



Society for Marketing
Professional Services
Boston

September 28, 2011

File Formats: Does this file make my email look fat?

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"I sent you the file 10 minutes ago. I can't imagine why you haven't gotten it yet"

Sound a familiar? Have you checked your outbox and is it trying desperately to push that file through? And is that file huge? Like over 50MB? Yeah, I thought so.

High resolution files are amazing! Beautifully large and full of information and detail. They are a requirement of four-color printing and make your collateral richer and more authentic. However, they have their place in our world. You wouldn't wear a tux to a client meeting (presumably...) but a more appropriate ensemble like a jacket and tie is just fine.

So too is the often misunderstood realm of file types. Imagine a high-resolution .tiff file as a tux and a .jpg as your jacket and tie. Now, imagine that a .gif is a pair of jeans and a T-shirt and a .png is a pair of cut-offs. You get the picture, right?

An .eps file is like a super-charged tux – one that has been custom-made to fit you perfectly. And, a PDF is like the whole wardrobe. It can accommodate large and small files with ease, and includes the shoes, tie, belt, watch, and anything else you care to include.

File types have a myriad of applications and there is no hard-and-fast rule of thumb. But, there are basic guidelines to help clear up the confusion.

TIFF

.tiff files as mentioned above contain a lot of pixels with a lot of information stored in them. They provide extremely clear imagery for offset printing and are a standard of professional photographers. Don't be surprised to see files larger than 50MB or more.

JPG: High-resolution .jpgs are often acceptable for some off-set printing and are definitely OK for digital printing. High-resolution files can fall within the 10MB range or more. Although .jpgs can be tiny as well (in the low k's) high resolution .jpgs are probably the most requested and available files.

GIF: .gifs are often for web or screen-based applications and are typically low-resolution. They can be animated or they can be static, but the file size is normally below 1MB or less, and they make great files when a web site needs to be quickly loaded or refreshed and resolution doesn't matter much. .gif files should never be full-color images (even on the web!) because they are incapable of holding a lot of different colors at once. .gif files are better for charts, graphs, logos, etc.

PNG: .png files are tiny – think an average of 10k, and are strictly for web-applications where speed of upload is critical, but resolution is not

EPS: Vector-based .eps files are great for scaling when you need to preserve resolution; this type of file has no pixels, so it can be 1” wide or the width of ten football fields, and the resolution will remain perfect. Fantastic for logos and promotional items where clarity at a small size is imperative. File sizes are all over the map, because the scaling increases or decreases the amount of information, and therefore changes the file size, however the majority of .eps files are rarely above 3MB.

PDF: PDFs are everyone's friend. Want to preserve formatting? Make a PDF. Having trouble between a PC and a Mac? Make a PDF. Want to easily fill in a form or annotate a document? Send a PDF. The world of this amazing document application transcends merely a discussion on file types, but it is worth mentioning because of its versatility. A PDF can often be used like an image file, making it one of the most widely known and accepted file types out there.

Understanding when to use a particular file, or just being able to identify the characteristics, will go a long way in communicating with your clients and vendors. And, you probably won't endanger your email system by trying to email your boss a 100MB building photograph again.

A general rule of thumb for wondering if those emails will make it to their destination: The majority of corporate email accounts have a maximum send/receive file acceptance of 4MB or under. Firms that deal with graphics as part of their business (architects, graphic design agencies, web firms, etc.) will generally have a larger maximum. Many Internet-based emails hosts (Gmail, AOL, Hotmail, etc.) have one that is 10MB or higher.

If your email is over 4MB and you MUST send that file, here are some tips:

- Compress the file using your computer's compression option (examples: “Zip” for PCs, “Stuffit” for Macs).
- Upload it to a cloud and send your recipient a link to download it. Most clouds have a free trial (YouSendIt.com and box.net are two examples).
- Many firms have email tracking software, like Newforma, which also has a storage option where you can upload a document and have your recipient download it.