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How to earn brownie points as a PR executive (and not irritate editors)

Sending a hopelessly inadequate image to a journalist is not only guaranteed to blow their blooc pressure through the stratosphere, it's also going to blow your reputation as a halfway compete PR professional out the water, and probably blow your chance of getting any decent coverage the story you just spent days slaving over.

By Roger Hislop 8 Jun 2004

Get the picture thing right. It's really not hard. It's really not that complicated. You don't even need expensi software... but please, please... try get it right. Almost every PR agency and company I've dealt with in Sou Africa has got this wrong, many times.

When a journalist or production assistant from a print publication asks for a picture, they need a 300 dpi "print quality" image.

This is not some trivial detail you can blithely ignore. Get this wrong, and you may as well not bother sendi the picture. It all comes down to your eyes, and how clearly they can see, and how clever your brain is at seeing things that are not there.

Electronic images are made up of millions of dots ("pixels" or "PIcture ELementS"). Images on your computer screen are made up of patterns of dots, roughly 72 in every inch. Look at your screen up really close and see how each of the letters of this article are made of dots. Look at a photo onscreen as well. S the dots. Now sit back and blink several times to get rid of the squint.

Now take a magazine. Look at the text very carefully. The letters and pictures are not made of dots - they a smooth lines and gradients. This is even true of a document produced using a desktop printer (if you have cheap printer, you may be able to faintly make out the dots).

To be able to fool the eye into thinking an image is smooth and sharp, you have to print at a resolution of a least 300 dots per inch - less than that, and images and text appear "jaggy" and pixelated. At 300dpi, the normal human eye can no longer physically see individual dots, it just sees a continuous line.

An image that appears fine on screen will look horribly jaggy when printed onto paper, because computers use clever techniques to blend and fade the dots next to each other to create an illusion of smoothness. A the dots on screen glow, which they don't do on paper.

Anyway. Be that as it may - even if you neither understand nor care about the technicalities, there are some hard and fast rules that you MUST obey if you want your picture to be useable (and not piss off the aforementioned editor).

Print images are 300dpi (dots per inch). Images on a computer are around 72 dpi. That means a picture th fills up your whole screen will be print onto paper ONE FOURTH as wide, and ONE FOURTH as high. Roughly the size of your business card, in fact.

So when you email a pic to a journo that you nicked off a Website and it's only a couple of inches wide on

screen, it will only reproduce about the size of a stamp on paper.

NO, THE JOURNALIST CANNOT MAGICALLY MAKE IT BIGGER! Using some clever software, you car make a picture slightly bigger, but only very slightly. Basically, if the detail is not already in an electronic image, making it bigger will not and cannot add the detail that's not there!

The way to check if your image is big enough to send to a magazine is to think about how big you hope the magazine will run the picture. For most magazines, the designer will give a small news story an image abo 3 inches by 5 inches or less. But at 300dpi, that still means the image must be at least 900 pixels by 1500 pixels (3 inches high at 300 dots per inch needs 900 pixels, 5 inches needs 1500 pixels). This is a lower limit... try never send an image smaller than 1200 pixels as a smallest measurement... because that immediately limits the magazine to print it at most 4 inches wide.

The bigger the image, the better, because the magazine designer has latitude to use the picture at the size they want.

And a bigger, high quality picture means more exposure for your client, as well as a better looking magazir Everyone wins.

Obviously if you're hoping that they'll print the image over half a page or over a spread, the image needs to be much bigger -- but if a magazine is wanting to use such a large image, in most cases they will send in their own photographer to do a proper job.

Now before you start getting over-enthusiastic with sending hires images, PLEASE check how big the file The only thing guaranteed to piss a journo off more than getting a tiny image is an email attachment so big that it blocks up their email for half a day.

Use the JPEG (JPG) format to save images you plan to send by email. Unless you know exactly what you' doing, NEVER use the TIF or BMP (bitmap) format. They produce very big files. There's nothing more frustrating than laboriously downloading a 5MB email attachment, only to find it's a low resolution image saved using the horribly inefficient BMP format.

Also avoid the GIF format - it's an old format that's not suitable for photographs. The PNG format is fine (although few people are familiar with it). A high, print quality JPEG image of 1400 x 1800 pixels is only a f of around 600kB... fine to send by email.

If you're worried about file sizes, there is a very nice piece of software called SmartSaver Pro from Ulead costs about $60 (www.ulead.com/ssp). It has a very efficient compression system, much better than PhotoShop. It'll take a 800kB JPEG saved by PhotoShop and reduce it to 500kB or less at the same compression factor.

This is important, by the way. The JPEG format uses techniques to "approximate" an image to reduce size If you overdo this "compression" you get those images that are still "hires" in terms of pixel size, but they have those horrible light halos around dark edges in the image, and everything looks kind of blurred. Normally about 70% compression is fine).

Rules of thumb when sending media images:

1. Print resolution is 300dpi - make sure your picture is big enough. In general, it should be a minimum of

1200 pixels wide/high. That's only 4 inches wide/high when it appears on paper.
2. If you're hoping for a picture to be used large (like full page) make sure it is high enough resolution. CHECK!
3. Only send a large file by email if you've checked with the person. Do not aggravate them hugely by blocking their email with an unsolicited 5MB picture!
4. CHECK the files size of the picture you are sending. If you don't know how to do this, FIND OUT. Peopl are normally happy to get an attachment of half a meg to a meg. If its bigger, check with the recipient.
5. ALSO CHECK that the files size is not too small. A 15kB or 50kB JPEG image is BOUND to be fairly tir Check the pixel dimensions, and re-read the above article). If you don't know how to check, FIND OUT.
6. In general, use the JPEG (.jpg) format. Do NOT send pictures as TIFs or BMPs unless you know what you are doing. And then use JPEG anyway.
7. Don't send a picture that's not yours. Don't scan it out of a book, steal it off the Internet, etc. If you aren't sure you own the copyright to a picture, it's not yours to give away! If you send a picture to a magazine, the will assume you own the copyright. Don't drop them in the pooh by causing an outraged photo library to tak them to court.

ABOUT ROGER HISLOP

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