

# Planning a Publication Strategy—Print or Electronic?

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published on BNET.com 11/26/2007

Many companies are abandoning traditional print for electronic publications. The decision is not driven by cost alone; electronic publications are quicker and easier to produce, distribute, and update. They can also be easily customized to particular audiences or produced cost-effectively for small niche markets. However, there remains a human need to “touch and feel” printed material, so it is important to retain a balance.

## What You Need to Know

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### Is it necessary to make a clear decision between printed and electronic publications?

The preliminary stages of preparing a publication are similar for printed or electronic publications. Therefore the decision is made at the production stage. You can either post the artwork on your Web Site for downloading or give it a printer to produce paper copies. The decision will be based on a number of factors including cost, distribution, update plans, and accessibility. However, there is nothing to stop you operating a hybrid strategy, printing a number of paper copies for direct distribution to selected customers and placing the same publication on your Web Site.

## What to Do

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### Make Information Easily Available

For many of your customers the Internet is now the first point of reference for product and company information. Information on the Internet is fast, accessible and up to date. The rapid growth of e-marketing, e-mail campaigns, and online advertising makes it easy to believe that the use of printed material is shrinking.

### Recognize Readers' Needs

However, reading a paper publication and an electronic publication are very different experiences. Industry experience indicates that printed material is still highly used, valued, and needed. While the Internet allows people to access far more information, paper remains a medium that people can hold on to, read, store, file, pass on, refer back to, and scribble on. Web Sites and e-mails are instant,

easily updated, and make communication seem spontaneous, but hard copy presents information in a universally compatible, naturally appealing way.

Electronic publications, on the other hand, are not perceived to be as readable as paper publications; they do not feel so easy to use; and they are not so portable. However, developments in portable computing technology could overcome these barriers. High resolution displays could mean quality barely distinguishable from the printed page.

## **Target Your Publications**

The growing use of e-direct mail means customers are used to receiving regular, up-to-date, interactive, and relevant mail. Online techniques also make it easy to segment and target customers quickly and efficiently in a relatively easy and inexpensive way. Printed direct mail has a hard job matching this. However, recent developments in print hardware and in marketing and design software means that printed direct mail can compete with the capabilities of electronic direct mail. For example, software developments make it possible to personalize printed direct marketing material to a sophisticated level. Direct marketing specialists can personalize every single mailing by gender, name, address, and even images so that each item is as individual as the customer it is targeting.

## **Print In-House**

Given the benefits and shortcomings of both printed and electronic solutions, many companies are adopting a hybrid approach, utilizing in-house printers to produce shorter-run paper copies. High quality laser printers and personalization software make it possible to produce highly targeted material very quickly at comparatively low cost.

## **Convert to PDF Format**

Adobe's Portable Document Format (PDF) is the most popular method for converting existing publications to electronic format. Any user with the freely available Adobe Acrobat Reader can view a publication in its original format, making this an ideal and cost-effective method for distributing publications over the Internet. Adobe provides detailed guidelines for producing electronic documentation on their Web Site.

The PDF format is very easy to integrate with established publication processes. Most authoring or publication design systems are capable of generating PDF output. Once the artwork has been produced, there is virtually no incremental cost in producing PDF electronic documents that are

essentially identical in visual layout and appearance to the printed versions. You can distribute the PDF documents via your Web Site or other electronic channels.

## **Benefit from Electronic Publications**

Electronic documents offer many important benefits, including:

- flexibility-once a document is in electronic form, it is easy to repurpose it for other formats such as Braille, print-on-demand, Web content;
- archiving-legacy material such as out-of-print publications can be retained for archiving or cost-effective distribution to meet ad hoc requests;
- updating-making small changes to content does not require an expensive reprint of an entire document;
- enhancement-electronic documents have characteristics not available in print documents, such as animation and hyperlinking;
- cost-full-color electronic documents cost less to produce than the equivalent print documents;
- distribution-online electronic documents are downloaded on request, with no distribution costs.

## **Recognize the Shortcomings of Electronic Publications**

Electronic publications also have a number of shortcomings, including:

- rights management and control-it can be difficult to prevent someone from copying an electronic publication and putting the security of your intellectual property at risk;
- startup costs-outlay for the training, hardware, and software necessary to publish electronically can be considerable.

## **Compare Readership Levels**

Although electronic documents offer lower distribution costs than printed copies, it can be difficult to compare readership levels.

- Industry experience indicates that typically, four people read each copy of a printed publication.
- PDFs can be forwarded at no costs, suggesting the possibility of increased readership.
- Sending a PDF as a link in an e-mail enables you to measure how many different addresses view the document.

- Posting the PDF on a Web Site for downloading also enables you to measure acceptance.

## **Put Case Studies on Your Web Site**

Putting a series of electronic case studies on your Web Site can improve traffic, particularly if you add new topics on a regular basis. If the featured customers are agreeable, you can add links to their own Web Sites. To get even greater benefit from using an electronic version, you could add links to relevant products and services on your own Web Site, as well as other information on similar topics.

## **Publish White Papers Electronically**

Because of their important role in purchasing decisions, white papers are now widely available as downloads on suppliers' Web Sites. The Internet has become a key medium for product research, and white papers are an integral part of that process. This enables you to distribute information to prospects in a very accessible and cost-effective way. You should make it easy for visitors to find your white papers by:

- creating a library listing all the white papers available;
- placing links to white papers on pages where you describe relevant products or industry solutions;
- placing a list of white papers on your press information page.

You can also distribute white papers in electronic format through companies who specialize in syndicating white papers for a particular industry. These companies offer readers a wide range of material from different suppliers so that readers can compare different offerings. With syndication services, you pay the specialist to place your white paper on a network of Web Sites that coincide with your target audience. Make sure that the syndicator can match your target, ideally by job title and industry, for example, if you want to reach technical managers in the printing industry. The syndicator should also be able to provide you with data that indicates how your white paper campaigns are performing. This may be simply the number of downloads, or you may get more precise information by job title or even by named company.

## **Convert Your Customer Magazines**

Increasingly, companies are using the Internet to distribute publications like customer magazines electronically, reducing production costs. As well as current issues, you can also provide visitors with access to archive copies, even though you have no more printed copies. The Internet can also be used to publish electronic newsletters as a substitute for magazines.

## Provide Publication Information

If you put publications and other documents onto a Web Site, it is important to give users and customers brief information on the contents of the document. In a large online document library, the title alone may not help the reader find the right document. A short, single line description is sufficient.

## Decide on Your Strategy

There are clear benefits and disadvantages for both electronic publications and traditional print. You need to decide which are the most important factors for your publication program:

- initial production costs
- readability
- ability to personalize or customize publications
- distribution requirements and costs
- frequency of updating
- archiving requirements
- protection of intellectual property

## What to Avoid

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### You Fail to Take Readers' Requirements into Account

Although the Internet is now a "first stop" for information, you have to ensure that the publications you provide electronically are usable. If a publication includes text-heavy pages or complex graphics, it may be difficult to read on a screen. Visitors who want to print the publication may not have the facilities to reproduce in color.

## Where to Learn More

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### Book:

Baker, Donna L., Adobe Acrobat 8 How-Tos: 125 Essential Techniques. Adobe Press, 2007.

## Web Site:

Adobe: [www.adobe.com](http://www.adobe.com)

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