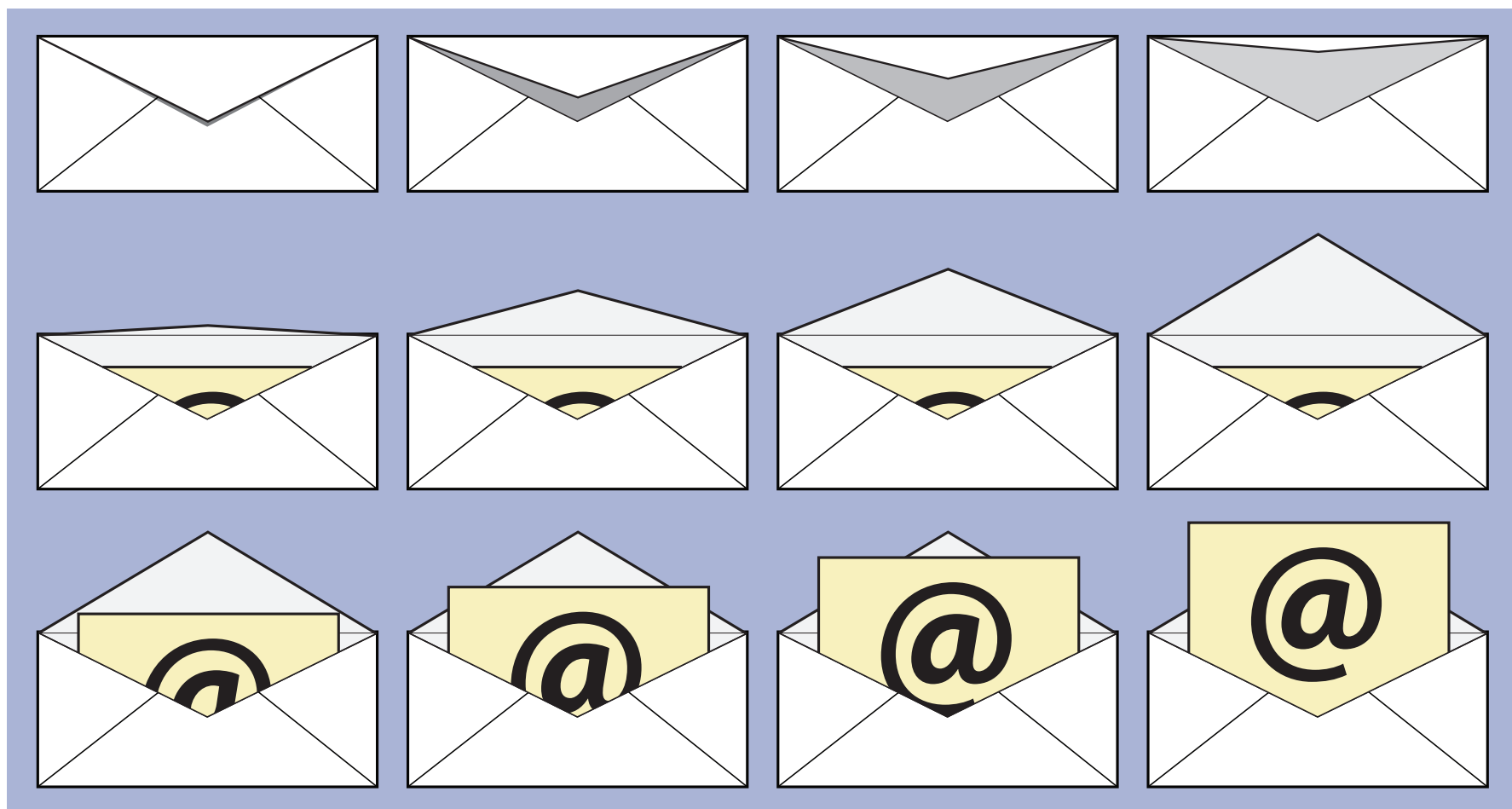


Smart Animated Gifs

A Guide to the Sensible and Effective Use of Animated Gifs
2017 Revised Edition



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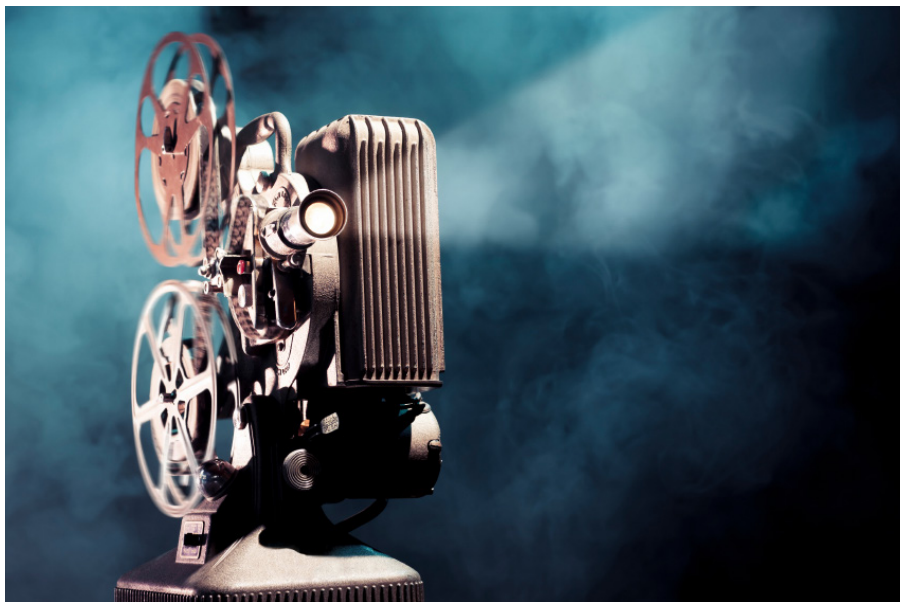
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INTRODUCTION



Whether you pronounce it with a soft G (as in “giraffe”), or a hard G (as in “graphic”), gif is one of the most interesting image formats available to an email marketer; especially when used to create animations. Animated gifs can allow a marketer to triple the content of a hero shot without increasing the real estate, help visualize things that words and static images can’t describe, and, in the best cases, create a source of viral marketing.

But for every cleverly-made gif, there are a few dozen mediocre to downright bad ones cluttering up the inbox (not to mention, their often poor use on websites). Animated gifs that flash, wave at you, or otherwise demand your attention are just asking for trouble. Small wonder, then, that there are posts that state unequivocally animated gifs should not be used in email at all. Using animated gifs, they argue, may be trendy, but they are rarely useful to customers, and can actually dilute the message and bury the call-to-action.

But what are the rules for using animated gifs? A quick perusal of Facebook shows that animated gifs are capable of inspiring a lot of buzz, but what’s the ROI? What are the best uses of animated gifs, and what are the worst? And are there any best practices for them that an email marketer should follow?

In this guide, we want to provide as balanced and impartial a look at animated gifs as possible. We see the advantages of using animated gifs, but we see the downside as well. As with any other aspect of email marketing, there are best practices and bad ideas. We will address both here,



“... for every cleverly-made gif, there are a few dozen mediocre to downright bad ones...”

along with some clever ideas that take animated gifs beyond the usual limitations.

Since this is part of our guide series, we will also go through all the steps involved in creating animated gifs of various sorts, along with tools for creating them; including some online sources that won't cost you a thing.

It's important to note that because of the nature of PDFs and some ebook formats, we cannot show the actual animations in this guide. In some cases, we've chosen to show breakouts of the individual frames involved in each animation to help you get a clearer idea of what would be happening with an individual gif. For working examples of these gifs, please go to the Goolara Blog, where our article, ***Using Animated Gifs in Email***, contains several examples of different types of animated gifs.

CHAPTER 1: UNDERSTANDING GIFS



“Gif” stands for “Graphical Interchange Format.” The format was invented in 1987 by Steve Wilhite of CompuServe as a way to provide color images on their bulletin boards without using up much disk space or bandwidth. A couple years later, animation was added to the format, which is when the format really took off. At that point, viable video formats such as AVI and WMV were still a few years away, and the ability to display videos across platforms and browsers was still further away than that.

It uses LZW compression, and reduces an image to 256 colors if necessary. This can cause a dither effect in a gif image, so the fewer colors in your image, the safer. It is possible to have more than 256 colors in a gif using a technique called True Color, in which the image is divided into smaller sections, with each section having a slightly different palette, but this technique is rarely used; mostly due to the difficulty of implementing it with many gif animation tools.

One way to think of gifs is like flipbooks, where each page is a separate image, and by flipping through the images quickly, you get the appearance of movement. You can control how quickly or how slowly the images cycle, and you have the option of either stopping at the end of a set of images, or cycling back to the first in an endless loop.

Animated gifs have a few advantages over static images. They attract the eye to the image (which is both a blessing and a curse, as we will discuss later), they can help demonstrate how something works, and they are more likely to be shared. But too often, designers treat these gifs as some sort of magical device whose very presence ensures higher clickthrough rates. In fact, a badly designed or ill-used animated gif can have the opposite effect. The proper use of animated gifs requires

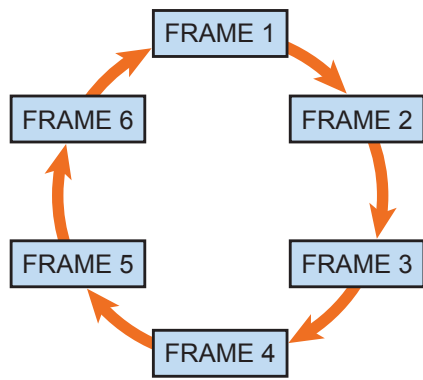
“The proper use of animated gifs requires a keen awareness of how your eyes are tracking your message, and the ability to look at your email as objectively as an unknown recipient.”

a keener awareness of how your eyes are tracking your message, and the ability to look at your email as objectively as an unknown recipient.

There are three basic types of animated gifs:

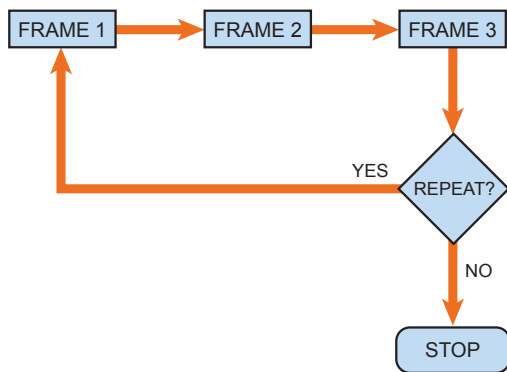
- Looped animations
- One-pass animations
- Looped displays

Each of these has its advantages and uses. Here’s a quick look at how each of these works.



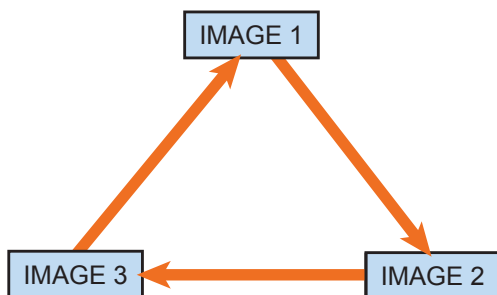
Looped Animations

In a looped animation, the series of images combine to create an animated effect, such as a sign flashing or a person walking. These are used, mainly, to enhance the email's visual appeal, but care must be taken to ensure these animations don't distract from the main message. A common example is the countdown clock signifying a limited time offer.



Limited-pass Animations

Limited-pass animations are animations that stop after a certain point. The most common version is the single-pass animation, where the animation stops at the end of a specific sequence. A limited-pass animation might also be used to enhance a message. A sign that flashes three times is an example of this.



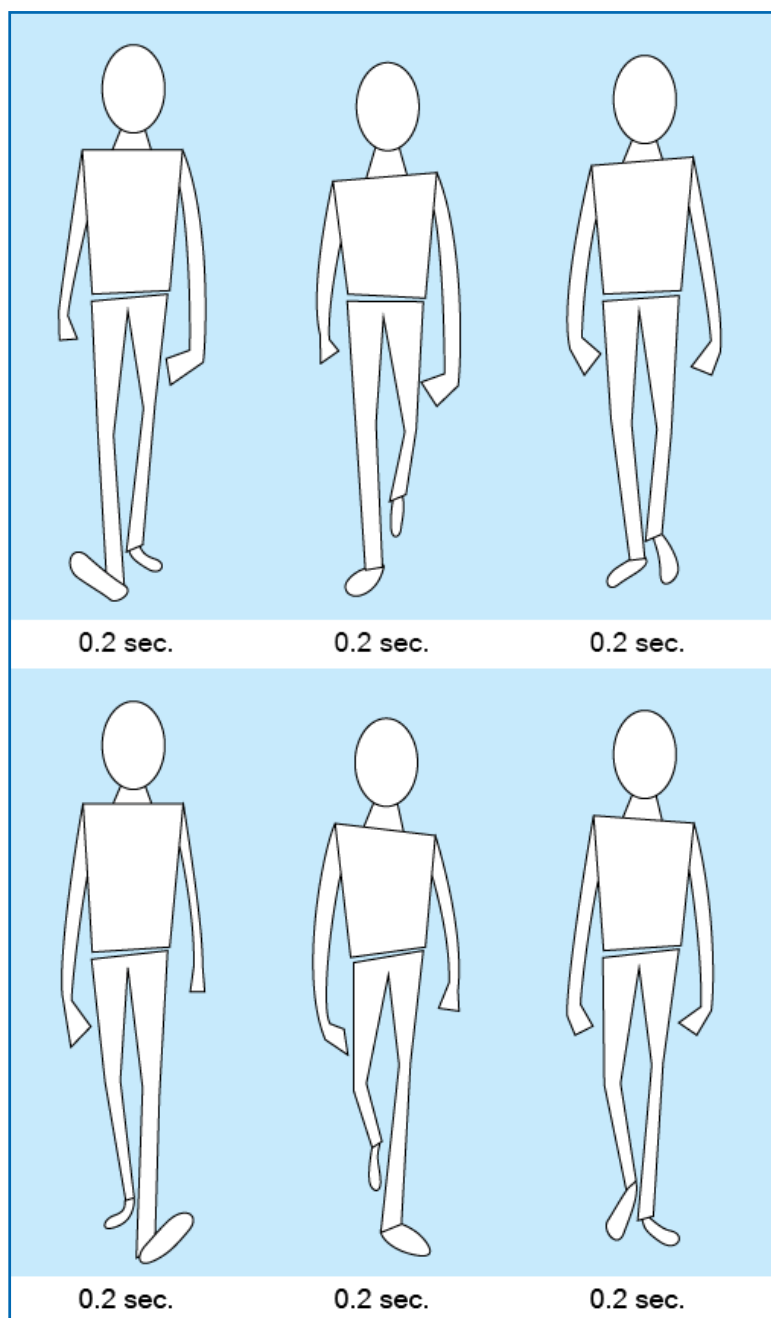
Carousels

An altogether different approach to animated gifs is to make each image a separate and distinct image, then cycle through them to show different products. With this type of gif, there is no attempt to create an animation effect. The various images are there to sell various products using the same real estate. For most purposes, this gif would be set to an endless loop. As long as the email is open, the image will cycle through the various images in the gif. While it is possible to create a carousel gif that isn't looped, its value would be limited.

Requirements

There are many ways to create animated gifs. Photoshop is the most popular commercial tool, but there are plenty of alternatives, including some web sites that will let you create gifs for free. Care should be taken using these web site, however, as they often add their own watermarks to the exported gifs.

CHAPTER 2: LOOPED ANIMATIONS



Looped animations are what people think of when they think of animated gifs. These continuous cycles of activity have been entertaining and annoying people for ages. The image to the left, for instance, is a breakdown of an animated gif that contains six illustrations set to appear for 0.2 seconds each. This sequence of illustrations creates the illusion of a figure walking. The continuous loop is consistent with the design since there is no logical ending point in the series.

This is about as simple an animation one could make that still appears fluid. The more sophisticated and smooth the animation is, the more frames it requires, which increases the file size. We've seen gifs with as many as 109 frames and as big as 799Kb—a bit hefty for email. The walking man gif shown to the left, on the other hand, is only 26Kb. Finding the sweet spot between file size and animation fluidity may take some work, but the more of these types of files you create, the more intuitive things like frame number and duration become.

In most cases, you'll want the intervals for this type of continuous flow animation to be constant across all frames, but they don't have to be. It is possible to use different display intervals for each of the frames to create interesting effects (see page 9).

Keeping it subtle

A looped animation has the most entertainment potential, but it also has the most potential to irritate. If the animation is too distracting, you run the risk of prompting the reader to delete the offending email without reading it. Garish, flashing gifs are a sure-fire way ensure that your recipients don't look at your mailings too long. Also, if an animation is too eye-catching, your message runs the risk of being overlooked entirely.

For this reason, animated gifs are often made as innocuous as possible when they are used in email. Take this example from Ann Taylor:



The only animation in the ad is the clock in the "O" of "Tock":



The clock is front and center, but it is easily ignored in favor of the message. As it should be, this image is all about the message. The image is screened back, and the animation is so minimal that the thing we end up focusing on is the actual message.

Two Rules for Looped Animations

If an email is going to have an element that is constantly changing, you don't want it to distract from the primary message. If you have a looped animation in your mailing, you need to look at it carefully. You should be able to answer both these questions with a firm yes:

1: Does it need to be looped?

Is there any advantage to endlessly repeating the set of images? Does the last frame lead logically back to the first frame? In the examples of the clock and the walking man, looping is logical. The clock never stops ticking and there are no frames in the walking man animation that bring the figure to rest.

2: Does it distract from the message?

Look at this example below (shown here without animation):



In the animated version of this gif, the woman twirls around and waves at the viewer. While this may help engage the viewer with the woman in the gif, it does little to promote the actual message. We are too busy looking at the woman to pay much attention to the message.

In this case, a static image or a limited-pass animation (see chapter 3) might have done the job better. Keep in mind that animation in an image is going to naturally attract the eye, and sometimes it runs the risk of pulling the reader's eye away from the actual message. You need to ask yourself if your animation is attracting the eye into the message or away from it.

Now here's an example of a use of irregular time durations that we mentioned earlier in this chapter. This comes from an email that was sent out by Bed, Bath & Beyond:

GET READY FOR THE DOG DAYS

SHOP IN-STORE OR ONLINE TO BE BLOWN AWAY BY OUR SELECTION OF FANS

20% OFF ONE SINGLE ITEM ONLINE. OFFER EXPIRES 7/27/14. [VIEW DETAILS](#)

DON'T FORGET IF YOU HAVEN'T ALREADY REDEEMED-->

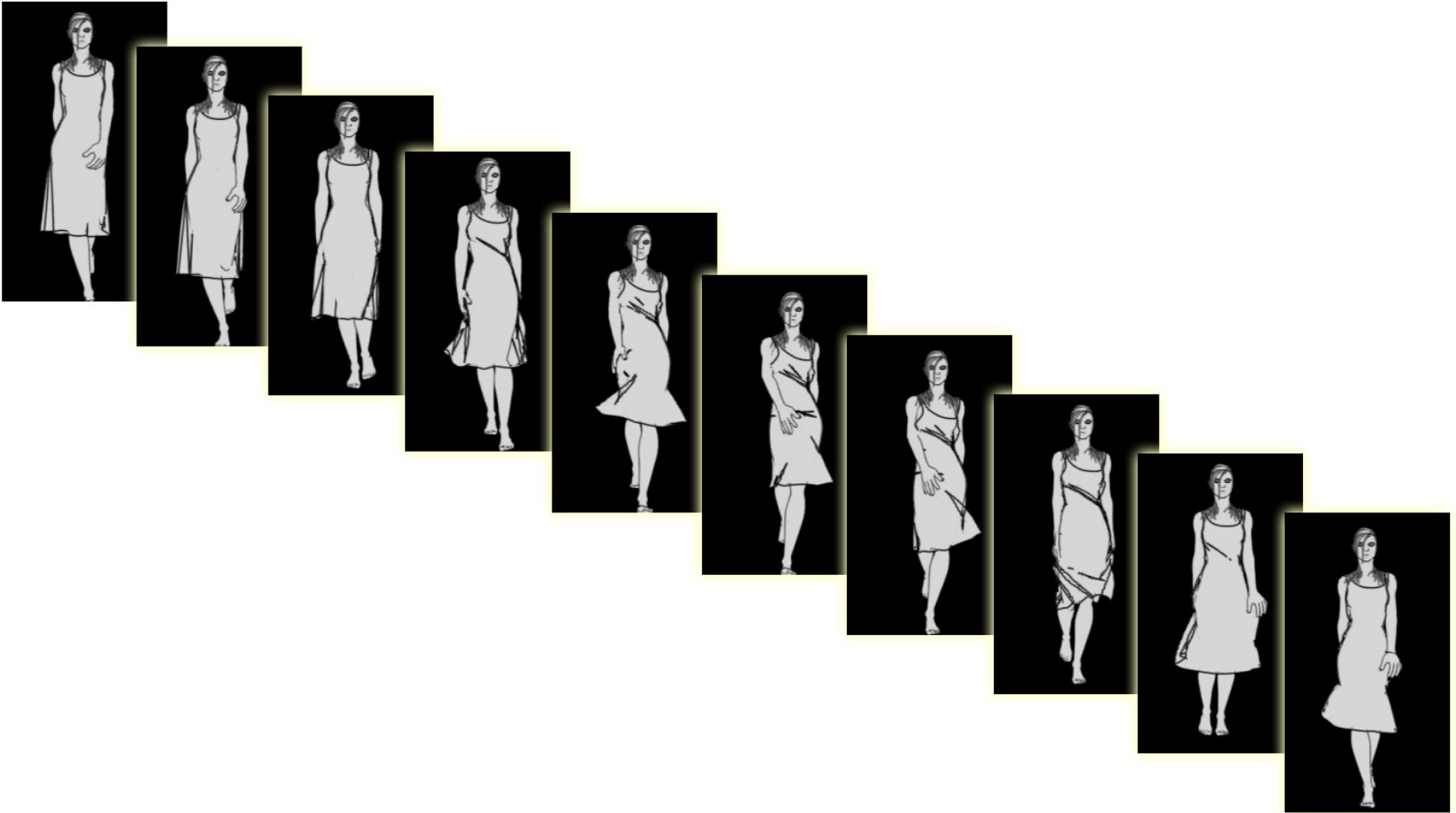
EXCLUSIVE ONLINE OFFER FOR THIS EMAIL ADDRESS ONLY

<p>0.1 secs.</p> <p>0.05 secs.</p> <p>0.1 secs.</p> <p>0.05 secs.</p> <p>0.1 secs.</p> <p>0.05 secs.</p> <p>0.1 secs.</p> <p>0.05 secs.</p>	<p>Lasko® 48-Inch MaxAir Tower Fan 79.99 FREE SHIPPING</p> <p>Dyson Air Multiplier™ AM06 10-Inch Desk Fan 299.99 FREE SHIPPING</p>	<p>Holmes® Lil-Foot Blizzard™ Table Fan 19.99 FREE SHIPPING</p> <p>Vornado® Whole Room Table Air Circulator 69.99 FREE SHIPPING</p>	<p>Rowenta Turbo Silence Pedestal Fan 119.99 FREE SHIPPING</p>
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To send out this message, BB&B sliced the image into pieces and replaced the dog in the picture with an animated version. In the animation, the dog's ears flap in the breeze created by the fans. The dog is directly in the center of the image, which keeps the viewer's eyes close to the message. There is still a danger of the reader never seeing the message, but the risk is mitigated by positioning the dog in the center of the image.

To create the seemingly random flapping effect of the dog's ears, BB&B created a gif with alternating frame display times as shown in the expanded detail.

There is no rule that says animations have to remain in constant motion. In the next chapter, we'll look at an entirely different approach to animated images.



CHAPTER 3: LIMITED-PASS ANIMATIONS



Although not as common as looped animations, limited-pass animations are sometimes a better way to go for certain types of animations. They are especially useful to create short animations that need to stop after a certain point. In most cases, limited-pass animations stop after the first pass. To the left is a frame-by-frame breakdown of an animated gif theme often seen in promotional mailings: a little banner train (or truck, sometimes) that pulls an announcement of a sale across the screen.

There's not much value in setting this up as an endless loop. The message we want to convey is contained in the final frames, so we'll want that message to be visible for as long as possible. The final frame is the one that we really want everyone to see. The rest of the frames are mainly there to create an animation and draw the eye to the banner. Looping this might actually have the opposite of the intended effect, where the eye is drawn to the banner just as it finishes completion, only to suddenly disappear as it starts over.

On a few occasions, you may prefer to have the frames loop a specific number of times and then stop. A flashing sale sign, for instance, will catch your reader's eye, but you know that if it continues to flash, it will become a distraction. In that case, you can set the gif to repeat three times and stop. This lets the animation do its job and attract the eyes of the readers, and then end so that they can concentrate on the actual message.

Make the Last Frame the First Frame

Once you have created all the frames for a limited pass animation, there's one more thing you must do: make your first frame the last frame. Not all email readers can display animations, and when they don't, they only display the first

frame. That means, if you leave the train animation as it is shown in the example above, recipients using animation-less email clients will see only this:

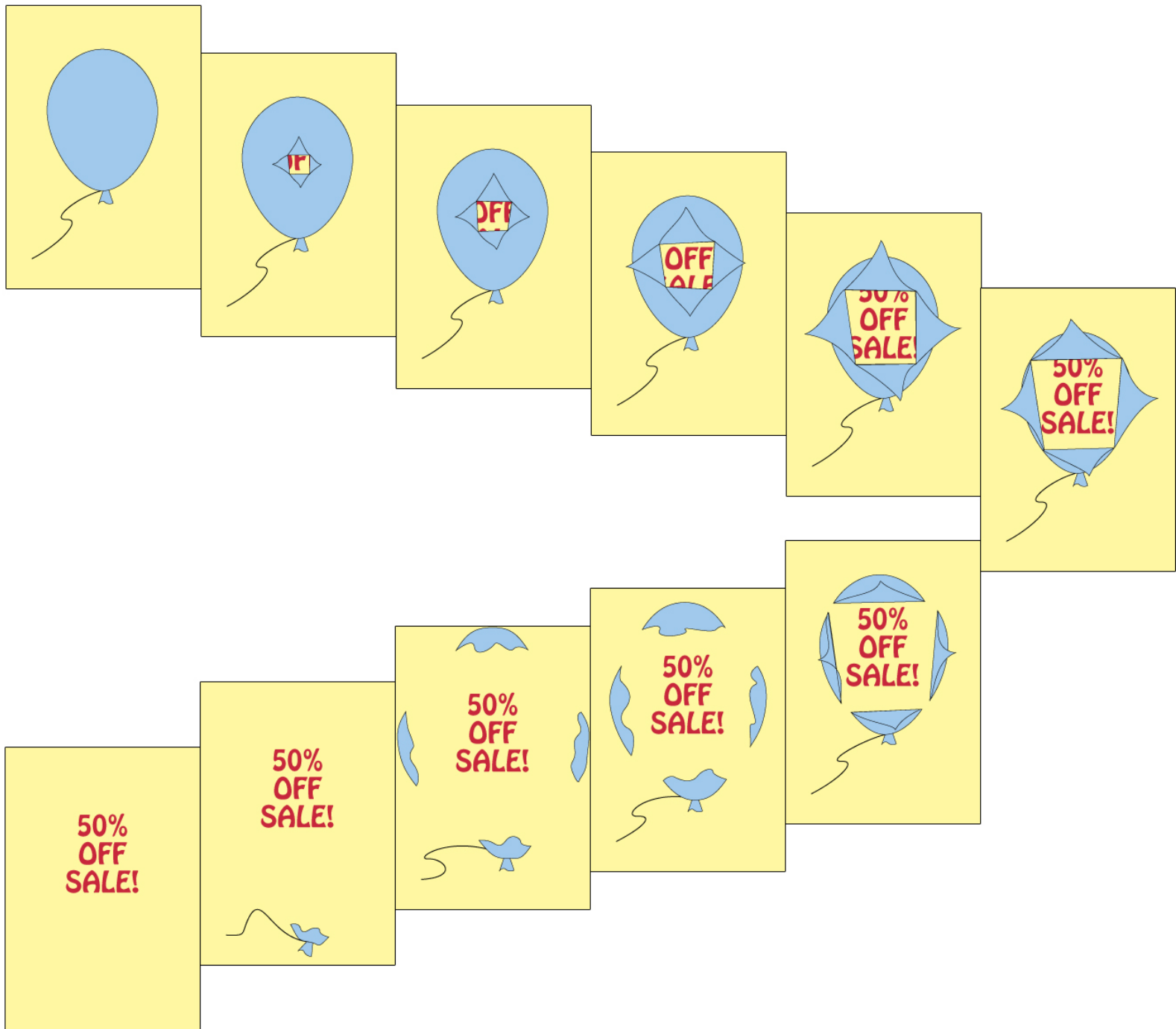


Not much of a message is it? This might not be such a critical issue if not for the fact that Microsoft Outlook—one of the most commonly-used email readers on the planet—is one of the email readers that doesn't display animations.

You want the flow of the animation to be as smooth as possible, so you need to set the time length for that first frame to 0 seconds, or "no duration." There will be quick flash of it in email readers that can use animation, but that is better than the alternative. Here is a breakdown of the animation sequence, with the time codes listed to the left:



The time on the final frame is superfluous since the animation will stop on it anyway. Whether you are planning to use a continuous loop, a limited-pass, or a simple carousel, you must keep in mind that the first frame is often the only chance you'll get to make your pitch. Look at all the frames in your series and ask yourself which one contains the most important information, then start with that frame.



CHAPTER 4: CAROUSELS



Like the looped animations, carousels cycle continuously through a sequence of images, but unlike looped animations, the frames make no attempt to create the illusion of motion. They are used, instead, to show a variety of products in the same area. These are especially popular in the retail field, partly because of the visual stimulus a changing display provides, and partly to display as many images as possible in the space normally reserved for the hero image.

The image carousel is a common feature of web site home pages, particularly when the company sells several products or services. It is normally a function of JavaScript, but JavaScript is not available to the email marketer. The carousel gif accomplishes a simplified version of the same thing.

For example, here is a breakdown of four images that appeared in a gif for a sweater sale at The Gap:



Some of the rules regarding carousels are the same as those for other types of animations. As with looped animations, you don't want the animation to get in the way of the message and distract from the sales pitch. You also want it to intrigue—not irritate—the reader. But carousels come with their own rules.

The Rule of Four

You can put as many images into a carousel as you want, but, for most purposes, you should restrict your carousel to three or four images. More than that and the viewer starts to tune out, stops paying attention to the individual products, and starts seeing the gif as an animation. If the images are all of

the same product in different colors, then you might get away with five. The more disparate the images, the more important it is to avoid overwhelming the viewer.

Similarity Dictates the Speed

Let's suppose you have an animated gif containing four images of the same basic style of shoe in four different colors. Here is a breakdown of an example of this from Andrew Marc:



The animation on this loop is set to one second, which is perfectly acceptable in this case. The images are all similar enough to allow the viewer to take in each one during the second it is displayed. As a rule, one second is the minimum amount of time you'd want to display each carousel image, as long as the images are visually similar—three sweaters, four shoes, etc. But suppose the gif images look something like this:



Now each image takes a little longer for the eye to process. None of these images have anything in common, so the brain has to start from scratch with each image.

The example on the previous page is exaggerated. It's doubtful if anyone would create a carousel with that much variety, but here is a series taken from an actual email sent by Levens:



Although all of these images have the same product theme (accessories for the iPad), they are as disparate as can be. A pen on a blue background is followed by a book on a blond wood table, followed by an iPad propped on a wooden easel on a white background, and so on. With each image, the brain has to readjust to what it is seeing. Had the animations in the gif been slowed down to at least 1.5 seconds per image, it would have been possible to take in all this information, but the settings were left at the default (one second)—much too fast for this amount of variety. To make matters worse, the carousel contains five images. A carousel with this much variety would have been better off repeating after three.

Placement in Email

Part of the popularity of carousels comes from the ability to display more than one image in the top part of the email. Preview panes in some email clients display very little of the message, so a good assortment of images does have the potential to catch the eye. But if your content isn't interesting to your recipients, they aren't going to bother reading below the fold. Compelling content is still king, so don't neglect this in favor of creating clever animations.

CHAPTER 5: ADVANCED TECHNIQUES



Animated gifs have been around a long time, which is undoubtedly why so many email clients support them. In spite of this, people continue to come up with new ways to use them or enhance their effectiveness. Here are just a few of the more recent innovations, along with an alternative to the standard gif carousel. The first three techniques listed in this section are simply techniques to create gifs that look as if they

have depth. The last technique is a CSS solution to using multiple images. While we find these techniques intriguing, we recommend approaching them with caution.

Cinemagraphs

Cinemagraph is a fancy name for a specific style of looping animated gif. While most animated gifs create the image of movement through a repeated action that is front and center in the gif, Cinemagraphs take a different approach, relying on subtle animations. In the example at the top left, the only movement in the gif is the woman's loose lock of hair, which sways gently in the breeze. The term was coined by Jamie Beck and Kevin Burg, who have several examples available on their website. The effect is hard to describe. One person compared the effect to the moving photos that appear in the magic newspapers in the Harry Potter films, and it is an apt analogy. The effect's usefulness in terms of selling products is questionable, but it is intriguing enough to inspire recipients to share the email. It's also a subtle enough effect to avoid being irritating. Properly done, a Cinemagraph has no identifiable beginning or end point in its animation.

3D Gifs

An image that jumps off the screen has a high Wow factor, but the limitations email clients put on their HTML makes this almost impossible. Nonetheless, people have come up with two interesting ways to create the illusion of three dimensions. The first might have some potential value for use in promotional email. The second, while interesting, is of limited use, but we've listed it here in case you find a special need for it.

The Vertical Bar Technique



A clever, relatively recent technique for creating a three-dimensional effect involves placing vertical gaps in the image and then letting elements break through these gaps, fooling the brain into seeing three dimensions. This technique is most effective when the background portion of the image blurs while the foreground portion becomes sharper. Several sites online offer dazzling examples of this technique. As clever as this technique is, it also has a high potential to completely distract the reader from the actual message, so use with caution.

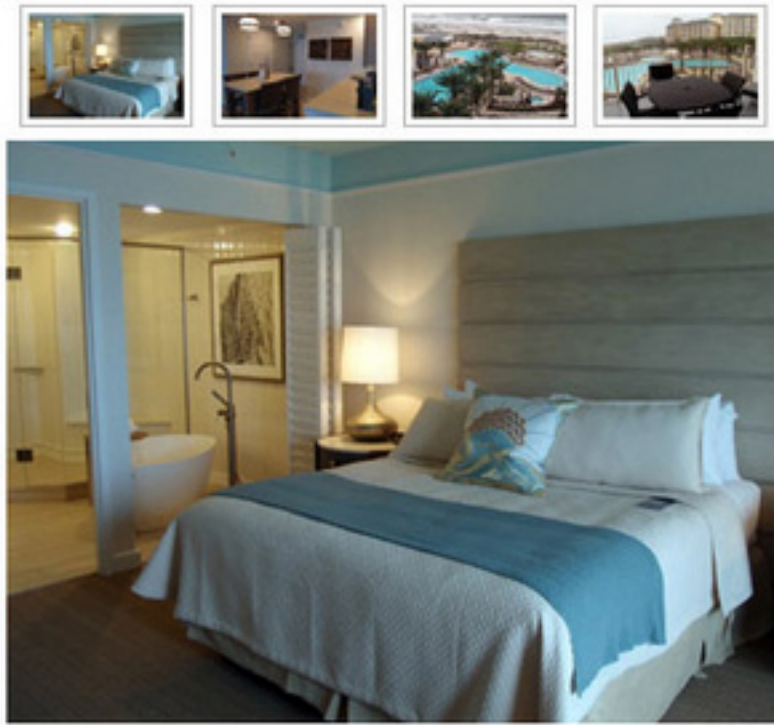
The Wiggle Gif



With this technique, images are placed on top of each other and rapidly looped to create a 3D effect that is similar in effect to those lenticular lens images used to create 3D photographs. A Wiggle Gif can be made up of two images, when taken from a stereo-optical picture (as shown above), or several images, when taken from a video. While it certainly does create a 3D effect, it's far too jittery to be of much use in email marketing. It difficult to see the difference between stereo images when they are placed next to each other, but there is enough parallax to give the image the appearance of depth. To give you a better idea of what is happening, here are the two images placed on top of each with the top image at 50% opacity:

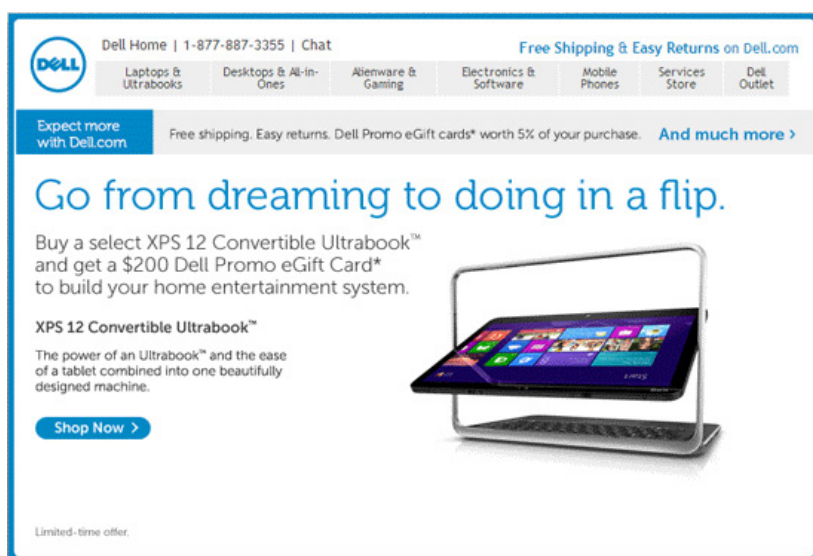


A True Email Carousel



Another very advanced technique is the CSS-driven email carousel, created by Justin Khoo at Fresh Inbox. This is a clever technique, but it requires a thorough knowledge of HTML and CSS. It is also limited as to which email clients with which it will work. It won't work with any email client that doesn't use styles, or with email clients that only use a limited set of CSS properties.

CHAPTER 6: THE TRUTH ABOUT ANIMATION



Before you start using animated gifs in your mailings, there are a few important considerations you need to add to the mix. Just because you want to use an animated gif doesn't mean you should. Sometimes the simplest approach is the best approach. It is also important to remember that engagement starts well before the first image is loaded. If the subject line isn't compelling, or the recipient is indifferent to your mailings, it won't matter how perfectly you've executed your animation. No one will ever see it.

As with every other aspect of an email, the best way to verify if the gif is helping or hindering the effectiveness of the email is run a split test. This is what Dell did when they introduced their XPS 12 Convertible Ultrabook. In this case, the split test showed that the animated gif did a better job of conveying the mechanics of the device than a static image, but the real takeaway here is that they ran a split test before sending. They thought that the animated gif would do a better job of conveying the complexities of a laptop that converts into a tablet, but they didn't assume this was true. It was only after the initial test results came back showing better engagement for the animation that they went forward with the mailing.

The careful use of the occasional animated gif can be effective, but, as with anything, overuse can cause your recipients to stop responding to them.

CHAPTER 7: TOOLS OF THE TRADE

If you are interested in creating animated gifs, but are new to them, here are a few resources to help you get started. The first one is the best of the bunch, but it is also the most expensive.



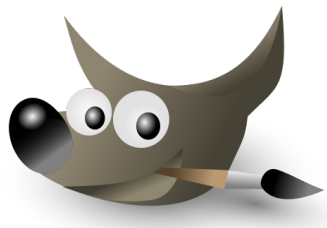
Adobe Photoshop (desktop)

Adobe Photoshop has made it easy to create animated gifs using the Timeline window. It lets you control the frame rate for each image and you can choose how many times to repeat the animation. Full instructions on how to create animated gifs with Photoshop can be found on Adobe's Online Help Center.



Picasion (web)

Of the online gif makers, Picasion is the most useful. Unlike most online gif makers, it does not place a source identification in the frame. It doesn't offer the level of control afforded with Photoshop, but it is a good choice in a pinch.



GIMP (desktop)

For the Unix crowd, GIMP has long been the best alternative to Photoshop. Creating animated gifs with GIMP is a little more complicated, but this is a full-featured program that offers about 80% of Photoshop's capabilities at a much lower price (i.e., free).



Mobile Apps

Since the last version of this guide, there has been an explosion of animated gif making apps for both iPhones and Android phones. A search for "gif maker" in either store will give you a host of options. Keep in mind that, while many of these apps are available for both platforms, some work better on one platform than the other.



About Goolara

Goolara has been in the email marketing business since 2005. Symphonie, Goolara's premiere email marketing solution is available in on-premise and cloud-based, SaaS deployments. The powerful software features many advanced capabilities, such as full-featured dynamic content, transactional and triggered email, and customizable report generation features. It is easy to use and runs from a browser-based interface using Chrome, Firefox, Internet Explorer, or Safari. Goolara is headquartered in Moraga, California and can be found online at www.goolara.com.

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