slogan, and then a QR code. The pitch is that visitors arriving in New York might want a tasteful supplier of frames for their moments in the city.



Herman

A captive audience at the exact moment of arrival.



Corn

That's the theory. And then he starts poking holes in his own idea, which is the most Daniel part of the whole thing. Can a passenger actually scan a code while landing? Aren't they in airplane mode? What if there's in-flight wi-fi? What's the legal height limit before you're endangering navigation? And where do you even find a cooperative landowner whose property sits close enough to the perimeter fence to make this work?



Herman

All reasonable questions. All of them fatal.



Corn

He knows. He also floats the highway version, then immediately notes that drivers shouldn't be on their phones, and lands on the train as probably the sensible one, because train passengers are sitting there with nothing to do and a phone in each hand. And then the actual ask. He wants us to rate the ideas, suggest better ones, and look at the return on investment for physical advertising in extraordinary places.



Herman

So the lame slogan is the least of our problems.



Corn

The slogan is a rounding error. Where do you want to start?



Herman

With the thing underneath the bit, because I think there are two different questions tangled up in there. One is the genuine tactic, meetups plus a QR code, which works and which Daniel already knows works. The other is the zany tactic, banners and airport signs, which is a completely different category of spend. And the interesting part isn't either one on its own. It's the gap between them.



Corn

Say more about the gap.



Herman

Digital advertising hands you a dashboard. You spend a thousand dollars, you get a number back, and the number feels like truth even when it's measuring something that doesn't matter. Physical advertising hands you a shrug. You spend a thousand dollars and you get... a feeling. And that asymmetry is why physical placements feel either romantic or stupid depending on your mood.



Corn

And the ridiculous ones especially. Nobody commissions an airplane banner because they think it'll beat their search spend.



Herman

Right. They commission it because it's a story. Which is a real thing to buy, it's just not the same thing as customers.



Corn

So the arc here. First the mechanics, can a QR code even be scanned from a landing plane. Then the legal geography, airports and highways. Then the one location that actually works, which is the train. Then the ROI question. Then a verdict on Daniel's ideas, because he asked for one.



Herman

And the theme running through all of it. The more ridiculous the placement, the more the ROI conversation stops being about conversion and starts being about attention and story. Which isn't automatically a failure. It's just a different product.



Corn

Okay. Start with the code. Can it be scanned?



Herman

So large-format QR printing is a real industry. You see it in conference rooms, on factory floors, in warehouses where someone needs to scan a code from thirty feet away while holding a clipboard. And the principle is simple enough. A QR code is a grid of modules, little black and white squares, and to scan it your camera has to resolve each individual module as a distinct thing.



Corn

So the modules have to be big enough to see.



Herman

Big enough to see, and big enough that the camera's autofocus and the sensor can separate them. The rule of thumb people use is that your scanning distance is roughly ten times the width of the code. So a one-foot code scans from about ten feet. A ten-foot code scans from about a hundred feet. If you want to scan from a thousand feet, you're talking about a code a hundred feet across.



Corn

A hundred feet of QR code.



Herman

Printed on a banner. Towed behind a Cessna. And here's where it falls apart, because the banner is moving. It's moving at maybe a hundred miles an hour relative to the person looking at it. Even if the code were physically large enough, you've got motion blur, you've got the angle, you've got the fact that the passenger is looking out a scratched oval window at a thing that's already past them.



Corn

So the answer is no.



Herman

The answer is no, not during approach. And there's a second problem, which is that passengers aren't doing that anyway. During landing, people are either gripping the armrest or filming the window. Nobody's opening a scanner app at eight hundred feet.



Corn

But Daniel actually lands on the version that might work, which is the person filming the landing.



Herman

That's the only realistic path, and it's a weird one. Someone's filming out the window, your code flashes past in three frames of video, and then... maybe, weeks later, they're going through their camera roll and they remember the printing place. That's not a conversion funnel. That's a lottery ticket with extra steps.



Corn

Delayed conversion. Which is a real thing in advertising, it's just very hard to attribute.



Herman

Impossible to attribute. You'd never know it worked. You'd just have a vague sense that maybe someone somewhere saw it.



Corn

So scenario one is dead. Scenario two, the ground-readable version. Signage at a height where it can be read from the ground near the airport.



Herman

This is the one that could actually work, and it collides with everything. First, height. Airports have approach surfaces, which are protected volumes of airspace that slope down toward the runway. Anything tall enough to be interesting is tall enough to be a problem. You're not putting a fifty-foot sign under a final approach path, full stop.



Corn

Even though there are signs there already.



Herman

There are, but they're low, they're regulated, and they've been through a process. You can't just buy a field and erect a billboard. Second problem, the landowner. You need someone whose property sits close enough to the perimeter fence that arriving passengers can see it, but far enough that you're not inside the security perimeter, and who is willing to have a giant QR code on their land. That's a very specific person, and you have to find them.



Corn

And then convince them.



Herman

And then convince them, and then get whatever local sign permits you need, and then hope the airport authority doesn't object, because they will have opinions. This is the part of Daniel's idea that's interesting, because it's not a printing problem. It's a real estate and regulatory problem wearing a printing costume.



Corn

So the code can be big enough. The question is whether you're allowed to put it there.



Herman

And the answer is: somewhere, maybe, if you're patient and you find the right field. But it's not a marketing plan. It's a land acquisition strategy with a QR code attached.



Corn

Which brings us to the highway, where the problem is simpler and more fatal.



Herman

The highway problem is that your audience is legally and physically unable to scan. Drivers shouldn't be on their phones. That's not a guideline, that's the law in most places, and it exists because people die. So a highway QR code is a billboard pretending to be a call to action. It's asking for a behavior that the setting forbids.



Corn

It's a QR code that says "please do not scan me."



Herman

Which is a strange thing to spend money on. And you see this all the time. QR codes on the sides of buses, on highway billboards, on the back of trucks. Nobody's scanning those. They're there because somebody in a meeting said "we should put a QR code on it" and nobody in the room had the nerve to ask who's going to scan it.



Corn

So the airport is a legal maze and the highway is a safety problem. The train is where this starts to make sense.



Herman

The train is the only one of Daniel's three locations where the scan behavior is actually plausible. Passengers are seated. They're not operating anything. They've got a phone in their hand, they've got forty minutes of nothing to do, and they're already looking at their phone. A code on a platform wall or across the track is readable at a distance you can



Herman (continued)

actually achieve with normal printing.



Corn

And it's stationary.



Herman

Stationary, well-lit, and you're looking at it for a while. The train is the sensible answer, and Daniel got there himself by the end of the paragraph, which is why I think he already knows the airport thing is a bit.



Corn

Okay, so the train works. But works compared to what? Let's talk about what any of this is actually worth.



Herman

So the ROI question for physical advertising in extraordinary places is hard, and it's hard for a structural reason. There's no click. There's no impression count you'd trust. If you tow a banner over a beach, how many people saw it? Nobody knows. You could estimate, but the estimate is a guess dressed as a number.



Corn

And the CPM dashboard, by contrast, is a number dressed as truth.



Herman

Which is its own problem. CPM measures cost per thousand impressions, and an impression is a thing that appeared on a screen. It doesn't tell you whether anyone looked, whether anyone remembered, whether anyone cared. So you've got two failure modes. Digital gives you a precise number that might be measuring nothing. Physical gives you no number that might be measuring something real.



Corn

Neither is strictly better.



Herman

They answer different questions. Digital answers "did this get in front of people." Physical answers "did this become part of the story people tell about you." And if you're a new printing business in New York, the second question is worth something, because nobody knows you exist.



Corn

So the airplane banner is brand spend.



Herman

The airplane banner is brand spend, and it should be budgeted as brand spend. Daniel's instinct here is right, and he said it himself. He'd do it because it's transparently ridiculous. Everyone involved knows it's ridiculous. The pilot knows, the guy on the ground loading the banner knows, and the people on the beach know. And there's something honest about that.



Corn

Honest how?



Herman

Because a business that commissions an airplane banner is signaling something about its personality. It's saying, we're the kind of company that does this. That's a real signal. It's just not a performance channel. If you spend ten thousand dollars on a banner and you expect ten thousand dollars of customers back, you're going to be disappointed. If you spend ten thousand dollars on a banner because you want people to remember your name and you've got the money, that's a legitimate purchase.



Corn

It's buying a story.



Herman

And stories are worth something. They're just not worth the same something as customers.



Corn

Now, the airport approach thing has a history. This isn't a new idea.



Herman

It's an old idea. Advertising and protests aimed at approach paths near international airports go back decades. There's a reason for it. The audience is enormous, they're arriving with fresh eyes, and for a few minutes they're a captive audience looking out a window at the ground. So people have tried to reach them.



Corn

What kinds of people?



Herman

Political campaigns, mostly. Protest groups. The occasional local business. And the reason it keeps getting attempted despite the constraints is that the audience is valuable. Arriving visitors are a natural high-volume audience for exactly the kind of business Daniel's friend is running. Someone lands in New York, they've got a week of sightseeing ahead of them, and at some point they're going to want a nice print of the photo they took at the top of the Rockefeller Center.



Corn

So the instinct is right.



Herman

The instinct is completely right. The question is whether the placement can reach them at a moment when they're receptive. And the honest answer is that the receptive moment isn't during landing. It's three days later, in a hotel room, when they're thinking about what to do with the photos. Which points back to the train, and to in-person touchpoints, and away from banners.



Corn

Okay. He asked us to rate the ideas, so let's rate them. Honestly.



Herman

Honestly. The airplane banner is a fun brand stunt with near-zero direct ROI. Rate it as entertainment, not as marketing. The airport-approach QR is a great thought experiment with a narrow legal window and a delayed, unattributable conversion path. It's clever and it probably doesn't work. The train-line QR is the only one of the three with a plausible conversion path, and it's the one he almost talked himself out of.



Corn

And the meetup plus QR code thing, which he opened with and then abandoned.



Herman

That's the one that actually builds a business. It's also the least interesting to think about, which is why he abandoned it. Showing up at a local event with a laptop and a QR code that goes to your site is boring. It works, but it's boring. And boring things don't get written up as prompts.



Corn

The rating is: banner, fun but pointless. Airport, clever but illegal. Train, actually fine. Meetups, the actual answer.



Herman

That's the rating. And I want to be fair to the airport idea, because it's the most interesting one. It's just interesting as a puzzle, not as a plan.



Corn

What would you actually do, if it were your friend's business?



Herman

I'd tell him to spend the banner money on a hundred coffees. Find the tourist-heavy neighborhoods, find the places where people are already thinking about their photos, and be there in person. That's the unglamorous answer and it's the right one.



Corn

Okay, so the train works. But works compared to what? Let's talk about what any of this is actually worth.



Herman

We just did that.



Corn

I know. I wanted to say the line.



Hilbert

I agree with you.



Corn

The banner business is real.



Hilbert

It's real and it's mostly local. I spent a summer out of a regional airfield loading those things. Not flying them. Loading them. You show up at six in the morning, you unroll the banner on the grass, you check the hook, you check the letters, and you listen to the pilot complain about the wind. That was the job.



Herman

And the clients?



Hilbert

Car dealerships. Radio stations. The occasional divorce attorney. That's the whole market. Local businesses with a budget and a reason to be seen. And the ones who rebook are the ones who measure it by whether people mentioned it. Not whether people converted. Whether somebody said, hey, I saw your banner.



Corn

They know it doesn't convert.



Hilbert

They know. They just don't care, because that's not what they bought. They bought the mention. And the mention is worth something to a car dealership, because the next time somebody's driving past the lot, they've heard the name.



Herman

That's the whole brand spend argument, from the loading side.



Hilbert

It's what it looks like from the ground, anyway. The hardest part wasn't the flying. It was the letters. The banner has to be legible from the ground at the angle people actually look up, which is steeper than you'd think. And half the clients wanted too many words. They'd send over a message with the phone number and the address and the tagline and the name of the owner's wife, and you'd put it all on the banner, and then you'd fly it and nobody could read any of it.



Corn

The whole flight was wasted.



Hilbert

The whole flight was wasted. You'd tell them, and they'd do it again the next month. Same message. Same result. It's not a lesson anybody learns, because the person paying for the banner isn't the person reading it.



Herman

That's the same problem as Daniel's slogan.



Hilbert

It's the same problem as Daniel's slogan. Too many words, no clear thing to do. And it's the same problem as the QR code, if the code's too small to scan. You've done the hard part, you've got the plane in the air, and then the message doesn't land. I've seen it a hundred times.



Corn

So what actually works?



Hilbert

Repeat local clients and word of mouth. That's the whole business. A car dealership that rebooks every summer because people keep mentioning it. A radio station that does it for a promotion. Nobody's getting rich, but nobody's going broke either.



Herman

Which is, uncomfortably, the same in-person marketing Daniel started with.



Hilbert

It's the same thing. You show up, people see you, they remember you. That's the whole game. The banner is just a very loud way of showing up.



Corn

I have to go. I've got something to collect from a place that closes in twenty minutes, and I'm not sure I'm going to make it.



Herman

Okay.



Corn

The question I keep coming back to is why we reach for the airplane banner at all. If the most effective tactic is the least weird one, if showing up in person with a QR code beats every stunt we've talked about, then the banner isn't marketing. It's a story we tell about ourselves.



Herman

Stories are worth something. Just not the same something as customers.



Corn

Which leaves you with the image of a plane over a beach, a banner flapping behind it, slightly annoying people who are just trying to swim, and a QR code that nobody scans. And the question of whether that's a failure or the whole point.



Herman

Thanks as always to our producer, Hilbert Flumingtop.



Corn

This has been My Weird Prompts. If you've got a minute, a review helps other people find the show.



Herman

We'll be back soon.