

Corporate Training On The Go: iBooks

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In the first of this multi-part series on educating with mobile technology, we will discuss the pros and cons of developing an iBook.

No matter how much corporations resist changing their tried-and-true methods for educating sales professionals, the infiltration of mobile devices is forcing them to look beyond traditional classroom or computer-based training sessions to training using mobile technology. One device in particular—Apple’s ubiquitous iPad—is setting the course for the mobile education market.

More than any other technology, iPads have driven companies to produce training materials that are more dynamic, more interactive, and more visually stunning. One of the ways to produce training materials for iPad is to create an iBook, using Apple’s free proprietary app, iBooks Author.

OK, so what is an iBook, anyway?

iBook 101

Designed exclusively for iPad, iBooks are digital books that bring content to life in ways the printed page never could. Examples include digital textbooks, cookbooks, novels, or just about any type of book that can benefit from utilizing creative design, photography, videos, and interactive features that make learning fun.

There are many beautiful examples of iBooks available for download from Apple’s app store, but as with any design, the visual style of your iBook will vary greatly depending on your own skill level.

“Creating training materials in iBooks Author allows us to include a variety of materials appealing to every learning style,” said Alliance Performance Systems creative director Jesse Zeimet. “Video, audio, games, custom interactions and quizzes—they’re all available in an iBook.”

Essentially, iBooks allow you to create content for iPad that is more interactive than traditional printed books and presentations, but, as with any technology, there are some challenges to overcome.



Worth the Effort

To start, let's assume that any materials you convert to an iBook—regardless of their quality or effectiveness—will encounter problems when transferred with iBooks Author. The reason is quite simple. Depending on the amount of text and graphics in your materials, as well as the complexity of the layout, a good deal of reformatting will be required to convert the content to an easy-to-use iBook. Simply put, there is too much stuff—and certainly not enough room—for an iBook to look identical to a paper-based book. But with a little effort and practice, your high-tech iBook will quickly outshine its low-tech sibling.

Once you master creating an iBook, does that mean you can discard your traditional, paper-based materials? Perhaps one day soon. "To date, iBooks have primarily been used for client pre-work and reinforcement of content learned in the classroom, but some clients have discussed going entirely paperless," hints Zeimet. "The next generation of sales professionals has little need for cumbersome, three-ring binders full of printed materials. They want quick, easy, and most importantly—mobile."

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There You Are

Since user interaction on iPad is performed with your fingers, the content developed must be simple and intuitive for touch-and-go navigation. Large, easy-to-find buttons and links are essential to a successful iBook. "You should incorporate multiple ways to navigate through the materials," says Sarah Eshleman, a graphic designer and iBooks developer at Alliance Performance Systems. "You want to ensure the user can reach the desired information in the quickest way possible—this is expected in mobile learning."

One way to ensure users can find what they're looking for and navigate through your iBook is to make buttons and links much bigger than you would on a printed page or computer screen. Apple suggests 44 by 44 pixels at a minimum; Eshleman suggests going even bigger—at least 50 by 50 pixels.

Think About Graphics

The standard iPad has a 10-inch display, while the iPad Mini is just shy of eight inches. No matter the version, screen "real estate" is at a premium, and the quality of your iBook will be judged—fairly or not—on the quality of your graphics.

If your iBook feels crowded, one method of creating more space is to change its orientation. Changing the layout from horizontal to vertical, for example, is a quick way to create more room. But space isn't the only concern.

Traditional computer monitors and websites display graphics (or images) at 72 ppi, or pixels per inch—an image's resolution—but the ultrahigh-resolution Retina display found on newer iPads requires a bit more oomph.

"The images are still set at 72 ppi, but are four times larger than on the web," says Eshleman. "This creates an image that has a 'double density,' or higher pixel count, and presents beautifully on iPad's Retina display."

Don't Ignore Text

Images are only half the equation in terms of visibility—text is also critical when designing an iBook. In fact, text written as text (in other words, not part of a graphic) on an iBook is sharper than on other devices like PCs

and laptops. The only drawback, as Eshleman points out, is traditional pinch-and-zoom finger gestures, which are a primary feature of iPads and iPhones, are not available in an iBook. “The end user cannot increase the size of the font in an iBook,” she explains. “This can only be done by a developer when creating the iBook, so it’s important for a product manager to be aware of font sizes and their space requirements.” In other words, what a user sees on-screen is what they get, so make sure your text is large enough to be easily read without the need to zoom.

Speed vs. Space

Sitting in a room with a decent high-speed internet connection is one thing, but chances are your iPad will be running on a mobile network and speeds will vary greatly. Thus, it is important to keep your content simple enough for users with weaker connections to download and store on their iBooks shelf. The easiest way to lose someone’s interest is to offer them clunky, slow-to-download content. Keep it streamlined, but engaging.

There is also a finite amount of storage space on iPad, and even less on iPad Mini. With that in mind, it is important to remember to keep your iBook file size as small as possible, while still retaining the important information needed to train end users. In other words, get your message across, but don’t go overboard with unnecessary content.

Run It Through Legal

Does your company restrict the storage of training content (called intellectual property, or IP) on devices like iPad? Before you say no, investigate.

To prevent snags, Zeimet cautions iBook developers to check for such restrictions or policies before you get started. “It always helps to know who your partners in information technology and learning development are, and connect with them early on—they may have insights that will help make your iBook project go more smoothly.”

If your company prohibits locally-stored content, don’t expect an iBook to be arriving on an iPad near you. In this case, you may want to consider alternative e-learning platforms like web-based or streaming content providers. These platforms allow materials to be streamed directly to users’ mobile devices through a secure website. It’s like watching a Netflix movie on your iPad; the content is yours to enjoy for now, but it doesn’t save to your device.

Despite the challenges mentioned, an iBook is a tool that should not be overlooked if you have been charged with figuring out how to deliver engaging training content to a highly mobile and increasingly tech-savvy sales force.

What’s Next?

If reading about iBooks has your creative juices flowing, you’ll want to join us for the next installment of this series, as we explore the pros and cons of other electronic publishing formats for iPad, including ePubs and HTML5. Stay tuned.

The Ultimate iBook Checklist

- ✓ Did you check with Legal?
- ✓ Did you create large, easy-to-find-and-touch buttons and links?
- ✓ Are your graphics high enough quality?
- ✓ Is your text large enough to see without pinching-and-zooming?
- ✓ Horizontal or landscape? Which layout best suits your content?
- ✓ Is your iBook streamlined enough to download over a slow connection?
- ✓ Did you check with Legal again?