Revisiting PDFs for Law Firm Websites
& Mobile Publishing

Steve Matthews | September 2011

Most law firms have a history of using Adobe's Portable Document Format (PDF) to distribute their brochures, papers and longer written pieces. That practice matches what web usability experts have long advised [http://www.useit.com/alertbox/20010610.html]: "PDF is great for distributing documents that need to be printed," but not much more than that. The well-traveled rule is that if a document contains more than five pages of text (hint: that excludes lawyer profiles), then PDF format is worth considering.

Now, let's throw a wrench into this. As we approach the end of 2011, many firms and their clients are moving toward paperless offices. Clients are consuming law firm publications on a variety of devices, including smartphones, tablets, e-readers, and large multiple-monitor desktop environments. So how likely is it that we consume a PDF on printed paper? Not very.

We can now presume that PDFs will be read almost exclusively on electronic devices — and that changes a lot of our previous assumptions. The "need to be printed" rule is close to becoming as obsolete as the printouts upon which PDFs were once routinely produced. In light of this digital evolution, we need to revisit the usage of PDF and how firms integrate this file format within their online properties.

The Impact of Tablet-Consumed PDFs

No recent technology change will impact the PDF file format more than tablet computing. Tablets can do many things, but for most of us, their dominant use has been as a content consumption device. For all forms of longer written work, including substantive and marketing-based communication, the tablet will rule much sooner than any of us expect.

Most tablet devices do a reasonably good job of PDF visual display. In fact, it could easily be argued that what Apple has taken away from Adobe through the absence of Flash compatibility, the iPad has given back (in spades) for its PDF handling. Reading PDF documents is a reasonably pleasant experience, and the rich selection of available applications to capture, modify, and annotate documents may well preserve the file format's future.

With respect to the smallest mobile devices, smartphones, PDF should also continue to have a place. Many smartphones capture and share well, and although they're not an ideal environment for reading a longer document, PDFs do no worse (or better) than many web pages when it comes to reading on the 'small screen'.

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PDFs for Publishing Are Still A Problem

The PDF format will likely be around for the foreseeable future. But a number of usability disadvantages have traditionally kept law firms from using PDF as a publishing format. Here are two of the most common drawbacks.

PDFs and search engines don't jibe, so PDF is a less "findable" format. Now, to be fair, any web-readable file format has an opportunity to rank in the search engines. Point enough links at your file and the search engines will raise your PDF to the top of the results. In my experience, however, when we compare the performance of the average PDF file against a comparably structured webpage in HTML, the webpage does continue to be the better performer. This may simply be because webpages can utilize a descriptive title tag, while PDFs cannot.

PDFs kills web navigation. With PDFs, users are placed in a "toggle state": they're either inside or outside the document. Designers can add links throughout a PDF, or additional contextual documents as appendices (such as an author's biography); but ultimately, this remains a legitimate complaint. The absence of reader distraction can be a good thing, especially once you've convinced the reader to invest his or her time in your document. But in the end, moving your reader to the next point is key. Online travels are just that: travels. Website architecture must always consider the next point in the user's path.

Continued Best Practices

Many firms have created "workarounds" that allow them to publish PDFs – specifically, papers and longer publications – to their websites, and that probably won't change much in the short term. Some of these best practices will continue to include:

- HTML Landing Pages (a.k.a. "gateway pages") – These are especially helpful for search engine marketing. Creating a dedicated landing page allows firms to optimize around the title, author, and abstract of a publication. This "surrogate cover page" is then marketed, leading readers to the full-text PDF download.

- Removing PDFs from the website's architecture – As mentioned above, PDFs aren't "an endpoint" to your reader's travels, but relying on PDFs for any key navigation will frustrate your website's visitors. For example, PDFs should never be used for lawyer profiles or practice group pages.

- Deep-linking into PDFs for increased navigation. Most Acrobat users know they can generate a navigable Table of Contents from within their PDF generation software. Usability can also be aided by deep-linking from web pages into specific areas (or pages) within a PDF document, re-orienting the initial view and screen-size for their audience.

Most of us probably expected or sensed that our consumption of PDF files is moving from paper to electronic format, and it is a bit of a cultural shift. But will our longer publications eventually move from PDF

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format to something new, like HTML5? It's certainly possible, especially over the longer term; but it won't happen overnight.

Like 'em or not, PDFs will be part legal web publishing for at least another five years. Fortunately, readers converting to e-devices won't change the fact that PDFs remain a content delivery vehicle with limited expectations. As long as we simply want the user to "sit and read," the tactics employed by law firms won't change much, either.

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