Dump your PDF brand guidelines

Why you should dump your PDF brand guidelines

We're slightly biased, but PDFs are no longer the best format for your brand guidelines. They're inflexible and impossible to keep track of. Instead, companies should look for modern, cloud-based solutions as a more suitable place for their resources.

When the PDF was developed in the early 1990s, people built their brands predominantly offline. Your brand guidelines could be relatively simple — they needed to include your logos, colors, and taglines and look the same on any computer. PDFs were the perfect format for displaying basic instructions.

Unfortunately, the functionality of PDF documents hasn't evolved at the same rate as the technology that drives companies' digital presences. If your brand guidelines are PDFs, it's unlikely you've got rules for all your assets, touchpoints, and use cases.

It's as easy as one-two-three: How to dump your PDF brand guidelines

1. Accept that PDFs can't keep up with modern brand-building needs

2. Breathe new life into your brand guidelines with a centralized solution

3. Maximize your brand guidelines with Frontify
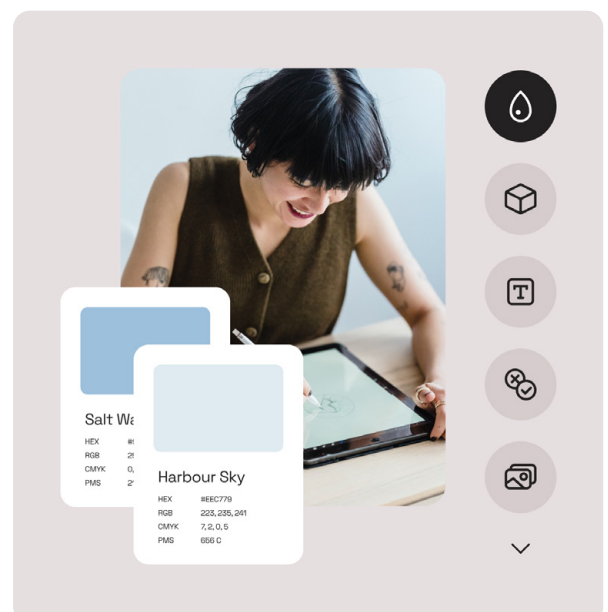
Step 1

Accept that PDFs can't keep up with modern brand-building needs

Brand guidelines are one of the most valuable resources for building your brand. They help your internal teams and external partners understand how your brand should look, sound, and feel so they can properly represent it in their work. Don't limit your potential by trying to fit your specifications into a file format that can't adapt to all the asset types and touchpoints modern brands need.
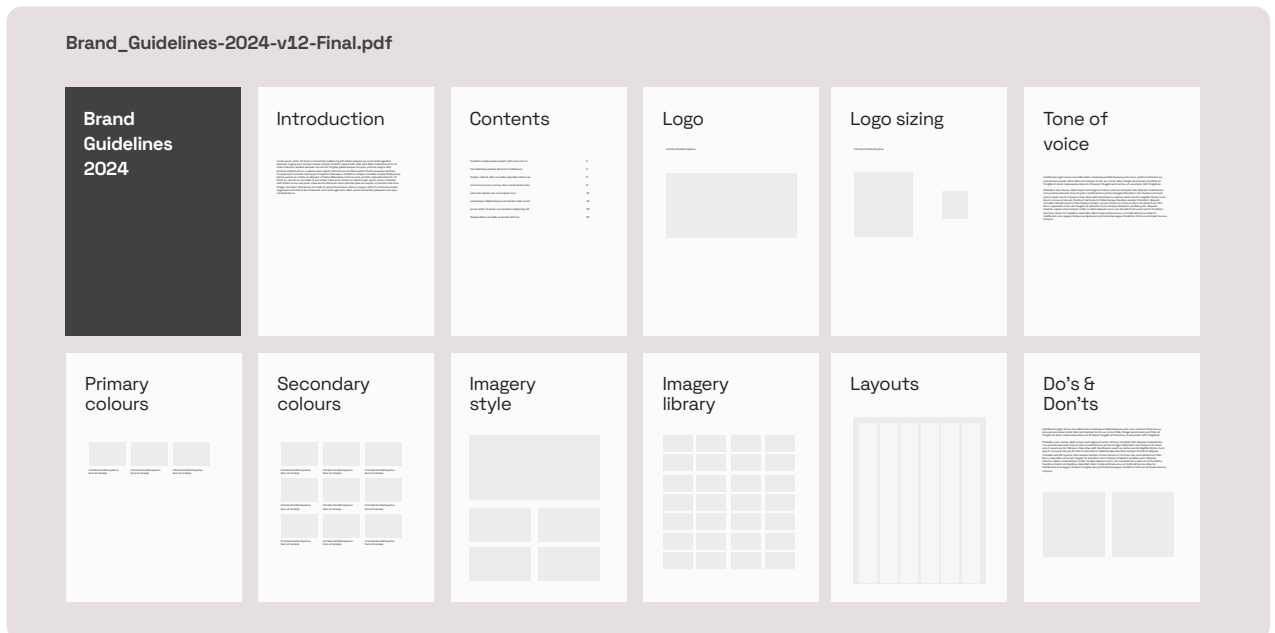
Lost efficiency: You lose hours searching for your guidelines

If people can't find your guidelines, staying on brand becomes an obstacle. Teams either waste a lot of time searching, or they just make things up, leading to marketing materials that all look a little off (brand). Unless every single employee has an immaculately organized filing system, they'll struggle to keep track of your PDF guidelines — and your brand.

This was a challenge for the German newspaper Süddeutsche Zeitung (SZ). Korbinian Vielmeier, Head of Brand at SZ, said,

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"Before we started working with Frontify, different style guides existed … which made it really difficult and time-consuming for the user to find and work with the correct content."

A PDF is a single document, which means it's easy to lose. When companies create or update brand guidelines, they often email them to ensure everyone has a copy. While you may have documents saved on your shared drive, employees are likely to have their own copy somewhere — on their desktops or in Slack and inboxes.

For some team members, this scattered distribution won't be a problem. Designers and marketers generally consult the guidelines regularly, so they know where to find them. For less-frequent users of your assets and guidelines, however, looking for PDFs wastes a lot of time: Research by Elastic found that 54% of workers "spend more time digging for documents than replying to email."

This isn't an isolated problem. It's likely to affect a large number of employees. According to 35% of respondents in our State of Brand Ownership Report, which surveyed 759 people across creative and leadership teams, less than half of employees at their company need to "use or create on-brand company materials on a weekly basis." Those less-frequent brand builders have a choice to make. They spend more time looking for their guidelines or best-guess their content or design and risk creating an inconsistent representation of your brand.

Lack of collaboration: Someone always works with an outdated version

Your brand evolves — and so should your guidelines. Most companies create multiple versions of their guidelines, which makes it difficult for employees to know which document to use.
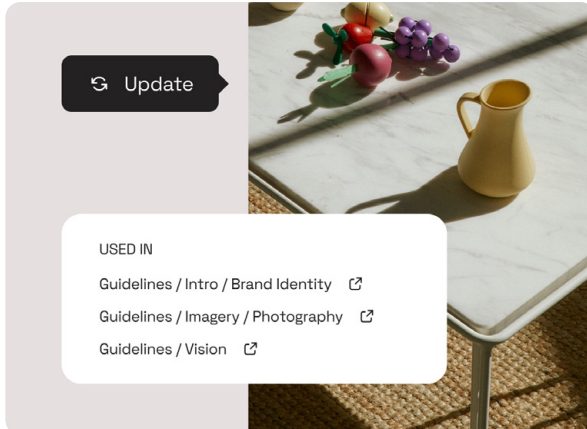
To complicate things further, not everyone works in the same office. Collaborating across multiple locations makes it harder to check that people are looking at the latest version of your guidelines. Remote work and distributed teams mean it's increasingly likely that someone still has outdated brand documents saved on their computer. What's more, being present in multiple markets means that teams will localize content — by consulting several global and local guidelines and increasing the risk of inconsistent assets.

Research and advisory company Forrester interviewed several brand managers and leaders for its report on the total economic impact of Frontify's platform. The results showed that

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"organizations kept basic tools such as brand guidelines in PDF format, which made them difficult to keep up to date. While the guidelines were easy to send, it was impossible to manage and control the version that each person was using. Once a PDF was squirreled away on a hard drive, there was little way to dislodge it."

Just because you send updated PDFs doesn't mean that everyone will delete old files and refer to the latest information. If employees or external partners, such as agencies or freelancers, work from old versions of your guidelines, they'll introduce inconsistencies and dilute your brand.

Decreased productivity: No software, no (quick) updates

Another frustration with PDFs is that you need the right software and the original file to revise them. But many companies work with agencies to develop their guidelines — especially if done as part of a rebranding project — so you may not have either.

Brands change. For example, you might evolve some of your core messaging and values as you change your product to ensure they continue to align with its capabilities. Alternatively, if you expand, you may need instructions for creating content for new channels and locations. You have to adapt your guidelines to show your changing brand. If you can't do that, your documents won't be an up-to-date and authentic reflection of your identity.

Keeping your guidelines current becomes a low-priority task when you don't manage them in-house. As a result, your brand stops evolving and starts looking outdated and inauthentic. You may have to decide if you want to use your budget to update the guidelines or create new designs for an upcoming campaign.
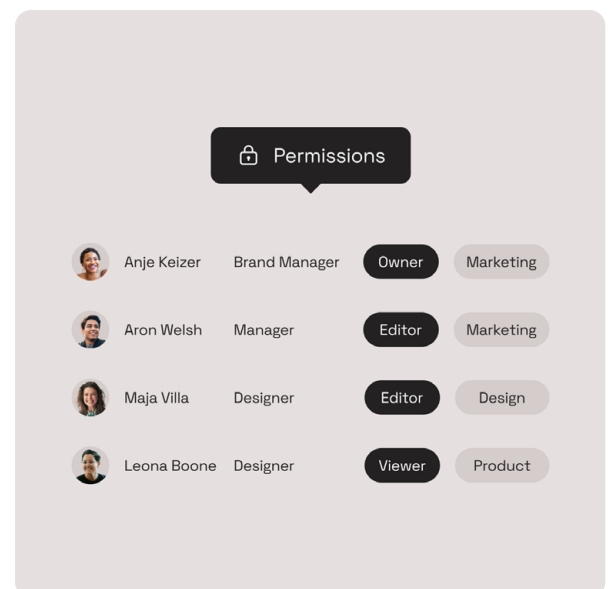
Limited innovation: No interactive brand elements in your guidelines

When PDFs were first released, one of the main benefits was the ability to produce files that look and function the same, no matter who's working with them. As brands get more complex and have more asset types and instructions, PDFs struggle to meet those needs.

Brand guidelines have to cover more file types, creative elements, and use cases than ever before. The days when you could include logos and color palettes are long gone. Today's guidelines include video, animation, UX elements, and components such as buttons or dropdown menus, which are difficult or impractical to include in a static document.

Each addition means your PDF resources become bigger, hard to navigate, and prone to slow loading times and errors in displaying the included file types.

For example, while you can embed videos and interactive elements into PDF files, this is only the case for people with the latest version of the software. Even if you add everything you want to your PDF, your colleagues or external partners may be unable to access that content.

Why PDFs can't keep up with modern brand-building needs

Lost efficiency

Lack of collaboration

Decreased productivity

Limited innovation

Step 2

Breathe new life into your brand guidelines with a centralized solution

There's a time and place for PDFs — but guidelines are not it. An online brand-building platform like Frontify is much more accessible, flexible, and user-friendly than traditional PDFs, making it a better choice for hosting instructions.

Frontify helps us bring our globalized brand identity to life. Coordinating projects with our partners, worldwide, is now a lot easier by having everything brand-related centralized in one platform — the BVB Brand Portal.

Marius Happe,
Head of Marketing at Borussia Dortmund

One centralized, online location everyone can access

Cloud-based brand guidelines are accessed via URL. This means that anyone with the link can bookmark and access your documents.

Online guidelines democratize access to one of your most important brand resources. Employees, agency partners, and freelancers working remotely or in global offices can be confident they're seeing the latest rules and recommendations.

Frontify centralizes Datacom's brand and acts as the single source of truth for over 45,000 files and guidelines. Kirsty Brown, Senior Brand Manager at Datacom, explained the benefits of centralizing their brand documentation:

"Frontify has enabled us to create and centralize brand guidelines and supporting resources, ensuring anyone at Datacom, as well as our partners and agencies, have access to the correct and approved brand assets in just a few clicks."

Advantages of your new centralized brand home

Streamline access to relevant assets for all teams

Customize and configure your brand elements

Tailor branding strategies for different markets

Ensure consistent use of up-to-date guidelines

Download brand assets right from your guidelines

PDFs exist separate from your brand assets: You can consult the guidelines for the correct logo, but then you need to search through shared drives to find the files. Online documentation contextualizes and makes it easier for your employees to understand your brand and use it in their work. This saves them time and creates efficiencies across multiple teams.
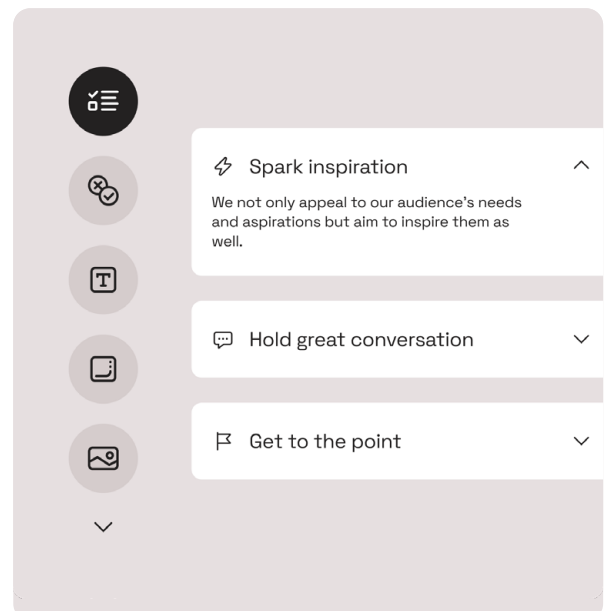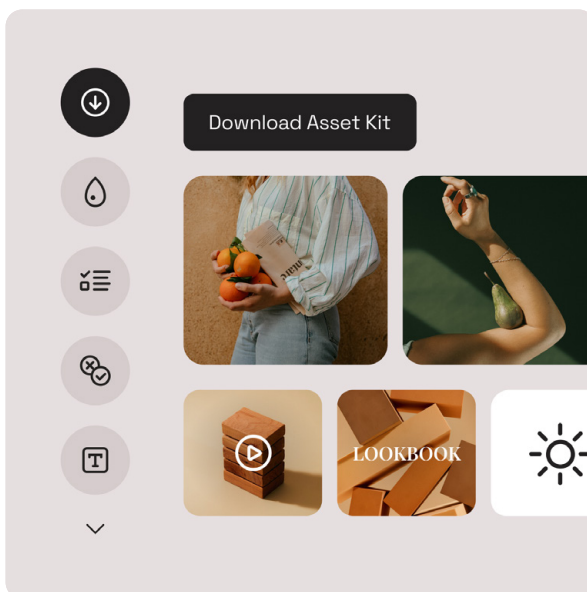
With online brand guidelines, you can embed the relevant files, so users can immediately download the assets they need. This makes your guidelines even more valuable as they become a practical tool, not just a set of instructions.

Update once, update everywhere

Once you refresh your PDFs, you have to send them around to ensure everyone has the correct version. Cloud-based brand guidelines get updated for all users immediately and automatically. Whether your team is working from home or in international offices, you can be confident that everyone works with the latest information.

Energy company E.ON had worked with static PDFs but has switched to Frontify's online cloud-based guidelines. Holger Castritius, Head of UX at E.ON, explained:

"Our brand guidelines are always up-to-date and they're easy to use — to share and to collaborate on."

As the E.ON example shows, companies that switch to online guidelines benefit from unified brand communication to strengthen their market position — teams no longer work with outdated documents that contribute to confusing and inconsistent visuals and messages.

USED IN

Guidelines / Intro / Brand Identity

Guidelines / Imagery / Photography

Guidelines / Vision
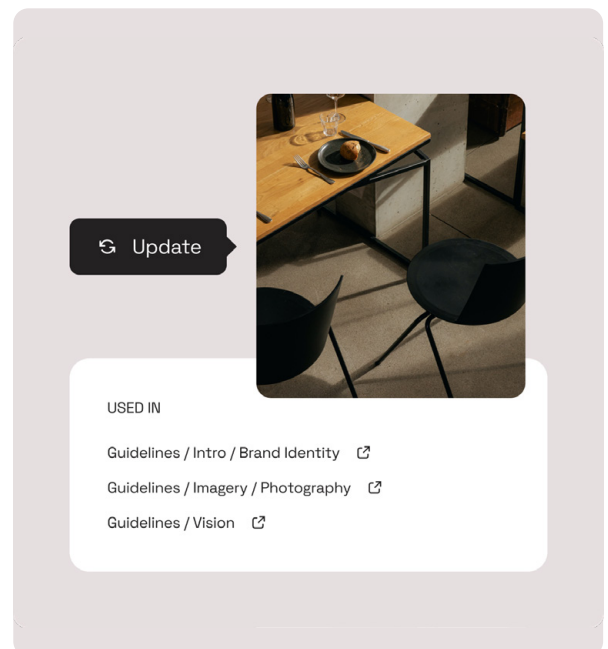
Improved consistency means you're presenting a more professional, authentic image of your brand to the market, which is important for building trust with your audience. It has internal benefits, too. When everyone's following the same set of guidelines, your teams don't have to spend time checking if customer-facing materials are on brand. Instead, they can focus on strategic and creative work — and become brand ambassadors who promote brand awareness internally and externally.

Add custom blocks for any brand element you can imagine

Online guidelines provide a lot of flexibility: In Frontify, users can customize their guidelines with content blocks — the basic units of interactive and multimedia instruction — and bring their brand to life with UI and UX elements, audio, video, or animation.

American coffeehouse chain Caribou Coffee needed a brand-building solution that was scalable, inclusive, and intuitive — they needed Frontify: "We can now be confident that the necessary stakeholders always have the most up-to-date information. In addition to the guidelines themselves, we also love the ability to be able to customize our brand portal, which we plan to continue optimizing in the future," said Courtney Gifford, Digital Engagement and Loyalty Marketing Manager at Caribou Coffee.

Technology changes mean you don't always know what the next critical brand element will be. This is why it's essential to use a future-proof tool that evolves and scales with your ever-changing needs.
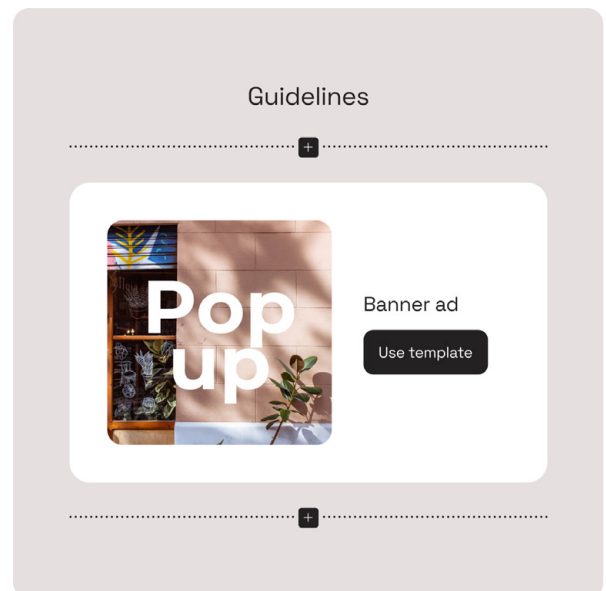
Step 3

Maximize your brand guidelines with Frontify

Companies that host their brand guidelines on platforms such as Fronitfy not only achieve brand consistency but also transform their brand-building processes by streamlining collaboration and enhancing productivity.

A centralized approach enables teams to work more efficiently and creatively, reducing the time spent on design approvals and ensuring faster execution of marketing strategies.

Scalability:
Online brand guidelines allow companies to scale their brand identity easily — by quickly editing and distributing updates across various locations.

Ease of use:
Companies can skip timely and costly agency processes. Instead, they can redirect these resources towards more strategic initiatives or activities that deliver greater business value.

Consistency:
With digital guidelines, all stakeholders access the same information. This centralization eliminates ambiguity and questions about versions or updates.

Customization:
Online brand guidelines offer enhanced display options for different content types, allowing the brand's identity to be displayed and developed in one place.

Dump your PDF brand guidelines!
Learn more about Frontify's brand guidelines or request a personalized demo to see how you can accelerate your brand-building efforts!