

Optimize Your Graphics for the Web

By Mario Sanchez

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Mario Sanchez
TheInternetDigest@hotmail.com

The Internet Digest <http://www.TheInternetDigest.net>

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Heavy graphics cost you money and traffic. They cost you money because heavy graphics require both significant storage space and bandwidth. Since your web host will usually give you a limited amount of storage space and a maximum data transfer allowance, heavy graphics can cause you to exceed those limits, in which case you'll have to pay extra.

Then, heavy graphics cost you traffic: put up a web page that takes more than 10 seconds to load, and your visitors will run away faster than you can say "back button". If you happen to be running an e-commerce website, you already know that traffic equals money, so heavy graphics will make you lose both.

Fortunately, there is a solution: you can optimize your graphics for the web. Your graphics should be in either .gif or .jpg formats (.gif works best for logos and navigation buttons, while .jpg works best for photographs.) The idea is to reduce the size of your graphics so that they take as few bytes as possible while retaining acceptable quality.

This can be done using free on-line graphics optimization tools. One of the best ones out there is Gifbot, by Netmechanic (<http://www.netmechanic.com/GIFBot/optimize-graphic.htm>). They have a user-friendly web-based interface that works like this: you upload your picture, they process it, and almost instantaneously they will give you several lighter versions of your graphic for you to choose. Pick the image that takes the fewest bytes while still retaining an acceptable quality level. It is not uncommon to reduce the weight of a picture by up to 70% with no noticeable decrease in quality (especially if the image is in .jpg format.)

Another useful tip is to use thumbnails. Thumbnails are miniature versions of a picture that are hyperlinked to its actual size version. The thumbnail will load fast, and by clicking on it your visitors will be able to see the actual size version.

Use both of these techniques and you will have a faster loading website, while having more storage space and bandwidth available for that useful content your visitors are always looking for.

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