Your Digital Publications and Optimising them for the Web

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Centre for e-Innovation

In Summary: Getting Digital Files from Designers

When you get a supplier to create a publication for you, specify in the deliverables that you want:

1. All the source files that created the final publication, in their original file format.
2. A web-optimised version of the publication
    a. using a common and accessible file format (probably PDF)
    b. at the smallest file size quality will allow
    c. with an intuitive file name.

The guidelines below explain why this is necessary and you can give them to the design company to help them understand what you need.

Digital Files

Most documents, pamphlets and posters are created digitally and then printed on paper. Being in possession of the original digital file(s) means that:

*   You can republish your publication easily to other mediums, e.g. the Internet.
*   You can reuse files in other projects, saving money and time, e.g. a logo.
*   You can easily archive your publication, and the digital file won't degrade over time.

To get these benefits, you need to build into your briefs to suppliers and service providers, that their deliverable must include the original digital source files.

You will want the digital files in the format of the software programme they were created in. Don't worry about which formats the supplier used to create the work, but ask to be given *all* the final files they used, including images. You are paying for them - they belong to you! Ask for the files on a CD, or if they are really big, and your computer has a DVD drive, get them on a DVD.

FILE FORMATS - Common source file formats that you will come across include: Freehand (.fh8), Quark (.qxt), Photoshop (.psd), TIF (.tif), JPG (.jpg or .jpeg), Microsoft Word (.doc), Microsoft PowerPoint (.ppt).
(This is not an exhaustive list)

Optimising Your Files for the Web

File Format

When you create a publication you will probably want to distribute it on the Internet, through Cape Gateway[*]. In order to do this you will need the file in a format that the ordinary user can open, like a PDF file.

The Cape Gateway Content Management Guidelines[**] prescribe which file formats should be used when publishing to the Internet. In most cases, PDF will be the most suitable format.

File Size

You also need to consider the file's size when publishing it on the Internet. The original source files will probably be quite large. You want the large files for your records as they are the most detailed, but for the Internet it is better to have small files which can be quickly and easily downloaded.

FILE SIZE - Files vary in size depending on how much information is in them. Images are often very big as they need a lot of detail in them to look good when printed. File size is expressed in Kilobytes (KB), Megabytes (MB), or Gigabytes (GB). A stiffy disk can hold 1.4 MB, a CD can hold 700 MB, a DVD 4.4 GB.

Generally files with images (photos, backgrounds etc.) are very large. When commercially printing a publication you want highly detailed information for an image, so you need the large files. But on the Internet this is overkill, as a computer screen can only show a limited amount of detail.

RESOLUTION is the number of dots per inch (dpi) in an image. The greater the resolution, the better the picture. Printed pages have a high resolution, usually around 300 dpi. Computer screens have a low resolution usually about 72 dpi. Documents that are going to be viewed onscreen thus don't need a high resolution.

In addition to lowering the file resolution, you can also compress files to reduce their size. Much like packing a suitcase well, to get more items in it, file compression "packs" information better, using mathematical algorithms. Compression is a trade-off between quality and file size, but by compressing a file you can reduce the size enormously without any perceived quality loss.

So how do you get your publication optimised for the Web? Get your designer to do it for you by including this as a deliverable in your project!

Note that although compression is relatively simple to apply, it can be quite complex and the result will depend on what was in the original file - a two-page document may justifiably have a larger file size than a 100 page document depending on what it contains. Before you accept the optimised version of the document you need to make a judgement call: Is the quality of the file acceptable? Is the file small enough?

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[*] www.capegateway.gov.za
[**] www.capegateway.gov.za/Text/2004/6/content_management_guidelines_v1.3.pdf (see: Appendix C: Preferred File Formats)

| This image has a file size of 530K. This is unnecessarily big. | Here, the original file has been compressed down to 15K and it looks (almost) as good as the original. | In this example, the image has been over-compressed – it is only 4K, but the quality is unacceptable. |

File Names

Give your file a sensible name! A well-named file helps the user. For example: *Document5.pdf* is a poor file name, while *CapeGatewayStrategy2005.pdf* is clearer and more helpful.

Getting Text in Text Format (Not Image Format)

Make sure that the optimised file your designer provides contains text that is still in text format – you don't want them to make an image out of your text.

Text is what you are reading now. You can copy and paste sections. You can magnify without losing clarity. You can use "Find" to look for a word or a sentence in this publication. When text is made into an image, it might initially look the same (the words are still there), but all these features are lost. Also, files with real text in them are much smaller in size than files containing images with text.

| This is real text, you can copy and paste it. You can magnify it without losing clarity. You can search it. And much more. | This looks like text, but it's an image. You can read it, but that's about it. Try copy and pasting or Finding the word "useless" - you can't! |

Advice and Help

If you need more help learning how to get your source files from suppliers, as well as Web optimised versions, then contact the Cape Gateway Content Team:

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