

# Forming the Future

by Ryan Sutherland

## Harnessing variable and dynamic content in PDF forms

Since version 4.0 of Adobe Acrobat, users have been able to easily add form functions to their PDF files, but few have taken advantage of these features. Now, with version 5.0, it's time for those who haven't already to stop and take notice.

### HTML VERSUS PDF

Using *Acrobat 5's* form tool, all the familiar tools from HTML forms are readily available with an interface that is at the same time more intuitive and more powerful than its HTML counterpart.

Why use PDF forms instead of HTML? Well, PDF isn't necessarily the best choice for all applications, but there are many clear advantages. All the standard form types are available—text boxes, buttons, drop-down lists, radio and check boxes, etc, with more features and customizable options than HTML has to offer. And, of course, this is all available alongside *Acrobat's* beautiful typography, vector graphics and convenient interface. Not only is it an elegant solution, it is also much easier to create working form objects in *Acrobat* than in any HTML editor (even Adobe's own *GoLive*).

But perhaps the most significant difference is that PDF forms

can be easily saved as a single file for later use. Many large forms have not been implemented in HTML because it's too cumbersome for users to try to fill out everything correctly in one sitting, and it's highly impractical to save HTML files locally. Saving files becomes especially important for sensitive documents where proofreading is essential, such as tax forms or credit applications. With *Acrobat's* powerful form capabilities, more and more paper forms are becoming available for electronic filing. And this need not apply to just government forms; the same strategic advantages can be applied to other commercial and personal applications, such as online vacation reservations, purchase orders, electronic surveys, and more.

Even these basic capabilities provide exciting opportunities for the creation and distribution of brochures and magazines, for which PDF downloads are already the preferred choice of many online customers. But PDF form features shouldn't be limited to their analog counterparts. Form content can be easily added to any existing PDF file, instantly creating offers for contests, mailing list subscriptions, discount coupons, and product order forms, as well as voting polls and customer profiling.

### AVOID GATLING-GUN DISTRIBUTION: USE DYNAMIC PDFS

But *Acrobat 5* has a lot more than this to offer when it comes to forms and relational content. First and foremost, forms do not have to look like forms. *Acrobat* provides such an array of appearance options that form content can be seamlessly woven into the document without disrupting the page design with clunky text boxes, button, and menus.

PDF forms also feature many interactive options, powered by



**Acrobat 5 now lets you easily add form features to existing PDFs, without sacrificing appearance or confusing users.**



The form tool in Adobe Acrobat (v4.0+)

Javascript actions that can be associated with buttons and menus. These can be custom scripted or drawn from the several built-in functions, providing for dazzling interactivity and powerful database integration based on industry standards—WebDistributed Authoring and Versioning (WebDAV), Open DataBase Connectivity (ODBC), and support for the eXtensible Markup Language (XML).

Furthermore, PDF forms extend beyond traditional “fill-out and submit” formats, using Acrobat’s FDF layer which dynamically shares form content with an online SQL database.

FDF (Form Data Format) is a file format built into Acrobat that stores user input and personalized information. It can be embedded within a PDF for single-user purposes, or saved separately as an \*.fdf file that links to a parent PDF document for multi-user applications. FDF allows for real-time data exchange with a webserver, making it much more powerful and easier to use than CGI forms. What this means is that the content of a page can change as the user is filling in in-



formation without having to submit the form or refresh the page. This allows for fluent integration of dynamic data and personalized content.

#### DO I NEED VERSION 5.0 TO CREATE PDF FORMS?

Not necessarily. The form tool is available in version 4.0 with all of the major form fields, dynamic FDF layers, and file saving capability.

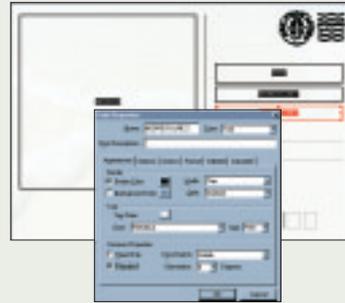
Version 5.0 builds upon these features, adding more options, enhanced annotations and file attachments, as well as the ability to digitally sign files for security and authorization. Many third-party programs are available to help construct powerful PDF form solutions. Acrobat 5.0 ships with a demo version of LiquidForms by Cardiff Software, which provides many page templates and simplifies Javascript actions.

## CREATING CUSTOMIZED PDF POSTCARDS

1. Use an existing digital postcard or create one from your favourite photo.



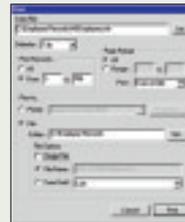
2. Construct a template PDF postcard by creating form fields for the address information and message.



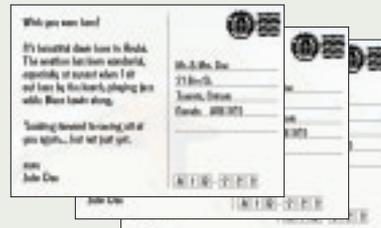
3. Create a delimited text file of addresses for receivers.



4. Use Variform PDF available from [www.pdfstore.com](http://www.pdfstore.com) to merge the PDF template postcard with the text file.



5. Presto! You've created customized PDF postcards for everyone on your list.



## USEFUL LINKS

For an excellent introduction for beginners creating PDFs using PHP: [www.zend.com/zend/spotlight/creatingpdfmay1.php](http://www.zend.com/zend/spotlight/creatingpdfmay1.php)

An intermediate-level tutorial for creating PDFs with PHP and MySQL: [www.phpbuilder.com/columns/perugini20001026.php3](http://www.phpbuilder.com/columns/perugini20001026.php3)

PDF Reports — Industrial strength server-side solutions for creating PDF reports, invoices, receipts: [www.interak.ro/products/PDFreports](http://www.interak.ro/products/PDFreports)

Office Courier by Movaris: A powerful corporate workflow solution using PDF electronic forms: [www.movaris.com](http://www.movaris.com)

