PDF Software Manuals – Ugh!
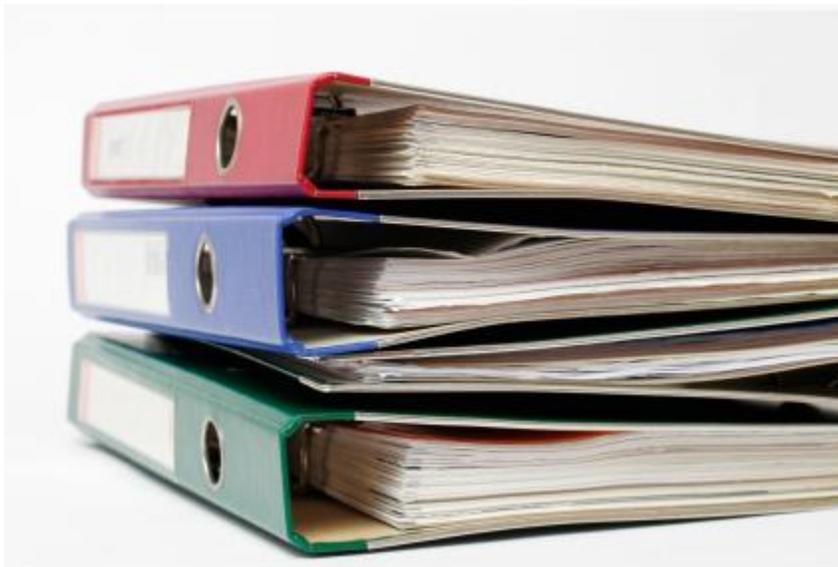
By Peter Lawrence Alexander / May 7, 2009

PDF software manuals – the studio's new pain in the bunzola.

Go to a baseball game and you're likely to hear the barker cry out, *"Programs! Programs! Get yer programs! Ya can't know the players without a program!"* As with baseball, so with the recording studio. You can't know the players (the software we're using) without a program (the manual).

Now there was a time when companies would create a manual and pack it in the box. But this is fading quick. That's because getting the manuals written and designed to fit into the box, then get it printed timely, and packaged is a chore and a half. Then there's the shipping, which is costly enough, but with a 1-2 pound manual, the shipping goes up.

Then there's that catch-22 situation of creating the wonderful manual that no one will read. So you've just spent a bundle on paper that may not even be used to light a fire on the beach for a little summer night barbecue.

However, there are times I'd like to burn the manual, barbecue or not.

And the reasons are:

1. clutter creating disorganization and confusion
2. poor design for effective online use
3. poor use of color that wastes ink

Clutter
Do a piece with Project SAM, EastWest, Addictive Drums and any Vienna Instrument, and right there, you've got nearly 200 pages of docs either online or on your desktop. To organize, you need to buy three-hole pre-punched paper, and of course, a three-ring binder or two, or five.

And some of these manuals are genuinely indispensable, especially the Vienna Instruments manuals because they contain the data needed to more effectively MIDI edit.

As you watch the paper print (is this a new soap opera in the making?), you have to make a decision that affects room organization – will you put the manual in its own binder or put it in a binder with several manuals?

However you do it in a binder, it's 187 square inches of space taken up on your desktop. And the standard 3-ring binders don't always fit bookcases neatly, either.

Poor Design For Effective Online Use
Using a PDF software manual could be a great thing if it's designed well so that you can easily go back and forth between the program and the documentation. Unfortunately, I haven't seen this yet. You still have to scroll up and down to read.

Poor Use of Color That Wastes Ink
I'm thinking specifically of a drum manual that on the inside pages made pretty decent use of color, until you got to the cover, which was pitch black with some white lettering. My poor ink jet printer! When that cover came out, you could hold it by its page corner and just feel the weight of the ink.

Getting Organized
I tried printing out the manuals, putting them into a file folder, and then filing them. In theory, that should be a cozy solution, but in practice, you end up with folders and loose papers laying around. So in the end, I've opted for smaller white 3-ring binders, 1″ or smaller (when I can find them), with a plastic sheath on the front where I can slide in the cover and then on the spine, label it for quick grabbing.

However, I still end up with binders-o-rama.

Which leads me to conclude that the best way to handle things is to just learn the program so well you don't need the manual (why create music when you can read a manual), or grow a third telescopic eye to slow down the need for bifocals (aka progressive lenses).

Oh the joys of the 21st Century composing life.

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