

# Speed Up Your Web Site For More Sales

By Alvin Apple

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Margaret spent a lot of time and money to get her web site just right. The big photo of a professional at work beckoned visitors to stay and learn how they, too, could be as successful.

Links to her main pages flashed when a visitor's mouse passed over them. She even featured a classy animated mailbox at the bottom of the page to encourage visitors to send her email.

But something went wrong. When Margaret checked her web site visitor statistics after one week, she noticed most people clicked to her site, then clicked away after just a few seconds. No sales.

Like many sites, Margaret's takes too long to load. The very graphics and programming tricks that seem so exciting are loading at a snail's pace on the dial-up connections 85 percent of her customers have.

For a while there I thought all we needed to do was wait for a few months and most North American's would have fast cable or DSL hook-ups. Even the fanciest sites crammed with eye-popping graphics would download in a breath.

But Wall Street's telecom melt-down has all but sealed our fat-pipes fate. It looks like most of us will be using dial-up to get on line for several more years if not another decade.

Here's what you need to do to get on the right side of this important trend:

Step 1. Start cutting. Right now you can't do better than to scale back the time it takes your site to load. Last year Zona Research estimated 40 percent of sales were lost due to customers who left a site early after waiting on slow web pages. That translates into \$21 billion in lost sales.

If you've visited the FedEx site lately to track a package, you may have noticed their pages come up much faster. Now pages download in less than two seconds. Big sites like FedEx have special server tricks up their sleeve, but some of the time-cutting things they do will work for anyone.

Step 2. Reduce those graphics. FedEx took the big jpeg file photo off the page and replaced with a much faster loading gif file graphic. Jpeg files, commonly used for photos, require thousands of colors. A gif file, used for drawings and simpler graphics, can be compressed to include only a few colors.

Think of your favorite cartoon character. Chances are he or she is created with a just a few colors, maybe as few as two. That translates into a graphic that downloads fast. A designer confided you can get killer graphics with just 16 colors.

FedEx made their pages speedier by replacing the little graphics next to links with HTML dots. The old graphics popped onto the page one by one. Done tastefully, the dots appear instantly and look just as good.

For outstanding examples of just how good plain old HTML can look, see <http://www.the5k.org>. The site is dedicated to clever designers who create outstanding pages all under 5k. Even on the slowest of dial-up lines, these pages load in less than a second.

Step 3. Bag the Java. Java enabled links that change their look when you wave a mouse over them require three different graphics to work. A visitor's computer also has to take time to interpret the Java code. Use non-Java links instead.

Also reconsider those Java scrolling news headlines. They also take time to load. CNN took their Java ticker down, making their page load faster. Visitors never missed it.

Step 4. Cut down on links. Lots of sites have a big thick forest of links at the bottom of each page. It's doubtful many visitors even see all of these. If you've got more than ten links, you have too many. Cut some out and watch your page load just a bit faster.

While I'm all for copy-intense sites, very long copy can make a huge difference in how fast a page loads. Keep your text at around 300 words on the opening page. Inner pages can be longer.

Step 5. Repeat graphics. One of the best ways to speed up your site is to use the same graphics on every page. Once a graphic has loaded, it doesn't have to load again. I like to have a medium-sized logo at the top of the page, then a small logo at the bottom. It adds color and personality to an otherwise plain page, giving your site a feeling of continuity.

Once you've paired down your pages, try comparing them to your competition. Clean out the cache on your browser, then time how long it takes your page to load. Now time how long it takes for competitors' pages to load. Results will vary from one user to the next, but you will get a pretty good idea of where your pages stand.

Alvin Apple helps everyday people start businesses they will enjoy. Then he teaches them how to succeed. Read all his helpful strategies, including his latest article, "How to write the perfect classified ad" at <http://AlvinApple.com> . Reach Alvin at 801-328-9006 or [alvin@drnunley.com](mailto:alvin@drnunley.com).

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