Adobe Spark: A Web-based, Customizable Graphic Design Tool

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Abstract: Adobe Spark is a user-friendly, cloud-based graphic design tool that can be used by staff at any skill level to develop library marketing content. Using Adobe Spark libraries can maintain a consistent look and feel throughout a variety of marketing campaigns. Adobe Spark can create social media posts, flyers, web pages, presentations, and video stories. Templates and themes can be adapted with stock content or with content from the user. Adobe Spark's capabilities, functionality and limitations are discussed, as well as its free and subscription options and features.

Keywords: marketing of libraries, web-based graphic design, library presentations, social media marketing, free graphic design, cloud-based design, branded design

Introduction

Adobe Spark (Spark) is an integrated web and mobile design tool for creating "visual stories" allowing casual users to present ideas in a visually appealing manner. It is a web-based, user-friendly graphic design tool for creating modern web pages, flyers, video presentations, social media content, advertisements, and other visual projects. Spark users create projects using the provided templates or from scratch; easy-to-follow prompts combine textual elements with photos and branding icons within the templates. Users also have the option to add music and video to their projects. Content developed with Adobe Spark may be downloaded or shared via social media tools that are integrated with the Spark platform. Adobe Spark is ideal for library marketing because it has been designed for ease-of-use by people who are not graphic design professionals. This ease-of-use allows libraries without a graphic designer on staff (or the funds required to employ a design team) to implement

professional-looking campaigns. For libraries with graphic designers, Spark facilitates rapid brainstorming and prototype creation.

Formats and Platforms

Projects in Spark fall into three categories, dubbed by Adobe as "story formats": Spark Video, Spark Pages, and Spark Posts. All three share a similar user-interface and design philosophy. Spark Video allows the user to create short movies to tell stories. Spark Video projects start off by (optionally) selecting a story template. These templates consist of narrative types, such as "Teach a Lesson," "Promote an Idea," or "Tell What Happened." Selecting one of these creates a skeletal outline for the video. For example, a "Promote an Idea" project generates slides for defining the setting, describing the problem itself, articulating a future vision, proposing a solution, noting the impact, and then a call to action.

Each slide in a Spark Video project begins with a video clip of up to 30 seconds or a still picture that can be panned and zoomed. These slides can be overlaid with text, visual effects, music and narration for which Spark provides a library of themes, fonts, transitions, and royalty-free music. Slides can be manipulated slightly by trimming their length, but Spark Video is an assembly tool rather than a video editor. There are many other video editing tools on the market that can be used to supplement Spark.

In the social media age, the ability to quickly assemble a video from existing content is very appealing to draw attention to library services and resources. Libraries often have recurring events, for example. Software that allows for easy import and editing of existing content reduces the time it takes staff to create marketing videos and the need to spend money to create new content each time.
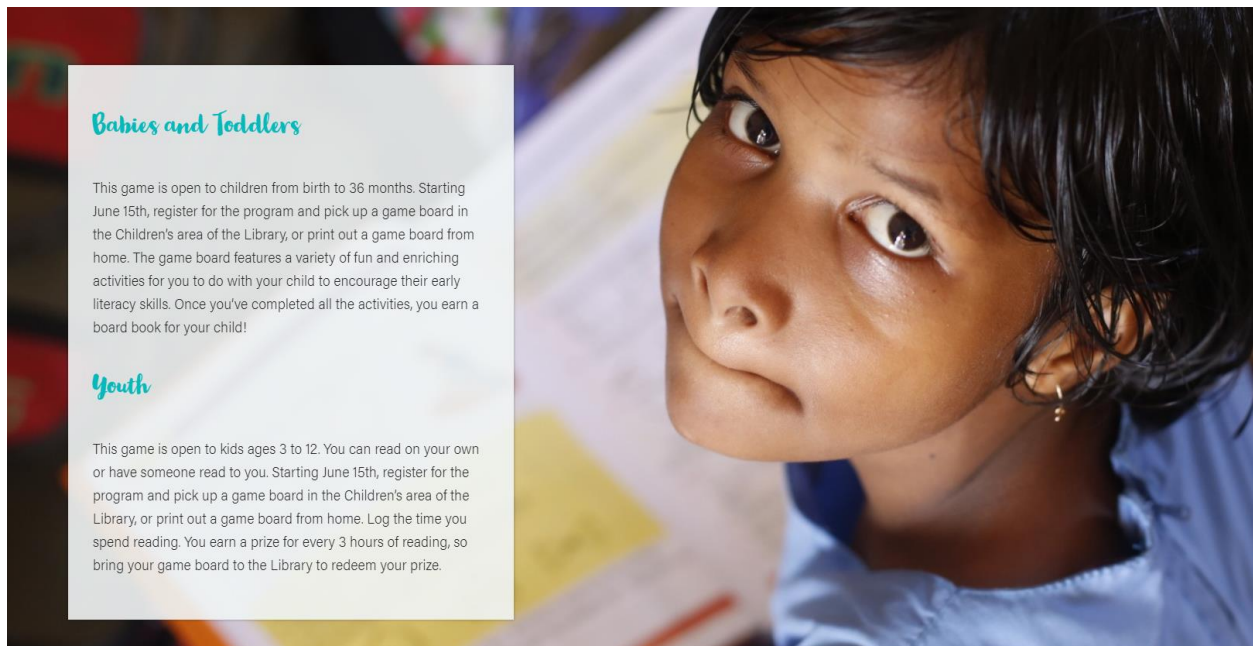
Spark Posts (referred to as Spark Graphics in the webapp version) is designed for social media; as such, there are predefined templates for Pinterest, Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook. While originally designed for lower-resolution social media campaigns, Spark now allows for custom resolutions and is capable of generating images with higher resolutions suitable for print. Thus, the tool could be used to promote a library event through both social media and traditional paper flyers with the same consistent look-and-feel. Users interested in using this tool for print projects should note that projects are raster-based and can only be exported as JPEG images.

Spark Pages creates single web pages. These image-centric pages are a collection of user-definable rows; rows may constitute text, images, video, a form of sliding text Adobe calls Glideshows (see Figure 1), and picture collages. The row-based design leads to a vertically-scrolling page using responsive design that is both desktop and mobile friendly. These pages are hosted by Adobe and

cannot be exported for external hosting, but they can be linked to other websites. It is worth reiterating that Pages creates a single webpage, not multiple linked pages. This makes them perfect for one-off events, such as publicizing summer reading program information.

The ability for library staff to quickly and seamlessly advertise across multiple platforms and social media outlets means that each library department can take ownership of the creation and maintenance of its marketing posts. Adobe Spark's consistent look-and-feel across formats means that library staff can avoid the pitfalls of inconsistent branding.

Figure 1. An example of a Spark Post Glideshow. Screenshot by author, Adobe product screenshot reprinted with permission from Adobe. Retrieved December 28, 2018, from https://spark.adobe.com/sp/design/page/
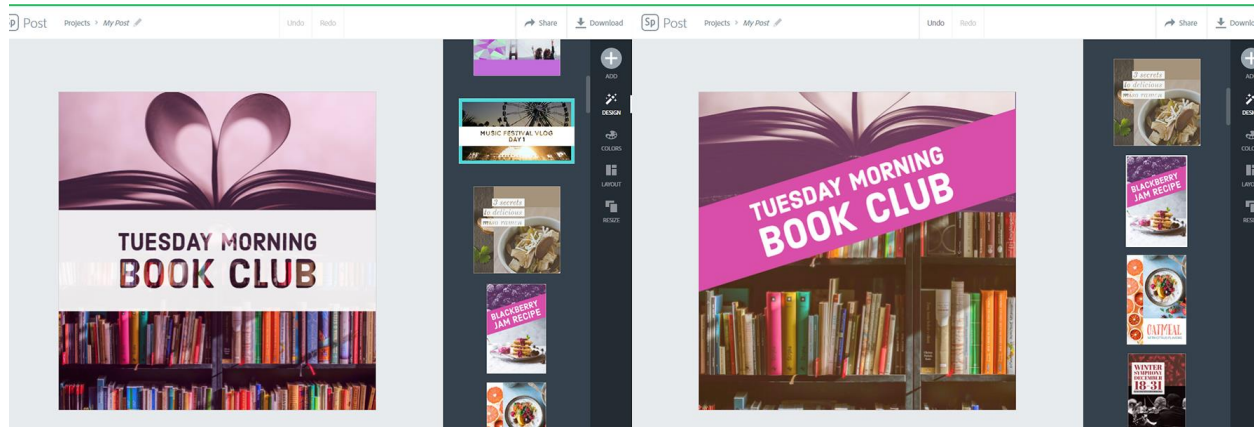

Unlike traditional Adobe applications, such as Photoshop, Spark is a web application accessible through the internet browser on Windows, Mac, and Chrome OS computers, or as a series of discrete mobile apps for each of the formats (Spark Post, Spark Page, and Spark Video) for iOS. Android versions are still in development; only Spark Post available when this article was written in December of 2018. To create content in Spark, simply create and account and log in. Users can log in with an Adobe account or through Google and Facebook accounts via OAuth (Open Authorization).

Adobe Spark Features

Regardless of format, users creating a new Spark project can select templates from multiple categories such as "Teach and Study," "Business," "Organize an Event," or "Start From Scratch" with a blank canvas. These templates are pre-populated with stock images, but those images can be easily swapped out while leaving the layout intact. Users can then swap layouts, text styles, color schemes, size, spacing, opacity, text effects, or the order of items before proceeding to add additional text, photos, icons or logos (see Figure 2).

Like Canva, another free design tool, Spark generates great looking visuals by enforcing a coherent layout and design aesthetic while still allowing for some customization. Sometimes, that enforcement can lead to photos being resized or cropped in unexpected ways.

Figure 2. Examples of the same Spark Post with different templates applied. Screenshots by author, Adobe product screenshots reprinted with permission from Adobe. Retrieved December 28, 2018, from https://spark.adobe.com/sp/design/post/

Spark allows users to search and import images through a federated search of creative-commons tagged images from Google, Flickr, Pixabay, 500px and Unsplash. As such, it provides a fairly robust set of images for many image searches. Users may also upload their own images for use in projects either from a local disk or from cloud services such as Dropbox, Google Photos / Drive, or Adobe's own Creative Cloud. Professional stock assets may also be purchased through Adobe Stock. Once imported, the user can move, crop, and scale images, as well as add Instagram-esque photo filters. Throughout the process, users can undo or redo their edits.

Spark Post and Spark Video permit users to post directly to social media outlets from within the tools themselves, which eliminates the need to download from Spark and then re-upload the content elsewhere. Users can also share posts via email, classroom (Adobe Systems Incorporated, 2018b), or as a link. This functionality is well-suited for librarians who are tasked with maintaining

social media posts in an efficient, effective, and timely manner allowing them to thrive and remain competitive in a marketing heavy environment.

Typical of cloud-based services, Spark can serve as the sole storage facility for all library marketing projects. This means that projects will synchronize across devices and platforms. However, it also means while users can export and save finished copies of Posts and Videos, they cannot save the editable source files for their projects locally – only the finished product. Should Adobe discontinue or decide to charge for the service, the vendor promises to give users "a way to download and save" their creations. (Adobe Systems Incorporated, 2018a). Saved projects retain both editing and sharing functionality, as well as keeping track of views and likes. There is also a Spark blog that includes articles and tips for creating project-based marketing, content posting strategies, advice for boosting productivity, and more.

Paid vs. Free Versions of Adobe Spark

Adobe Spark provided both free and paid accounts. A premium account ($9.99 per month) offers the user additional features and branding options. The $19.99/month version is ideal for small teams. The main differences between the free and paid versions are that the free version includes a Spark watermark whereas the paid version includes the ability to integrate pre-defined branding into one's project. Branding includes fonts, logos, colors and image filters that can be automatically applied to any template to provide a look and feel consistent with your library's existing branding. In addition, paid versions include support via phone and chat.

Similar to the rest of the Adobe Creative Cloud suite, Adobe offers a corporate version, which they term the "teams" plan. The additional benefit for the corporate version is the ability to revoke or re-assign licenses and consolidate billing.

One additional plan, Adobe Spark for Education (ASfE), is available exclusively for schools and colleges. These accounts are managed with enhanced controls, which means that the school owns and manages the account, controlling both access and data. ASfE licenses can be provided to Adobe Creative Cloud for Education registered IDs, but students under age 13 must sign in with an account created and supervised by a teacher or parent. The images within Adobe Spark for Education are reportedly age appropriate for K-12 students and are compliant with the Children's Online Privacy and Protection Act, or COPPA (Adobe Systems Incorporated, 2018c). Spark professional development resources designed to help educators apply newly acquired video sills to the curriculum are available on the Adobe Education site, along with many project examples relevant to teachers.

Conclusions and Considerations for Use

A wide variety of free apps and webapps are available to assist lay users in creating professional-looking content for particular media types or platforms. For example, users who want to create graphics can use Canva or Easil. Wix or Weebly offer tools to simplify website creation, and users can access Renderforest or Moovly to develop video-content. Spark, however, differentiates itself from these other tools by providing a consistent user interface across multiple tools geared for developing content across disparate media types. Furthermore, it provides an easy-to-use set of tools that automatically generates a reasonably polished product with little effort. Adobe clearly views this as part of their core strategy with this product, given that most of the Spark suite consists of rebranded and improved versions of previous Adobe mobile app offerings.

Spark does not have the kind of multi-user collaboration that Canva offers through its Enterprise accounts (DeFord et al., 2017). While multiple logins from the same account are permitted, there is no true multi-user workflow. As such, Spark is better suited for individual users rather than teams who are attempting to work on the same material simultaneously.

In addition to being used for the creation of library content for social media sites, Spark easily lends itself to being used as a focal point for promoting library programs. Spark's all-in-one approach, with links to multiple social media tools built into the platform, is perfect for promoting one-off Teen or Tween Tech programs.

If your library is not yet using online tools for designing graphics for social media, Spark is a good solution. Likewise, if your library is currently using multiple free tools to design across content types, Spark may also be worth a look. Finally, if your licenses preclude you from using graphics software on multiple machines simultaneously while conducting programs with your patrons, Spark may be a better option. It is an affordable, graphic design tool that offers robust features that are web-based and user friendly.

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