Interactive PDFs

Introduction

Generally, we use the term interactive PDF when we're talking about a PDF file that is meant to be viewed on screen.

The interactive PDF features are the parts of a PDF that take your audience beyond the basic reading experience, and gives them more. Buttons that let them navigate around the file, videos that explain the subject in detail, windows that can open and close, hyperlinks, sounds, even check boxes, and text entry fields are all things that can be implemented in to a PDF file.

In the early 90's, Adobe came up with the idea of a portable document, a file that you could transfer from computer to computer, and it would always look and act the same. It's difficult to imagine now, how revolutionary this idea was but back then it was a real pain to send people your documents as most files were in different formats.

At first people called this idea e-paper but in the end became know as the Portable Document Format or PDF and the original software to make and read them became known as Acrobat.

There's no doubt that it took a while to catch on, Adobe lost money for several years in a row, as they tried to get people to use it. But over the past two decades, PDF went from a crazy idea to being a world wide standard.

One of the greatest things about the PDF is that from the beginning it was designed to be a container for almost anything. Adobe understood that the world was made of more than just text and photographs laid out in printed newsletters and books. Because of Adobe's forethought, PDF files can contain movies, music, buttons, notes, animations you can even embed other files or run programs from within it so that a PDF can react to you. Today, hundreds of millions of people now use PDF to fill out forms, read magazines and documentation.
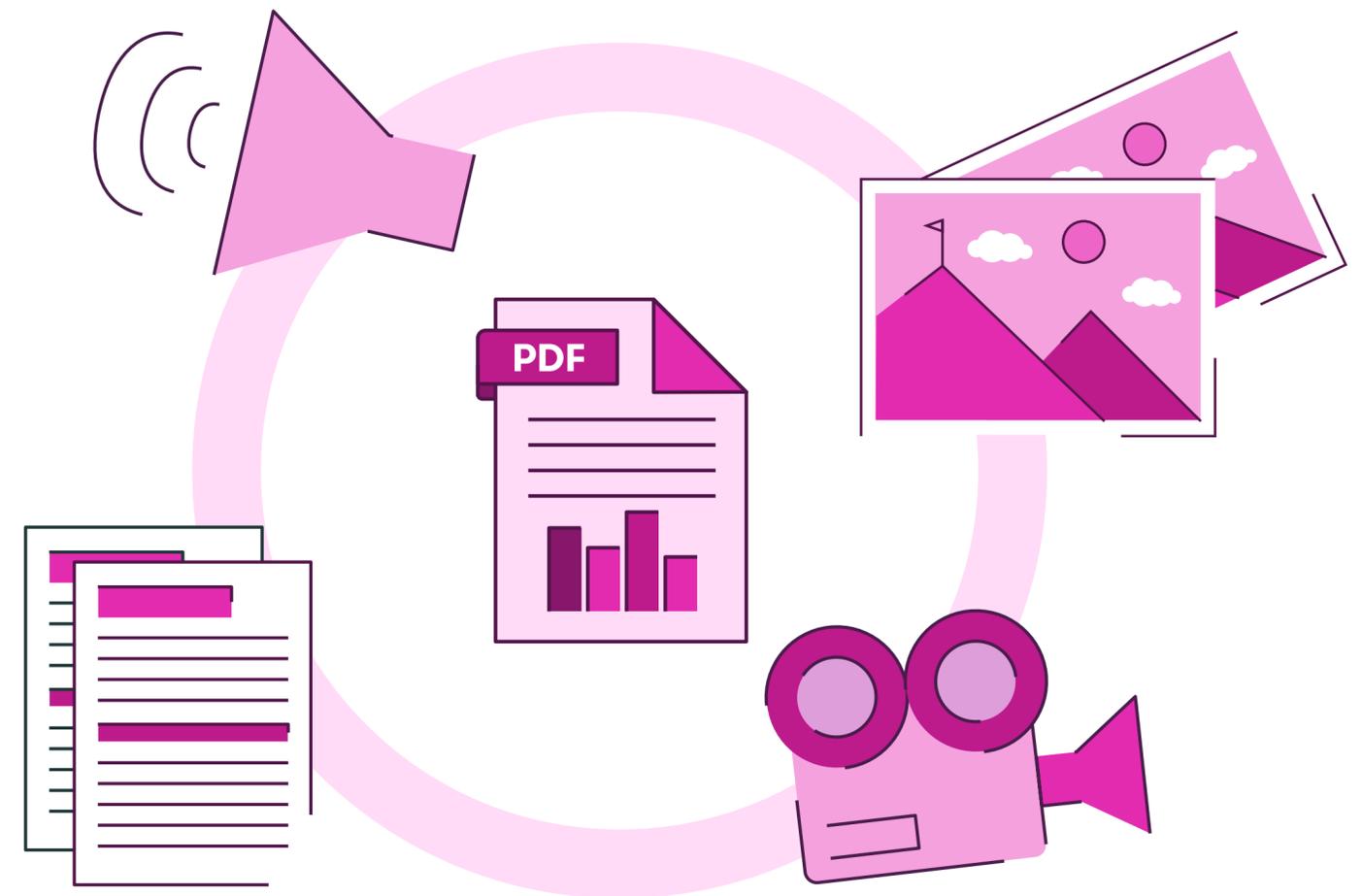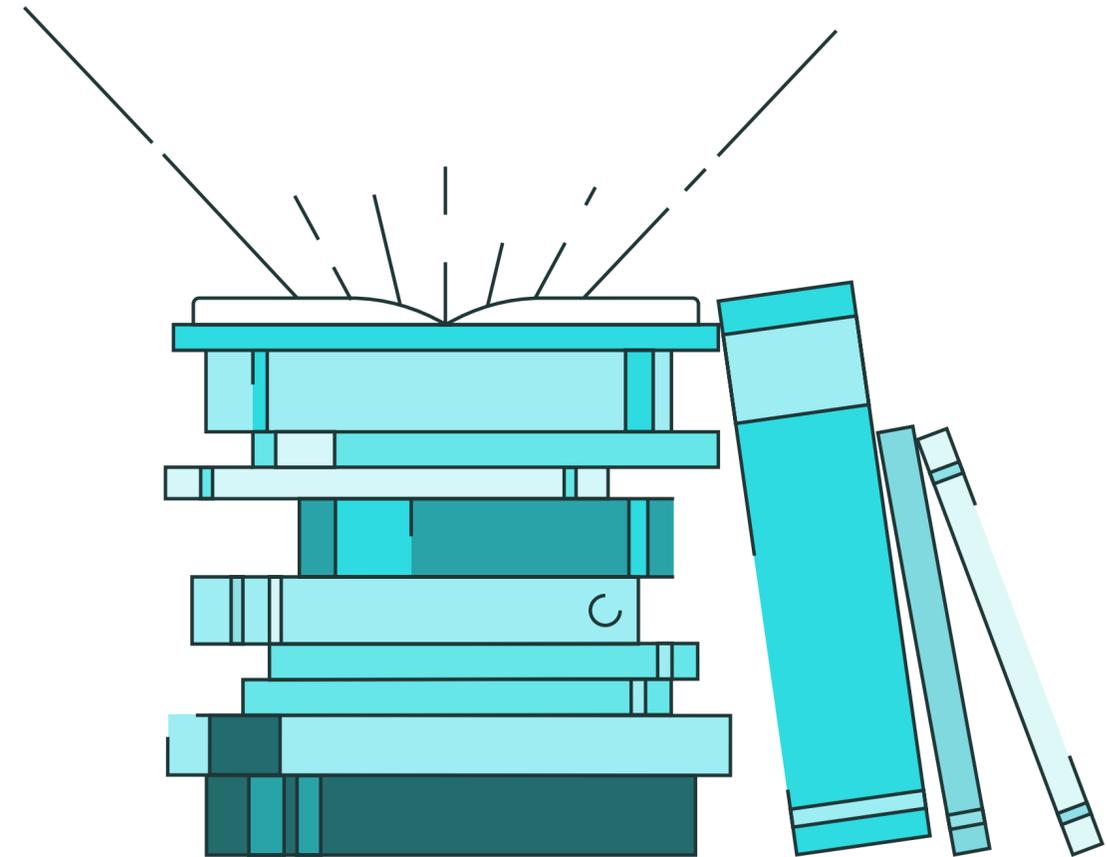
Features

The way this document is built shows just how how buttons, states and page transitions can work in a PDF.

Just like in PowerPoint we've got most of the basic transitions: fade, push, wipe, uncover, blinds etc. These features all help to enhance the feeling that we're in more of an interactive presentation, not just a text document.

Rollover pop ups are another feature available. Move your mouse over here to see a full list of the page transitions available.

Another cool feature that you probably noticed when you opened the file is that we are able to force the PDF to open in full screen mode which again makes us feel like it's not just a standard text document.

You can also add a piece of javascript to disable the default click to advance function. This means the user can only use the navigation controls you have built in to the file.

Features

You can use navigation controls to go to the first, last, next, previous or even a specific page.

Exactly the same as in PowerPoint, hyperlinks can point to internal or external locations. You can also use hyperlinks to point to another file on your computer or local network.

I'm sure you have noticed the navigation controls at tthe bottom. Also in this document, clicking the BrightCarbon logo (top left) will take you to our website.

Hyperlinks could also be useful to make contact details interactive.

Find us
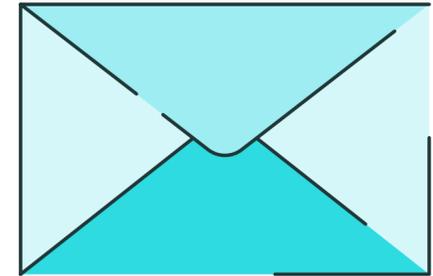
Contact us

Features

PDFs are a great way to gather information. Check boxes, radio buttons and text fields can all be programmed to be sent to an email address.

Obviously this feature relies on an internet connection to send the data.

Name:

Subject:

Yes/no: Yes   No

Message:

Features

As PDFs were designed to be a container for 'almost' anything it means you can easily embed movies and audio in to your files.

There are a couple of things to remember when embedding media in to your files. Firstly they will increase the file size as the media becomes part of the PDF. Secondly, they use flash for playback which can cause a few problems. You can learn more about this on the next page, restrictions of interactive PDFs.
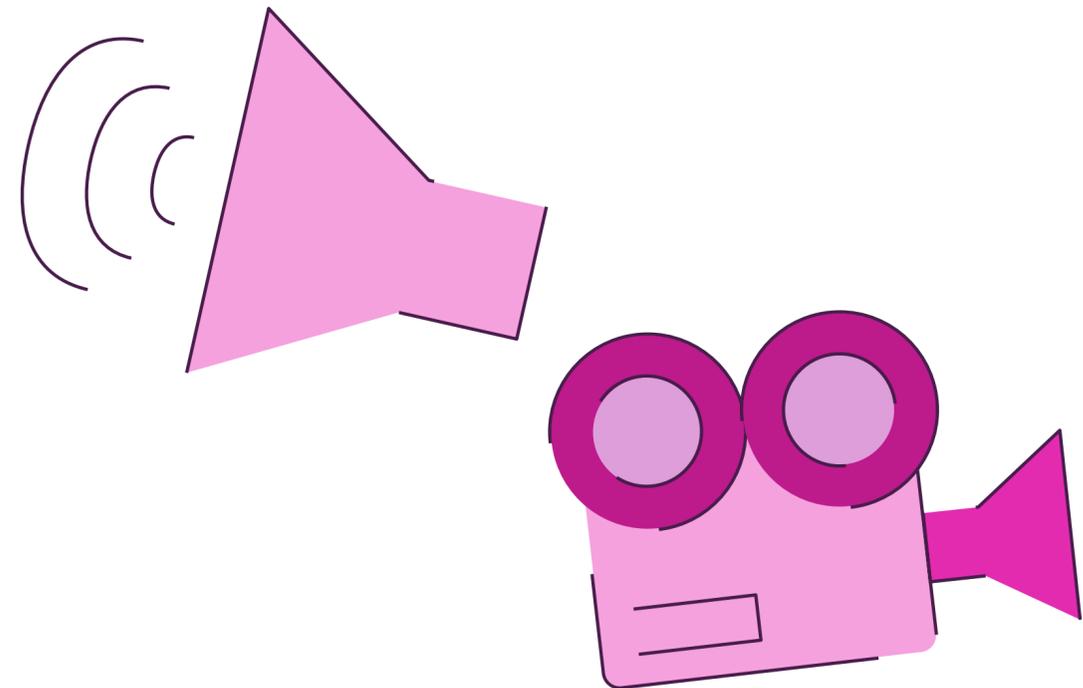
Restrictions

In some ways, the PDF has become a victim of it's own success, the popularity and capabilities of the PDF has given everybody a certain level of expectation as to what exactly they can do. People may have seen one of the features before and presume that because it's a PDF there are no limitations involved.

Unfortunately, that original dream of a true universal document that everyone sees, and interacts with the same has broken down a little bit in recent years. This is because not everyone uses Adobe's own Acrobat Reader on a desktop computer anymore.

While a PDF file is a standard, not all PDF readers are, not all of them work the same, or show the same things. In fact, even Adobe's Reader app doesn't work the same way on all devices. There are hundreds and hundreds of PDF readers on the market for both desktop and mobile devices, this makes it extremely difficult to control what the end user will be opening the file in.

What you see on a desktop or a laptop will be very different than what you experience on a tablet or phone. This is simply because tablets don't support flash and all of the interactive elements in a PDF rely on this software.
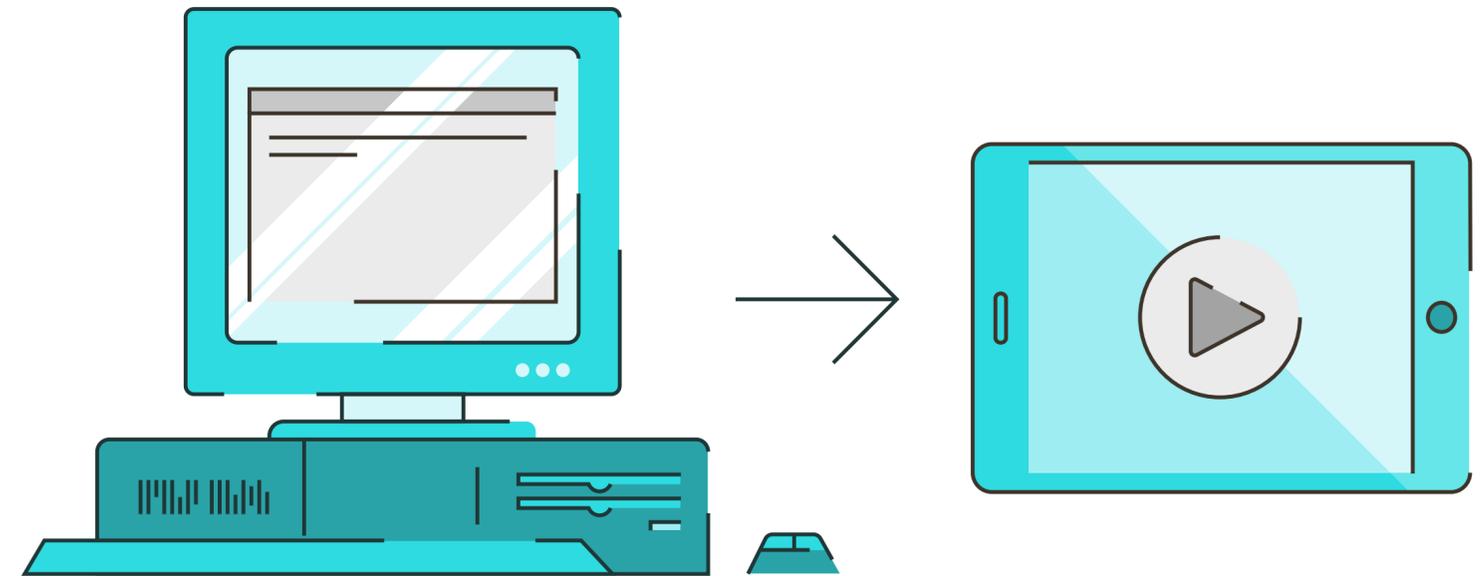
PDF vs. PowerPoint

Building an interactive PDF takes a similar amount of time to creating a PowerPoint presentation. If you already have a design style established and the content finalised you are ready to start laying out your information in InDesign. The time you would usually spend on animating a presentation is replaced with setting up hyperlinks, transitions and any other interactivity you choose to implement.
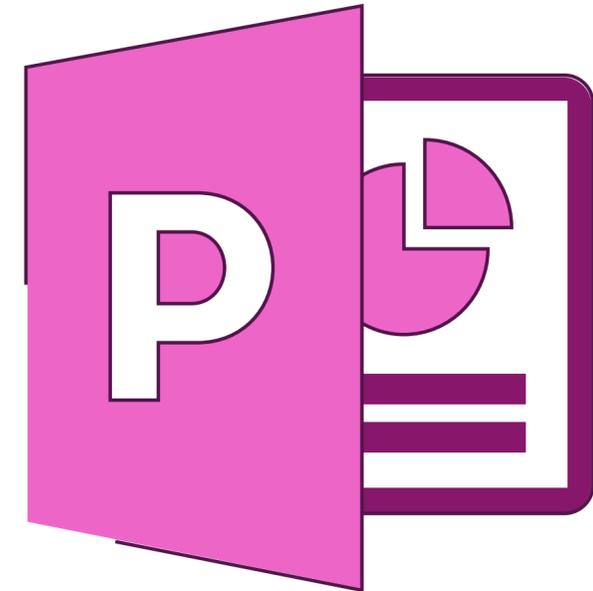
So, should you use them?

Interactive PDFs can be great, but it's a case of using the right tool for the job.

They may be the right format for some uses, but for most interactive uses today, there could be more suitable tools, such as an eLearning authoring tool or an interactive PowerPoint that can be converted to HTML.

The main issue with them is that they rely on flash for most of the interactive elements which pretty much rules them out for use on tablets, this could cause headaches in todays world. Your file will still open (text and images remain) but any buttons, pop ups, forms and media will either dissapear or just not function.

So, to be able to deliver an interactive PDF you will need to be able to guarantee that they will be viewed in a controlled environment - a specific device, specific reader and that flash is installed. If a client specifies the file has to be a PDF I guess it's just a case of educating them on the hurdles involved or presenting them with an alternative.