

Optimizing PDFs for the Web

“Your site's visitors will thank you for it.”

by Pete Choppin

One of my side projects is Web design and, inevitably, I must deal with PDF documents on the Web. Occasionally this involves the discussion of the pros and cons of providing documents in PDF format on the Web versus, say HTML forms, and what impact this may have on the Web visitor.

Using a PDF file or two is not necessarily a Web design sin. In fact, there are points to defend the use of a PDF file. So I thought it might be beneficial to highlight the pros and cons of using PDF files in Web site content.

I apologize that this comes from the perspective of a Web designer, but that's much of my background.

PDF Basics

If you are not familiar with a PDF file, this is a file format, similar to a Word document, that saves an electronic version of a document in a format suitable for printing. This file format should *not* be used for online presentation. It should be used only if you want to offer your visitors content for them to print and read offline.

So why is PDF not suitable for presentation? For several reasons:

- First of all, a PDF is designed for print. It is usually formatted to the size of a printed 8 ½ x 11-inch paper page and not to the size of a screen. This makes it difficult to read online, as the user needs to spend more time scrolling through the content as they read. Many PDF documents are converted from large paper format, such as books, and as such may be long and boring to read in an online environment.
- Browser loading times are longer. Since the PDF file is usually one large chunk of content, it requires extra time to download the entire document before the user can begin to scroll through it. This interrupts the flow of navigation that the user is used to experiencing on the Web site as a whole.
- The user experience is disrupted. A PDF file is merely an independent content. It comes equipped with its own set of commands for viewing and printing. These are separate from the standard commands of the Web browser or those built into the Web page. Hence, it acts like content that is not really a part of the overall site, and the user's experience is disrupted when entering the PDF reader application. The user experience becomes interrupted and separated from the Web site.
- PDF files use non-standard navigation. Working through a PDF file has gotten simpler over the years, but the navigation methods are still very different from Web site navigation or browser navigation. Searching is performed by indexing, pagination is based on the printed page, and pages are broken instead of using the continuous page or the linked Web page of the browser.

PDF files can be beneficial; however, there are a few things you should do if you are putting information in PDF form on the Web to help make it more Web friendly, and your visitors will thank you for it.

Design Your PDFs Well

Small PDFs are Good PDFs

If you're creating a PDF for your visitors to read online, you should make it small, no more than 30-40KB. Most browsers need to download the full PDF before they can render it, so anything larger will take a long time to download, and your visitors might just hit the Back button and leave rather than wait for it.

Optimize PDF Images

Just like with Web pages, PDFs that have images in them should use images that are optimized for the Web. If you don't optimize the images, the PDF will be much larger and thus slower to download.

Practice Good Web Writing in Your PDF Files

Just because the content is in a PDF doesn't mean you can forgo good writing. And if the document is intended to be read in Acrobat Reader or some other online device, then the same rules for Web writing apply to your PDF. If the PDF is intended to be printed, then you can write for a print audience, but bear in mind that some people will still want to read your PDF online, if only to save paper.

Include Navigation in the PDF

While most readers include some way to see an overview of the PDF document, if you include a clickable table of contents, forward and back buttons, and other navigation you'll have a PDF that is much easier to use. If you make that navigation similar to your site navigation, you'll maintain consistency, which is good design practice.

Design Your Site to Handle the PDFs

Always Indicate a PDF Link

Don't expect visitors to look at the link location before they click—tell them up front that the link they are about to click is a PDF. Even when the browser opens a PDF inside the Web browser window, it can be a jarring experience for visitors. Usually the PDF is in a different design style from the Web site and this can confuse people. Letting them know they're going to open a PDF is just courteous. And then they can right-click to download and print the PDF if they want to.

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