

Presenting Corporate Style Guides in Ebook Format

Introduction

Corporate style guides help organizations to present a consistent and coherent message. Large companies such as Apple and Microsoft have extensive corporate style guides, while smaller companies may use a public style guide such as the *Chicago manual of style* to determine most style choices, in addition to maintaining a smaller corporate style guide addressing style choices specific to the organization. Corporate style guides may be made available in many formats, including print, PDFs, or websites. With the growing popularity of ebooks, it makes sense to consider this format as an additional choice for corporate style guides. This paper provides a brief description of corporate style guides, followed by a discussion of applicable design preferences for ebooks. It then presents information to help readers determine whether an ebook style guide is the right choice for their organization.

A closer look at corporate style guides

According to Mark R. Bright (2005), “corporate style guides have become more and more necessary as a result of increasingly available office technologies” which allow nearly any employee within an organization to produce business communications (42). While this access to technology can improve productivity, it also introduces a greater risk for inconsistencies in documentation. Corporate style guides address this problem by focusing on “dynamic style decisions such as corporate identity guidelines,” and serving as “repositories for documentation style standards” (42). Additional benefits of using a corporate style guide include:

- Saving time (and money). With a corporate style guide in place, employees are not required to make style decisions repeatedly with each document.
- Acting as a training tool. A style guide can shorten the learning curve for new employees and reduce their need for assistance from senior writers.
- Improving the quality of communication. Style guides establish “guidelines that promote consistency in tone, design, and format.” This helps present an image of professionalism and competence (43-44).

Topics to address in a corporate style guide include:

- Grammar and punctuation choices specific to the organization, such as:
 - Spacing between sentences
 - Use of serial commas
 - Use of abbreviations and acronyms, as well as their definitions
- Identity and branding considerations, including:
 - Acceptable use of logos
 - Punctuation and placement of slogans and taglines
 - Information related to organization and product names

- Legal regulations concerning the use of trademarks and copyright disclaimers
- Words and phrases requiring further clarification, such as internet and technology terms
- Documentation policies, including procedures for document creation, and standard typefaces for all text used (47-48).

Considerations for online style guides

The following considerations apply when websites or ebooks are used for corporate style guides.

Accessibility

Bright (2005) advises that style guides should be easily accessible to all potential users (49). When online formats are used, it is critical to make sure that users have the network access and software required to use the guide. This is particularly true of ebooks, which require ereader software to be installed on each user's computer. The software must be compatible with the type of file used for the ebook, since not all ereader programs are capable of reading each file type. It is also important to provide training, to ensure employees understand how to use the guide correctly and make the most of it.

Navigation

"Online corporate style guides should be shallow sites with clear navigation that marks each topic, and links to shallow pages." This will help users locate the information they need quickly, without having to search multiple pages (49). Ease of navigation can be accomplished by creating a detailed table of contents, as well as including links within the ebook to other relevant portions of text.

Maintenance

It is important to routinely update corporate style guides in order to ensure that users have access to information that is current and accurate. Ebooks in EPUB format can be updated quickly and easily using Sigil, even by those with minimal knowledge of coding. EPUB files share many similarities with websites, and both are considered ebook formats. However, creating a style guide in website format may require more extensive coding skills.

Design considerations for ebooks

Susan Wiggenhorn and Richard Bellaver (2003) cite studies showing that people learn just as well using ebooks as they do with traditional paper books. Certain design considerations should be followed ensure that ebooks are user-friendly, especially when they will be used as a reference in the workplace. In a study of design preferences for ebooks, Chong, et al. (2009) noted that "ebook design is among the decisive factors which contribute to the users' satisfaction, and plays a crucial part in the success of ebooks" (214). Of the design considerations they discussed, the following are especially applicable to ebook style guides.

Navigation Aids

The majority of participants in this study perceived cross-referencing between pages, cross-referencing between table of contents and individual chapters, and bookmarks, highlighting, and

annotation functions as being able to enhance the function of ebooks (216-217). Cross-referencing can be accomplished by creating hyperlinks within the style guide, both in the table of contents and within chapters or sections. For example, a general section on punctuation could contain a hyperlink to another section that specifically addresses punctuation in slogans and taglines. Ereader software allows users to highlight or bookmark information, which could be particularly useful for marking parts of the style guide that are used most often.

Orientation Clues

In addition to navigation aids, “accurate and visible indications of a user’s place in an ebook are also suggested, so that the users know their progress through the book” (217). The researchers in this study advised using page numbers in ebooks, as this is something that many ebooks currently lack. Another helpful clue is to use standard color coding for hypertext links: “unvisited links must unquestionably be blue and visited links must unquestionably be reddish or purple” (217).

Page Layout

Study participants preferred page layouts that were tidy and consistent, with plenty of white space to avoid cluttered looking pages. They also favored text that was interspersed with images, and page contents that were presented in single, rather than multiple columns. The researchers advised “creating pages of a similar length to paper pages,” (218) in order to avoid scrolling.

Content Design

Study participants preferred to have the same typeface used throughout the ebook, with “different font sizes and colors to distinguish between the body text and the various headings and emphasized texts” (219). Fonts should also be large enough to read easily for a long period of time. The researchers advised using high contrast between background and text color, with black text on a white background being preferred for optimal legibility.

Scannability

Study participants preferred ebooks with content that was easy to scan or skim. The researchers advised keeping ebook content succinct, and suggested using simple sentences and well organized paragraphs when writing for electronic formats. Use of headings and subheadings, as well as bulleted lists was also found to improve scannability of ebook contents. These considerations are particularly applicable to style guides, which will most often be used as a reference, rather than read from beginning to end.

Are ebooks a good choice for corporate style guides?

Many of the ebook design considerations mentioned previously also apply to other formats, including print and websites. Those who are familiar with good document design principles will easily be able to apply that knowledge to creating ebooks. But whether ebooks are the best format to use for a corporate style guide requires careful consideration. The following information can help decision makers determine whether ebooks are the right choice for their corporate style guide.

Ease of creation and maintenance

Ebooks are relatively easy to create and maintain, even with minimal coding knowledge. Sigil is user-friendly software which allows users to type content directly into a Book View screen that shares similar features with word processing programs. Files are saved in EPUB format.

Portability and remote access

Ebooks may be used on a wide range of devices, including computers, tablets, and smartphones. This allows for exceptional portability and convenience, especially for those who prefer to edit hard copy. In this case, editors could access the style guide on their smartphone and refer to it while marking the document. Additionally, downloading a style guide ebook to a portable device makes it available even without Internet access.

File types

Currently, there is not a standard file format for ebooks, so companies must determine which format is the best choice for their style guide. The two most common file types, EPUB and MOBI, require different software for creation and use. Not all ereader devices support each file type. For example, Amazon's line of Kindle readers support the MOBI and AZW (an Amazon proprietary file type) formats. EPUB files must be converted to MOBI using software such as KindleGen or Calibre before they can be read on Kindle devices. EPUB is a more widely supported format. It is accessible through the iBooks app, and can be read on the Barnes and Noble Nook, the Kobo eReader, and the Sony Reader. Apps are also available for reading EPUB files on Android smartphones.

Version control

Style guides must be current, which requires frequent reviews and updates. Each time a new revision of a style guide is released, users would need to access the new version and delete the old one. In order to avoid possible version control problems, companies can email the new revision to all employees, and ask that they delete the previous file.

Conclusion

Corporate style guides are becoming increasingly necessary in order to help companies ensure consistency in their documentation. Ebooks could serve as a user-friendly way to present this information. Document design principles for ebooks are similar to other formats, and ebooks are fairly simple to create, particularly when the EPUB format is used. Other advantages such as portability and ease of access with smartphones and ereader devices mean that ebooks warrant consideration as a format for corporate style guides.

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