

should use a PDF.">



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### 5 Reasons Not to Use PDFs Communication News, December 2009

By: *Jacqui Cook*

Although they're easy for you to post, PDFs can give your website's visitors a major pain. One usability expert calls PDFs "the monster from the Black Lagoon." Find out why, and also find out when you *should* use a PDF.

If your job involves adding content to your association's website, chances are you've been tempted to take your pile of documents, convert them to PDFs, and upload them to your site. Just post the file name and the familiar PDF logo and you're set. Right?

*Wrong!* Most of the time, posting PDFs is *not* the way to go. It may simplify your job in the short term, but it will probably turn away a portion of your site's visitors—among them your current and potential members. The best way to put your printed material on your website is to take the time to convert it into HTML content specifically written for the web.

Still not convinced? Consider this withering description from web usability expert Jakob Nielsen in his [Alertbox newsletter](#): "PDF is the monster from the Black Lagoon. It puts its clammy hands all over people with a cruel grip that doesn't let go."

No association wants a monster on its website. So the next time you consider posting a document as a PDF, here are five reasons to think again:

#### 1. No Reader, No Reading.

PDF stands for Portable Document Format, which was created by Adobe Systems in 1993 (a century ago in internet years) as a means for document exchange. PDFs are made with Adobe software and in general must be read with Adobe's Acrobat Reader. There are a few alternative readers, but the vast majority of users can't open the document unless they have the Acrobat Reader already installed on their computers.

To view a PDF, users must click on the file, launch the Acrobat Reader and, too often, indicate whether they wish to update the software. Then—even if they can skip the update—users have to wait for the file to download (and hope it's not too large for their computer to handle). All of these are extra steps that a busy web user may not have the time or patience to handle.

#### 2. PDFs are DOA.

PDFs are meant to be a snapshot of a printed page. Period. All users who open a PDF will see the exact same page on the screen, regardless of other running software, hardware, or the operating system. By design, PDFs are not meant to be living documents that users can edit and save.



Jacqui Cook

#### When Should You Use a PDF?

There are some instances when a PDF is the format of choice. Remember this advice when considering which format is right for which cases.

**Use PDFs sparingly.** Ask yourself what the

This is great if you want to post a medical journal article with intricate graphics so that no one can edit in mistakes. But the static format is frustrating for just about every other purpose—especially if, like so many organizations, you house registration forms or job applications as PDFs on your site. Often, even forms made with upgraded Adobe software that allows the user to fill them out have to be printed and mailed or faxed back.

Follow this rule of thumb: If you put a form online for users to fill in, they should be able to answer the questions and submit the form online.

### 3. Searching Stinks.

Let's say your organization's board chair needs to find the transcript of her annual meeting speech. When she goes to your home page and types in "board chair speech," the first three listings are PDFs. She launches the Acrobat Reader, opens each PDF one by one, and then has to search again in each PDF. Because PDFs only find exact phrases, she can't just type in "board chair speech," Google-style, and expect to find what she needs.

By the time she searches for the 10th time, only to find the word "speech" buried on page 95, she can't remember what she was looking for in the first place. Not a recipe for a happy board chair, right?

It is much easier to search from the browser than to search in a PDF. If you want users to find information on your site quickly and easily, stay away from PDFs.

### 4. No Copying Allowed!

Anyone who has used the web for research has come up against this drawback: It is almost impossible to copy and paste from a PDF. Again, it is possible *if* you invest in a professional version of Adobe. But for the average user who visits a site, it is impossible.

This goes against one of the primary functions of an association: to provide members with timely, accurate material they can use in their daily work. What good is information if it can't be used in a presentation, an email to colleagues, or a document for the profession's constituents? You *want* members to seek out your association and view it as "the" source of information about their profession. Make sure the information is readily available and usable.

### 5. Plain and Simple, PDFs are Too Plain and Simple

A PDF is a document that wasn't intended for the web. It is not written in web-friendly format, does not use the look of your website, and is not an interesting user experience in any way. Your readers can end up feeling lost, disconnected, and frustrated—hardly the goal of any association.

The bottom line: A PDF is a printed document; a web page is an online document. Resorting to PDFs all the time is like trying to reprint a *New York Times Magazine* article in your weekly community paper. It just doesn't fit.


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primary format for a particular page should be—printed or online? Only if it's a print document at heart should the page appear online as a PDF. Use PDFs only for brochures, journal articles, and, in some cases, graphs or charts that might need to be reprinted.

**Be sure to provide users with a description of the PDF before they have to go through the trouble of opening it.** Include a summary of what's in the document as well as the file size and the approximate time needed for the average internet connection to open it. Position this information near the Adobe icon that launches the PDF so users know exactly what they're getting.

**Don't use a PDF just to avoid designing or updating a web page.** In these days of limited time and staff, it's tempting to post content as a PDF so you don't have to redesign it to be web-friendly. But try to resist that temptation. To serve your members most effectively, invest the effort to make the content a true part of your website—in design, tone, and usability.

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