

"How to Write an eBook Your Readers Will LOVE to Read ...No Matter What Format You Publish In"

By Priya Shah

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Could the format you choose decide the fate of your eBook? Will it determine whether your brilliant eBook will be devoured by your readers or languish somewhere in the black hole of their hard disk?

This report tries to address these questions.

In Jakob Nielsen's recent Alertbox (July 14, 2003) "[PDF - Unfit for Human Consumption](#)," he trashed the use of PDF documents for online readability.

It said, and I quote: "Users get lost inside PDF files, which are typically big, linear text blobs that are optimized for print and unpleasant to read and navigate online. PDF is good for printing, but that's it. Don't use it for online presentation."

Although Nielsen's study was conducted for online readability, I believe it says a lot for the on-screen readability of PDF documents in general.

Nielsen has his [detractors](#) and his poll attracted much [criticism](#) from PDF fans, one of whom even created a [spoof](#) on it.

Although PDF is today the most preferred eBook format for eBook publishers today, I have often wondered if **readers** felt the same way about it.

If you are writing an eBook or plan to publish one soon, I'm sure that, like me, you too are concerned about giving your readers what they prefer. Nielsen would have us believe that users hate PDF.

But it was my own experience with PDF publishing that made me **really** wonder if PDF ought to be the format of choice for publishers like me.

A while ago, I created a PDF version of my eBook "[Be a Whiz at eBiz](#)" and provided links to both the exe and PDF versions in my subscriber welcome email.

However after two months of checking my download stats, I found that my readers voted almost unanimously in favour of the **exe version**. I had almost no downloads for the PDF version.

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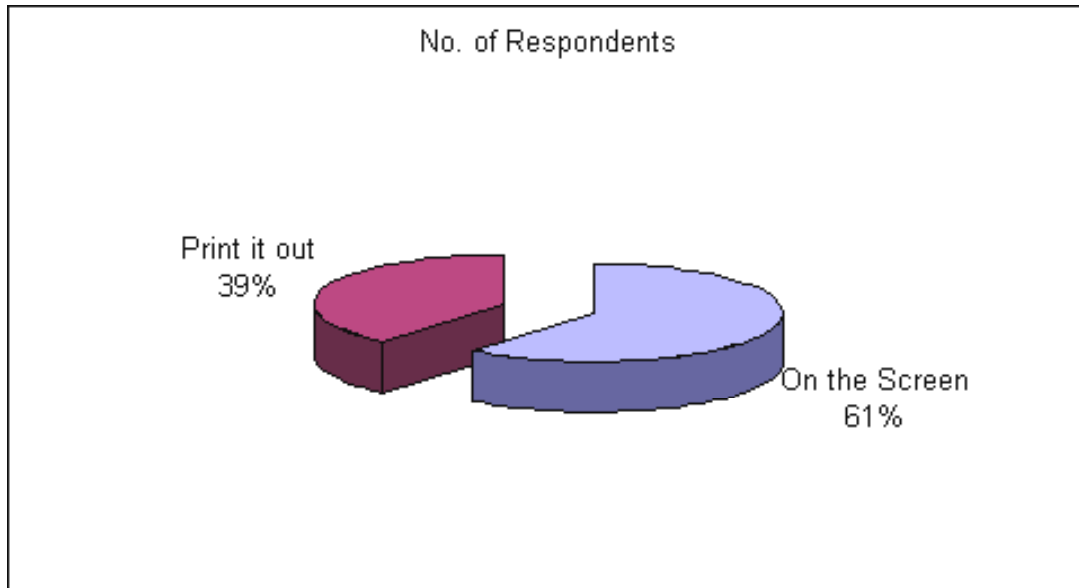
I was confused. Did my users really dislike PDF that much? Should I continue to publish PDF or stick to EXE?

I decided to ask my readers directly through an email poll. I received 90 responses from two of my lists totaling 500 subscribers.

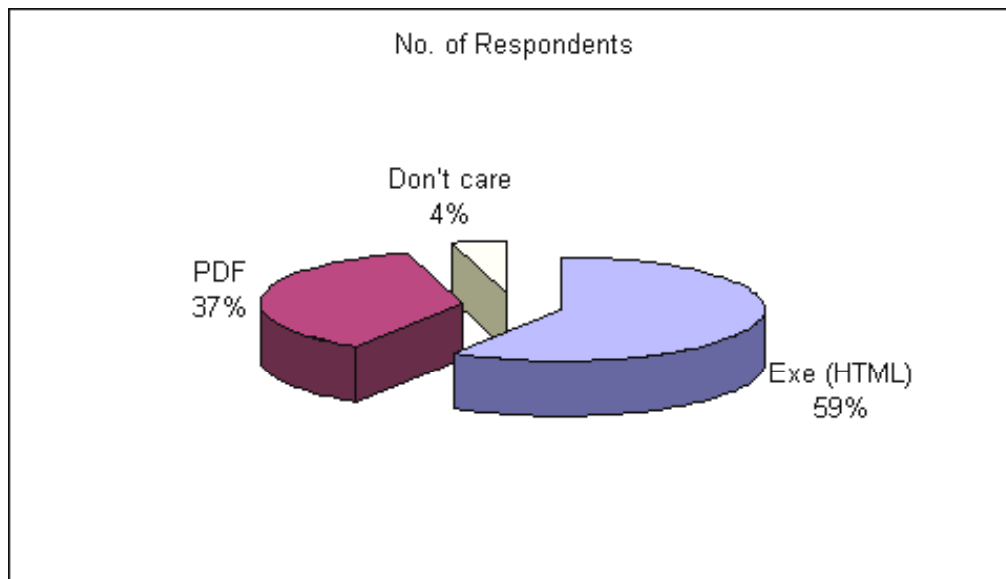
Unlike Nielsen's study, which included responses from a large cross-section of the general population, the people polled here all have an interest in internet marketing, are regular internet users, and are relatively familiar with the PDF format.

Here are the results of the poll:

- When asked whether they preferred to read eBooks on the screen or offline, 61% of those polled said they prefer to read on the computer screen, while 39% preferred to print out and read offline.



- When asked which format they preferred to read eBooks on screen, 59% preferred exe (HTML), 37% preferred PDF (Adobe Acrobat), while 4% didn't care either way.



Whichever way you look at it, EXE comes out ahead when it comes to reader preferences. But is it really as simple as choosing between one format or another?

Here are some observations I gathered from the comments of those who participated:

1. Some readers are die-hard PDF fans and make a conscious choice to download and read PDFs. However they represent a percentage of readers who are generally more experienced and techno-savvy.

2. Many experienced users, especially those who access their files at work, will not or cannot download EXE files because of the threat of viruses.

Reader comment: *"I NEVER run an .exe without at least doing a virus check on it. Further, I believe that anyone, especially IT professionals such as myself would NEVER open an exe attached to an email. If for some reason your prospect want to receive something from you at his office, it is very likely that the corporate email server would have an application such as AntiGen that would filter out any .exe files, and your prospect would never get it. All in all, pdf's are viewed as far less harmful by many computer savvy people."*

3. Some readers described PDFs as being more "professional" or "real" or even more "funky" than EXE eBooks.

4. Many don't like reading online because of screen glare, which tires the eyes and affects concentration.

5. Many readers prefer the convenience of having a print version they can carry with them anywhere they go, and that allows them to highlight sections. EXE books are not perceived as being printer-friendly.

Reader comment: *"Some things I don't like about exe books is that you can't cut & paste, and usually when you print the page, graphics get printed which wastes time and ink."*

If you have decided that publishing in PDF format is for you, you should know that not all readers agree with some widely-accepted views about PDFs. The survey threw up a few surprises.

In particular the view that:

1. PDFs are accessible to 100% of users.

In fact some users hate PDFs because the software is either incompatible with their operating system or causes it to crash. Here are some of their comments.

"PDF is no good for me, I can't use it. I deleted my old copy of PDF reader on my computer and went to ADOBE site and downloaded a new copy of PDF reader and installed it...that still does not work? What is the problem with this PDF reader? I don't know."

"I hate pdf format. It frequently locks up my computer."

While these readers were in a minority, it is still worthwhile considering the fact that some of your customers, for one reason or another, might not want to purchase a PDF eBook.

2. PDFs are easy to print and read offline

PDFs are more printer-friendly, but readers do not like the fact that they are often poorly formatted, and waste a lot of paper and ink to print.

Readers comments:

"I'm cursed with having to put up with the wasteful ways of the authors. I'm referring to the waste of space, & consequently my paper & ink, plus time. PDF's quite often have a two-line sentence taking up a full page, and often half a page between pages, which cost the author nothing, due the digital nature of the book. There may be a way to control these things, but if there is, I don't know how. Therefore, I prefer .exe."

"(Printing out) would be the best thing to do but I can't waste all my paper. Please you should include the number of pages included."

"Printing pages is also tedious, time consuming and expensive (ink & paper)"

Bad Design, Not Format

So is PDF really the monster from the Black Lagoon?

One of Nielsen's gripes was that "Most PDF files are immense content chunks with no internal navigation. They also lack a decent search, aside from the extremely primitive ability to jump to a text string's next literal match."

But, as Robert McDaniels of Adobe Systems Incorporated writes in his rebuttal to Nielsen's column, *"It looks like what you are really criticizing is bad PDF design, not the PDF format, because PDF actually does all of the things you claim it cannot. Just as there are terrible HTML pages there are also terrible PDF pages, but this is a fault of the designer not the file format."*

That's very true because no matter what format you use, bad design and poor navigation are not restricted to PDF books. I have downloaded many EXE books that are awful to read – ugly to look at, often garish and tasteless, with little or minimal navigation.

I believe poor design and ignorance of all the features that Adobe PDF has to offer (something I have been guilty of myself) is essentially the hurdle to making PDF eBooks more reader-friendly.

Adobe PDF has many features that can enhance on-screen readability - like adding bookmarks for navigation and highlighting links, while MS Word can be used to add graphic text and images to break the monotony of endless columns of text.

It is essentially the responsibility of **the authors** to make ebooks more readable and to ensure that readers are well-informed about features that will enhance their on-screen reading experience.

We must learn to use all these features to ensure our eBooks are read. But for someone new to creating PDFs the learning curve can be quite steep.

You'll find many useful tools and manuals - most free - in the resources section, that will shorten your learning curve and help you create beautiful, readable PDF documents.

Recommended Resource: [The 5-Minute PDF Creator](#)

One of the best manuals I have come across to help you make use of all the features of Adobe. It contains easy

to follow, step-by-step instructions for publishing ebooks using Adobe Acrobat. Download a free sample version.

When EXE Might Be Better

There are some occasions when it might be better for you to publish in EXE format.

1. When most of your readers are newbies or non-techies

Most internet newbies are unfamiliar with Adobe Acrobat and various features of PDF files - such as bookmarks, navigation, zooming in to make text larger, printing out sections of the book.

In my own experience I have had a customer write in to complain that "everytime she clicked on a link in the PDF file it opened a browser window."

It made me realise I could not take it for granted that all readers would be comfortable with this format. And this is even more likely with newbies.

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If your eBook is targeted at newbies, EXE might be a better format to publish in.

If you strongly prefer PDF, you should include **explicit** instructions on how to use PDF files so as to make it easier for your newbies to use and navigate your eBook.

One of the things readers did not like about exe books, is that they cannot be printed or that printing the graphics consumes a lot of ink.

In my survey I found that 39% of my readers prefer to take a printout. So if I also make my EXE eBook printable, then I could increase the number of people who actually read it to 100%.

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