Understanding Forms: A Complete Guide for Design and Management
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Forms represent a complex technology. This comes as no surprise to those of us who have spent a lifetime in the forms business and have witnessed the rapid changes that continue to impact our profession. However, many people don’t take forms all that seriously and, as a direct result, business efficiency suffers.

BFMA has entered into an agreement with Essociates Group, Inc. for the development of forms-specific training in a variety of areas. The first result is a three-day course entitled “Understanding Forms: A Complete Guide for Design and Management.” In this presentation, we’ll discuss that course and outline the topics and concepts that it includes.

Unfortunately, there are no standard, generally accepted definitions for much of the terminology used within the forms profession. That is a problem. Without standards, effective communication becomes difficult to achieve. Therefore, we start with our definitions, coupled with those developed and copyrighted by BFMA.

Document - a container of information
This is a useful definition since it rightfully covers virtually anything that displays information, including signs, posters, billboards, forms, brochures, letters, memos - the list is endless. Accordingly, the term “document,” which has become almost bankrupt in its ubiquitous use today, is much too general when used as a substitute for “form.” It appears that many forms companies, and even many forms professionals, are anxious to replace “form” with “document,” as if somehow “form” is a bad word. Let’s get past that problem quickly. A “form” is a specific kind of document and we are in the forms business.

FORM:
- the basic business tool (whether printed or electronic) for collecting and transmitting information,
- the catalyst for getting things done, and
- the record of what was done.

We like to point out that a form is a form until someone fills it out. Then it becomes a record and is subject to records management requirements. Before it is filled out, a form is subject to forms management requirements. There is a very distinct difference.

A “form” consists of four elements. All forms contain all four elements to differing degrees but all four elements must be considered when developing forms. A complete understanding of these four elements is vital for effective, efficient forms development, regardless of the “form of the form,” paper or electronic.

The four elements are:
1. Intent
2. Container
3. Data
4. Image

Let’s briefly define and look at each element.
1. INTENT

All forms must have a valid reason to exist. The justification for the existence of the form is its “intent.” What workflow does it support? What is the primary business function; primary, secondary and tertiary business systems supported by the form? What business rules apply? What are the pre- and post-processing requirements? What is the form’s lifecycle? Does the form require legal approval; secure access; signatures? What are the retention and filing requirements for records created from the form?

Answers to these questions are determined through process analysis techniques, including cost analysis and Return on Investment (ROI).

Forms require periodic review to ascertain whether workflow requirements are still met. Processes change regularly. Businesses change regularly. Accordingly, forms need to change to meet these new requirements. Regular, systematic review of all forms is very important.

We generally define analysis requirements as falling into three areas:

a. Macro Analysis - an analysis performed on the population of forms as a whole
   Queries are performed against the database, looking for opportunities to combine, eliminate, or redesign forms. This macro analysis is performed at least annually.

b. Reorder Analysis - performed when a form reaches reorder point (paper forms) or annually for electronic forms
   Every form must be subjected to a periodic review. This review ranges from a simple eMail to the form owner asking whether anything has changed to a formal review of the business process(es) supported by the form.

c. Ad Hoc Analysis - performed upon request outside the routine schedule
   A form owner may initiate an ad hoc review (e.g., study all envelopes) or a proposed system change may trigger the review. For whatever reason it is required, such a review challenges the form and its processes.

2. CONTAINER

This is the physical layout of the data collection vehicle. It is the lines, boxes, graphics, text and other objects that make up the static description of the form. A container takes many shapes, substrates, sizes and properties.

One of the first steps in container design is completion of a design analysis. Successful completion of this analysis requires a thorough understanding of what is possible. This includes knowledge of substrates, production technology, printing methods, marking engines, inks, browsers, networks, servers, fillers, drawing techniques, secure document requirements and techniques, form types, and much more.

DESIGN ANALYSIS: in addition to resulting in the design layout,
- increases productivity by creating a basic business tool which is self-instructive,
- encourages cooperative response,
- provides for easy entry of data,
- reduces the potential for error,
- facilitates use of the information, and
- enhances the organization’s image.

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Containers can range from paper to pressure sensitive labels to browser-based designs and can include tags, unit sets, continuous forms, envelopes, self mailers, cut sheets, register books, secure documents, electronic forms, Internet forms, data capture pages (caption-blank forms), and more. Forms can be combinations of product types such as form-label combinations, dual web products, combination tags and unit sets, and combinations of combinations. Many unique designs have been created to serve specific workflow requirements.

Following design analysis, creating the form layout design is accomplished using a wide variety of methods and tools. Familiarity with such methods and tools enables the designer to solve workflow requirements in very creative and cost-effective ways.

3. DATA

One of the primary purposes of a form is to capture and display data. It is the variable information that distinguishes a form from other documents. A thorough understanding of the sources and uses of data is vital to effective forms design and management.

Data originate from many sources. These include handwriting, OCR, OMR, ICR, MICR, keyboard entry, database interaction, XML, bar code scans, bit mapped scans, and more. Each type of data capture entails features, advantages and benefits that must be understood to solve workflow requirements effectively.

Data collection is a science in and of itself. There are many features and tools available to qualify and restrict data entry, validate data, display formats and capture data for reuse. Techniques for scanning, importing, database connectivity, storage and retrieval, ensuring data integrity and interaction with users are all tools available to the competent designer. Understanding data capture and handling techniques for physical substrates, electronic forms and Internet forms is key for effective forms development.

Many forms, once complete, serve as legal records with very specific retention requirements. Such requirements must be considered at the time of container design. Other important data retention considerations include providing for container and data to be recreated exactly as the user originally completed the transaction, data management such as form edition dates, signature management, secure access support and information privacy.

4. IMAGE

This is an often overlooked, yet very important function for a form. Image concerns the interface between the form and the form users. It is the graphical interface between the data and users, systems, and information.

Image also considers the marketing aspects of a form. All forms, whether used internally or externally, project an image of the organization to the users. For many external users, such as customers, the form container may very well be their only interaction with the organization. They form lasting impressions based on their experience with the organization’s forms. Proper usability considerations, logo displays, marketing messages and use of standards positively influence Image.

Many companies utilize a formal “Style Guide” or program manual to communicate and enforce standards of design, presentation and business rules. Contents of the style guide can vary, but usually include acceptable (and unacceptable) logo uses, fonts, substrates, typestyles, style sheets, and more.

Image also addresses accessibility. This defines standards for design such that all forms deployed in electronic format are equally accessible and usable by persons with disabilities. Section 508 of the
United States Rehabilitation Act, defines accessibility standards and requirements for Internet-based forms. Today, compliance with Section 508 requirements is mandatory for all federal government agencies. It is just a matter of time before such requirements are mandatory for most other governments and large businesses. Forms professionals should understand the requirements and how to attain accessibility, not merely because it may become the law, but because it is the right thing to do.

PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER

Forms management is the process for managing all aspects of development, production and deployment of forms throughout the enterprise. It includes program establishment, process analysis, forms control, forms files, forms databases, forms procurement, warehousing and distribution and revision, as well as edition control.

**FORMS MANAGEMENT:** the systematic process of
- increasing productivity and minimizing errors in information capture, transmission, and recovery through the use of workflow analysis and graphic design techniques;
- providing administrative control;
- reducing procurement, storage, distribution, and use costs through standardization; and
- ensuring the adequacy, business as well as legal, of all historical records.

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Many position titles and descriptions are in use today. There is a trend towards assigning this function to Information Technology departments, mirroring the trend away from paper-based forms to electronic and Internet forms. Generally, such an assignment is not successful, as all organizations still have lots of paper forms which tend to be unmanaged by IT groups. Forms Management is a vital function that, when performed well, can significantly improve an organization’s business processes, reduce costs throughout those processes, and drive improved sales, customer service and customer retention.

BFMA is the leading organization for forms and forms management education in the world. BFMA offers many educational opportunities, including the Annual Symposium, regional seminars, traveling training classes, local chapter meetings, a web site, Formspace (a listserv group), publications and professional networking.

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