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Adobe Acrobat Updates Likely to Lure Lawyers

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Another chapter in the history of Adobe Acrobat opened Monday, and this one includes some juicy plot points that might tantalize the legal industry.

Since 1993, when Adobe Systems Inc. released the first version of Adobe Acrobat, allowing users to create and view PDF files, an updated version has been introduced almost every two years. The company released Adobe Acrobat 8 on Monday in tandem with a newly rebranded, Flash-based collaboration tool called Acrobat Connect (formerly Macromedia Breeze; Adobe paid \$3.4 billion for Macromedia in 2005).

It's undisputed that the Adobe portable document format (PDF) has become the standard for publishing and distributing documents. Word processors such as Microsoft Word and Corel WordPerfect are used to create documents, which can be published to PDF when it's time to distribute them via e-mail or an e-filing system. PDF documents can be made interactive with links and bookmarks, secured with digital signatures and opened by anyone who downloads the free Adobe Acrobat Reader.

Each iteration of Adobe Acrobat has incorporated features that aim to help users share and collaborate

on electronic documents. Most recently, Acrobat 7 added capabilities for sharing and collaborating on documents. Its Create From Outlook feature allows users to easily combine related e-mail messages into one PDF, while a tool called Organizer converts multiple documents to PDF.

Adobe has often been criticized for releasing bloated applications, but every version of Acrobat has improved on the sharability and security of PDFs.

HELPING LAWYERS

Acrobat 8 improves upon the standard features, but also adds some interesting tools for the legal profession.

First up, Adobe incorporates a "true" redaction tool in Acrobat 8. With earlier versions, you can easily draw a black box around text to hide it, but every savvy user knew that you could still search the text behind the black box. (You can read past fixes for this here and here.)

Acrobat 8 now devotes a whole toolbar to redaction features allowing you to mark, apply and "Search & Redact." You can use different colors to delineate why you redacted certain portions (red for privilege, black for personal information, etc.). After you mark the sections for redaction and hit Apply, Acrobat doublechecks the document for metadata and hidden

text related to your original redactions, such as the title and author of the document. Then the text behind your redactions is really gone. That means if you need to keep a copy of the original, you better do a “save as.”

Next up is built-in Bates numbering. Lawyers who’ve been using Acrobat for a while have used all sorts of tools to apply Bates stamps to documents, such as the IntelliPDF BATES Stamp and the add-on from CaseSoft for CaseMap. Instead of partnering with a third party, Adobe decided to develop its Bates stamper in-house. From what I’ve seen so far, it looks nice. You can add a header and footer, as well as other pertinent information, and direct Acrobat where to place the stamp on the document.

In my opinion, those two features are the biggest news for legal professionals, although Acrobat 8 does offer a handful of other interesting improvements. In previous version, you could select multiple files and easily combine them together in one PDF with one mouse click. Acrobat 8 still allows you to do that, but now offers the option of only taking certain worksheets out of a Microsoft Excel file, or only certain slides from a Microsoft PowerPoint presentation.

Acrobat has evolved as a perfect tool for interactive forms, and Version 8 now has the ability to “recognize” a nonactive form and decide where interactive form fields should appear. This means a static, scanned image of a form can become interactive when you click “Run Form Field Recognition.”

THE ADVANTAGES OF ADOBE CONNECT

The second big announcement from Adobe is the rebranding of Macromedia Breeze, which is now called Acrobat Connect. If you’ve ever attended an online webinar via Webex, Microsoft LiveMeeting or GoToMeeting, then you have the general idea of Acrobat Connect. And if you’ve attended an online meeting through one of those services, then you may remember the annoying wait before you could attend, due to special software clients installed on your system.

The major advantage in using Acrobat Connect is that it’s based on Flash, a multimedia platform that

Adobe claims is installed on 98 percent of desktop machines. I think that number may be a little overblown, but Flash has indeed become a standard for delivering movies, animation, pictures and interactive Web sites through the Internet. That means using Acrobat Connect will get you meeting with your clients online sooner than competitors using another webinar service.

From what I’ve seen so far, Acrobat Connect is slick and customizable. You can move “pods” of information around on your screen to customize the layout you prefer. Pods can be a whiteboard, your desktop, documents, chat windows, etc. Acrobat Connect gives you the ability to share and collaborate on documents either internally within your firm, or externally with your clients.

“We designed it with a low learning curve,” said Adobe’s Michael Fitzpatrick, who demonstrated the product for me. “Basic Flash developers can take advantage of this.”

I see Connect as a huge boon for attorneys in remote offices working together on the same document without having to e-mail it back and forth for a week.

And because it’s an Adobe Acrobat family product, you can jump straight into an online meeting in Acrobat Connect right from Acrobat 8. The power of easy, efficient document collaboration is coming closer to reality.

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