

Don't let images and videos stunt your business growth

Who would have thought that something as seemingly basic as managing images and video online could constrain business growth? Believe it or not, in our increasingly visual economy, the work required to host, transform and deliver images and videos at scale can very quickly go from IT headache to major business bottleneck.

As we live more and more of our lives online, we are increasingly dependent on images and video. Visuals educate, inform, entertain and sell. And usage is growing at breakneck speed. Our just-released State of Visual Media report 2022, which drew on data from 376 global brands, revealed bandwidth for images grew by a whopping 25% this year. That's consistent with Cisco's research, which reported online videos would make up more than 82% of all consumer internet traffic this year. That's 15 times higher than it was in 2017.

Statistics like these have convinced online retailers to integrate visual media into all their marketing efforts. Want to react to a viral trend with promotions? You need relevant visual stories fast. Want to launch a website in new markets? You need engaging creative images that speak to that market audience. Want to drive online conversations and deeper connections? You need to host user-generated content.

Invisible to most of us, dealing with all this visual media requires a staggering amount of effort behind the scenes. Today it's so much more than routinely uploading new images and videos. All visual assets must be optimised for a high-quality, consistent user experience and site performance across multiple devices, browsers, and viewing window formats. This is especially important since Google introduced Core Web Vitals, metrics that impact search ranking based on user-experience and performance.

The tedious, laborious work of image optimisation

Optimising images and video involves several activities. The top three “basics” are: compression, cropping and resizing, and format selection. Let's have a brief look at each to better understand the work involved and the benefits.

Compression: compression makes an image or video file less heavy and thus load faster. The goal with compression is to minimise the file size while maintaining maximum visual quality. Determining the optimal file size and visual quality can involve a lot of trial and error; decisions are often made in favour of image quality at the expense of performance. However when someone can't render an image on their mobile because it's too big, the “quality experience” is effectively compromised.

Cropping and resizing: Developers apply cropping and resizing to ensure that images and videos display appropriately and consistently across all browsers and devices. That means, they prepare the same image in many aspect ratios, and may need to manually crop the main subject (a person, a clothing item, etc.) closer or wider. However, the result can be highly unflattering if the main subject of the *image is cropped in the wrong place*.

Format selection: Brands today are using a wide range of image and video formats to cater to different needs. The most common image formats JPEG and PNG have been around since the internet's infancy and are the most broadly supported. However, they are quite heavy and slow to load. Today brands have the option to use, whenever possible, more modern lightweight formats such as JPEG XL, AVIF, and WebP.

Beyond these three optimisation basics, web developers are often busy doing even more work in the background. This includes applying image ‘transformations’ like overlays for promotions, removing backgrounds, adjusting colour ranges, and tagging images to make them searchable. Manually handling these activities at scale can be tedious and time-consuming, and require lots of developers and long working hours. Using AI and automation instead is far more efficient and lays the foundation for scale as your company

grows.

Removing time-to-market bottlenecks on an ‘epic-scale’

Design marketplace Minted currently has nearly 60 million images supporting 4,000 product SKUs in its art business alone. A single product can have upwards of 100,00 variants. Without automation technology, managing visual media on this epic scale – essential for bringing new products to market – would be simply impossible.

As our customer, David Lien, VP of Engineering at Minted explained: “The complexity and bottlenecks in our process meant it would sometimes take weeks to launch new Art products, which really impacted our ability to stay nimble and move fast. There were also a few stability issues that were difficult to debug. Combined with a limited visibility into the pipeline meant that we’d sometimes see broken images making their way into the production site, which is not acceptable for a premium design brand like ours”

Minted used our automation software to streamline visual media management for its art segment, which lets customers configure and preview art products online by size, colour, medium, frame, matting, material, and of course, the design itself. Cloudinary replaces some of the key steps in Minted’s image generation pipeline. To start, Minted sets up a photo shoot in its studio for the scenes it wants to composite for the final images. Next, an internal image specialist slices the image into layers and corrects for transparency, colour and position. A script then generates the coordinates needed to position these layers as named transforms into a text file (CSV), which is then uploaded to our system along with the previously created scene layers used to create the final image. Separately, a Minted proprietary pipeline ingests raw art files from artists and builds the base images for each winning design. Finally, when a customer navigates to an art category page or product details page on Minted, the page makes requests to our system for images that composite the correct combination of scenes, designs, frame and texture into the final thumbnails.

Growth with limited resources is possible

Using automation also enables you to grow with less resources. The global live entertainment platform, Fever, relies on impactful images and videos to attract its users to local experiences and events. In its infancy it used tools like Google Drive to store, manage and share visual media, but these weren’t scaleable as the company grew. When the bottleneck became unmanageable, Fever moved to our Digital Asset Management (DAM) platform to automate visual media

management and support its growth during the pandemic.

Juan Redondo, Growth Lead Marketing Optimization at Fever explained: “It sounds counterintuitive for a social experience company to grow during a pandemic, but we were able to focus on more curated events, outdoor experiences, and then underwent aggressive geographical expansion. Cloudinary allows us to grow faster and be more productive with our existing resources, including our people.”

Too many cooks in the kitchen

A complex image workflow can also slow time-to-market when the process from creation to delivery involves different groups including your creative, marketing, web, IT and DevOps teams, along with external agencies and partners.

The international shoe brand Dune London ran into this when it set out to overhaul its commerce site. Managing and sharing visual content from its huge digital asset library had become complicated and inefficient. The brand also needed to give lots of users and teams fast, easy and secure access to its huge visual content library. Elaine Smith, Head of Digital Product, explained: “We work with a growing number of third parties, from wholesale and concession to franchise partners. The way that we were sending them imagery and videos was pretty outdated and manual involving URLs on spreadsheets.”

Introducing a new DAM designed for handling images has helped Dune London overcome all these limitations and has considerably sped up time to market. Smith said: “Replacing the old manual spreadsheet system with automation has been so welcome. I almost daren’t put a figure on the hours being saved, as it would probably be such a scary number – it’s very big!”

In business, as in life, it’s often improving the small things that make a huge difference. In our visual economy, using new tools to efficiently manage, optimise and share images and videos can easily turn a major growth bottleneck into a serious competitive advantage.

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