



**COURIER
PRINTING**

A CONSOLIDATED GRAPHICS COMPANY

THE CASE FOR CREATING A PDF WORKFLOW

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SPECIAL DELIVERY

INFORMATION YOU CAN USE

If you've been entertaining switching to a PDF workflow for commercial printing, but haven't been totally convinced, maybe this will help.

To the uninitiated, the PDF, or Portable Document Format, is an Adobe™ concept from the mid '90s. Originally, the PDF format was created for the convenience of office workers needing to send information to those without the same software. Adobe's plan was for the author to convert the information to a PDF file (a relatively painless process in Adobe Acrobat™) so the recipient could open the file in Acrobat Reader™, available free from Adobe. And, since the PDF included the original's graphics and fonts, the document looked the way its creator intended. Somewhere down the line, however, someone figured out that if you can preserve images and embed fonts for low-end office applications, you should be able to do the same thing for high-end commercial printing.

PDFs for printing: lean and mean

Most commercial printers love PDFs. When created properly, the files are efficient for digital prepress, all relevant fonts are embedded, and the graphics are lean. When the prepress department images your files in high resolution for litho negatives or CTP plates (rasterizing or "RIPping"), PDFs glide through the system faster and easier than "native" desktop publishing (DTP) files (like QuarkXPress™ or Pagemaker™). Native files also have to have their tag-alongs—all relevant fonts and linked image files. Almost every designer has gotten the phone call from the printer about missing fonts or omitted image files. And the linked files sometimes bog down even the most efficient microprocessors.

The lean nature of the PDF is what makes it special—in particular, the way it handles graphics. Service bureaus and printers for years have begged customers to save their placed Photoshop™ images at the size and cropping that appears in the master document. That way, the printer has only the digital data he needs. Most designers on a deadline—and that means most designers—sidestep that request. To save time on their end, designers will place an image file on the DTP page with digital data enough to cover a full page, then either reduce it

to one column width, or use one face in a crowd in a one-inch square mug shot. When that page RIPs, the computer doing the work chews through massive amounts of data from the big linked files to render those smaller images on the page, spitting out what it doesn't need.

Not so with the PDF. PDF files save only the data necessary to render the page—it throws out all the extra unusable data when the PDF file is created. The downside for the prepress guy is that now, with your PDF, he takes a coffee break while your job RIPs instead of taking a two-hour lunch while waiting for your native files to process.

As with most good things, there's a downside to PDFs. If you like your printer to make last-minute corrections, PDFs aren't for you. Unlike those native DTP files, the printer can't simply open up a PDF and make wholesale changes. Consider PDFs cast in stone—well, almost. If you've purchased full-version Acrobat, you can make extremely limited changes, like fixing one character in a line or changing a bad page number. But if you change a word, PDFs won't rejustify the line. If you find a must-fix error in your document, it's best to fix it yourself in the native file and send the printer a new PDF for that page. Further, there's the time it takes for you to create the PDF. If you have a multi-page document like a magazine or an annual report, plan on letting your computer chew through the data while you take the long lunch (better you enjoy the away-time than the prepress guy).

That brings us to another element of what printers like about PDFs—the liability question on jobs gone awry. If you deliver a locked-down, final-version PDF, and the printer makes no fixes to your document, you own the error liability in all but the most technical cases. It's your file, and the printer's tinkering is kept to a minimum, thus his exposure is a lot more limited than it once was. For him, it eliminates the ever-potential "who-shot-John" factor.

"So what's in it for me?" you ask.

If the PDF benefits generally go to the printer and liability and time are not on your side, why go to a PDF workflow?

CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE

THE CASE FOR CREATING A PDF WORKFLOW

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For one thing, on jobs that are periodically recurring with minimal changes—product brochures, corporate identity pieces, etc...—you never ask yourself if changes were made at the printer the last time that aren't in your in-house archive file. If you are making those changes or corrections in-house and sending PDFs, you are always confident you have the latest version. You have total control of the archive.

Since PDFs make printer fixes difficult to impose, PDF workflow sharpens your in-house editing and proofing procedures—the file has to be right when it leaves your hands. You'll likely notice a savings since the increased discipline means almost no printer alterations.

If your clients are distant, and proof review via overnight carrier is time consuming, consider using PDF for remote proofing at the design stage. And, if you are using it at that phase of the job, it's only a short sidestep to creating PDF files for output.

If you like to send files to your commercial printer electronically—via FTP, cable modem, or e-mail attachment—PDF files are lean with excellent data compression built in. In most cases, when you send a PDF to your printer, you are sending one file—a master PDF with all fonts and images efficiently cropped, packaged, and compressed. Corrected pages are sent as single-page PDFs to be incorporated by the printer. PDFs generally transmit quickly and trouble free.

If you like to use newer software that hasn't caught on in some prepress circles (Adobe InDesign™ with placed layered Photoshop™ native files, for example) PDF files bridge the gap. And, InDesign has a great internal PDF generator shortening your work process.

Further, PDFs cross computer platforms. You can view a Macintosh™-created PDF on a PC platform and vice-versa. This means that if you work in a Mac environment and your client does Windows™, you can send him a Mac-created PDF

and he can look at the proof on his PC. This also means that if you are using a commercial printer married to Macintosh output, while you produce your documents on a PC, you can simply create a PDF of your document for output and there should be no cross-platform translation problem.

Your printer will love you for going PDF too, and usually will give you a healthy discount on the prepress part of the price as a reward for your time.

Then, there's the crossover to new media. If you post information from your publication or brochure on the internet, you are only a couple of mouseclicks away from creating an efficient PDF of your print publication for your website, integrating your print and internet marketing programs. You want to be sure to lower the PDF conversion resolution settings and tell Acrobat to convert your images to RGB for the internet version to shrink the PDF file size for downloads. The benefits for using PDF on the web are impressive since full-version Acrobat can create active links within the web version of your PDF page.

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