Bringing New Meaning To Form And Function

(NAPSA)—One of the quickest ways to slow people down is to hand them forms. In a rush to open a new credit account at your favorite store? Or hoping to quickly enroll for new benefits through your company's health insurance program? Not without first completing forms. The same can be true when interacting with government agencies, as a subcontractor bidding for work on a new construction project or as a parent enrolling a child at a day care center. Like it or not, forms are everywhere. In fact, a U.S. research group estimates Americans fill out more than 100 billion forms annually.

On the good side, forms help us gain access to services we need. When you are in the midst of completing them, however, that benefit is often overlooked. Mostly, people cringe when handed pages of forms, only recalling how tedious they are to complete. And if forms are processed with errors, the real work might only be starting, with even simple errors like putting the wrong digit in a zip code possibly resulting in expensive and frustrating delays.

Businesses typically fare even worse when it comes to handling forms. Studies highlight that over 80 percent of business documents are forms, and the cost of processing even a single paper form is as high as $50. For companies of all sizes that rely on forms daily, finding smarter, more streamlined ways to capture information, collaborate and process requests is critical.

Using electronic instead of paper forms can save you time and trouble and perhaps a tree or two.

From Pen And Paper To Online Documents

Fortunately, technology advances are helping to make paper-based forms a thing of the past. Today, electronic forms are as common as their paper counterparts. Processes once reliant on pen and paper are increasingly yielding to more efficient means leveraging digital forms in PDF, a widely used document format that presents information electronically exactly as it appears on the printed page. Visits to most government or business Web sites reveal a range of digital forms that can be completed, submitted and even signed electronically using popular, free software such as Adobe Reader.

An important enhancement in some electronic forms is built-in intelligence that lets people know if they've incorrectly entered information or forgotten to complete part of a form. The forms can also handle calculations and other tasks that decrease chances of errors.

The benefits are dramatic. At the Medina Independent School District in Texas, better approaches to processing more than 200 forms are providing big returns. Using only simple tools in the widely available Acrobat 8 Professional software, the school district converted static documents to fillable PDF forms. Students, faculty and parents can complete and return the forms electronically using Adobe Reader. The simple shift from paper to digital accelerated the district's forms processing by as much as 80 percent and reduced administrative costs by thousands of dollars a year.

"Whether you're a school, small business or large corporation, cutting costs and moving money to higher-value activities is imperative," says Randy Moczygemba, superintendent of Medina ISD. "It's just smart business sense, and it reduces work for our administrators, teachers and parents."

Forming New Views

The next time you start to complete a form on paper, see if a digital alternative is available. You can end up saving time and avoiding hassles. For times when you need to create your own form—as is the case with a marketing manager seeking customer feedback on a new product, a lawyer collecting personal information from a client, or even the youth soccer coach arranging halftime snack duties with parents—consider going electronic. You'll be a star to those on the receiving end. Plus, with the heightened focus on all things "green," you might even help save a tree or two.