PDF: No Longer Just for Print

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The fact that PDF (portable document format) files are printable is the tip of the iceberg with respect to uses, said Scott Hamilton. He defined PDF as an object database, or "a place for your stuff". PDF is a container for information, like a book, that serves as a tool for both content presentation and distribution.

Every piece of a PDF file is an object or item that has X and Y coordinates, embedded fonts (so that someone else who opens the PDF file sees what you see), job specifications, and tags. PDF is platform-independent: Users always see exactly what the publisher designed no matter what operating system they use (Mac, Windows, or Linux) and no matter how their preferences are set up. PDF files are also compact, and thus PDF file sizes are smaller than those of many other formats.

PDF can add value to content in a variety of ways. First, it can provide security by means of encryption technology developed by Adobe. Second, navigational tools and bookmarks can be added for ease of navigation within the document, and interdocument links can be inserted so that users can link to, for example, a related graphic and zoom in. Third, Web hyperlinks can be added. Fourth, PDF supports audio and video. Fifth, indexes can be built in PDF files. Sixth, PDF allows for interactivity: Form fields can be used to create buttons—such as forward, back, close, and home—that will practically duplicate the look of Web intranet buttons for users unfamiliar with the standard Adobe Acrobat commands. Seventh, PDF supports the alphabets and character sets of a growing list of languages.

Hamilton went on to describe some Adobe products that further enhance the utility of PDF for publishers. The Adobe Document Server (ADS) eliminates the need for Adobe Acrobat Reader software for viewing PDF files. With ADS, publishers "serve" PDF files to users one page at a time as a graphic, via the user's Internet browser; the user does not actually download the file. The ADS technology also allows publishers to watermark documents and prevent users from saving or printing files without permission; documents can be configured in such a way that even a screen dump from the user's Web browser will not produce a satisfactory result. Hamilton suggested that participants think of ADS as a store window: You can look through the window at Tiffany's all day long, but the jewelry store owners will not let you reach through the window and grab something.

PDF Merchant software provides 128-bit encryption for each line of text. The rights management element of this software package allows publishers to embed copyright information in PDF files via metatags after the PDF file has been produced. Clients who have Adobe Acrobat Reader can use the Web Buy plug-in to download electronic content, then pay for the rights to read the text through a lock-and-key system in PDF Merchant. The publisher, or a retailer, supplies an electronic key to unlock documents that the client has requested.

Hamilton noted that PDF files can be used for internal mark-up and annotation, which makes this format particularly useful for collaborative efforts. For example, PDF proofs can be routed by e-mail through an editorial department for serial annotation by the production editor, managing editor, and editorial assistant. An alternative is a process Hamilton called blasting: A PDF file can be sent to everyone at once, and then the comments can be merged and appended at the end of the file to allow easy tracking of "who did what". He noted that PDF proofs can also be e-mailed instantaneously to authors, saving courier costs.

Hamilton concluded by saying that PDF is like bread: You can use it to make a ham sandwich, a turkey sandwich, toast. . . . It's not a whole meal in itself; it's a tool.