SENDING LARGE FILES

When it is big, and it really has to be there fast, email is not the answer. Here Gordon Woolf* reviews some of the options.

Files are getting larger -- especially photo files, and other graphic files such as those created in page layout programs. And the result is that we are starting to hit the limits of what can conveniently be sent as email attachments.

So there is a need for "a better way" regardless of whether the file you wish to send is a few pictures of your kids for Aunt Daisy or the leaflet that you want printed ready for the launch of your new product.

However, we should still be asking the obvious questions:
Why is it a large file?
Can it be made smaller?

In many cases that picture from your latest 4 megapixel digital camera is far more detailed than Aunt Daisy will ever want to see, even if it is shown on the plasma TV in her lounge room. And much more detailed than can be seen on the more likely 15-inch monitor of her three-year-old Dell.

Unless it is a picture with lots of straight lines or maybe even sharp slightly curved lines like your new Ford Territory, you will be surprised just how much JPEG compression you can create before you see any of those "artifacts" the photo gurus keep warning about.

You can even try the new JPEG2000 which creates smaller files with less loss of information. And then there is the old fashioned solution -- simply Zip the file, or create a zipped folder of it in WindowsXP, which is just about the same process but a little easier.

Even so, you may still reach the limits of email.

Very few email servers will accept attachments larger than 10MB. Many are limited to 2MB. Some are limited to 1MB or less. But it is not just that you may not be able to send a huge file -- larger files are more likely to be delayed.

They can take longer than snail mail. Let me give an example which occurred all too close to home. A graphic designer had a piece of artwork we needed for a book cover. I tried to explain the workings of FTP (I'll get to that later) but he insisted he'd sent many files of this size, around 2MB, by email and not had a problem.

Always be wary of that kind of statement: I'be done that loads of times; never had a problem!

And so I waited. A CD of some replacement pictures for inside the book sent from an adjacent Melbourne suburb by Express mail arrived early next morning.

And I waited.

We resorted to courier.

Three days later, the email appeared in my inbox. Yes, it had been sent, but the 2MB graphic file which was actually nearly 3MB as an attachment, showed that it had sat around in the servers of a certain major service provider for many, many hours. (I'll admit here that my hosting service is in the USA, but the quickest part of this file's journey was actually the section from Australia to the USA and back again!)

If I impart human thought to those machines on the way, I can imagine the arguments: can I send this now? No, I'm busy with the littlies, wait till I have more time? Can I send it now? No, I've got to do my nightly backup. Can I send it now? No, I've got a headache.

Large files get even larger when emailed simply because email uses an older system of storing information, so all that graphics info, and even many of the

lesser used characters in a Word document, have to be sent with extra coding. A 1MB file can be half as large again as an email attachment. It is all automatic, but it gets bigger to be sent and then becomes svelte again on arrival.

So, how do you get these larger files on the move?

One answer is to put them on a web site.

Does your ISP offer a web site? Many of them do, including MelbPC with its member pages. However it is becoming common that you have to ask for them, even if they do not cost extra. There will also be limits here. Some ISPs will offer a megabyte or two. Some may offer 5 or 10MB. They are after all intended for web sites -- not for temporary storage of those huge pics.

You can also get a free web site from other places. Such as the 15MB site you can get at http://geocities.yahoo.com
or the 100MB of space at http://www.doteasy.com/

If you want to do it with aplomb, how about getting a $10 a year domain from GoDaddy.com and a free 25MB web site from
http://www.themooseisloose.net/freehosting.html so that you can put your pics to auntie at yoursonfred.com (which is available as I write!)

To put the files on the website, your host may offer a means of using your browser, but it is more likely they'll tell you to use FTP (I said we'd get back to that).

So, what is FTP?

It stands for File Transfer Protocol and is the system by which files can be sent around the Internet. Sites which use this system commonly start with ftp:// in the same way that normal web sites start with http:// (HTTP being Hyper Text Transfer Protocol, the other major set of Internet rules).

To use FTP you need an FTP program, of which the most common are WS_FTP and Cute FTP. There are pictures here of the WS_FTP screen showing how it is very similar to Windows Explorer but with two frames showing the files on your computer and the other one those at the computer you want to send to. You can just drag files from one side to the other.

There was a common etiquette in the early days of the Internet that if you wanted to go into someone else's storage area for files, you could log in with the username of "anonymous" and a password of your email address, and thus the system was known as Anonymous FTP. It was open to abuse, so despite there being some safety steps, most sites now insist that you are known and have a proper username and password. But then people used to be able to leave their back doors unlocked too.

Storage sites are sites intended for remote storage of files, principally for backup but they can also be used for transferring files if you give your username and password to the person you want to collect the files. See http://www.lights.com/pickalink/freestorage/ for a list of several such sites, though note that some of these are free trials for a paid service.

Forwarding sites are set up specifically for sending files to other people, and are the latest addition to the armory of services available on the Internet. The one which first built a reliable reputation is http://www.yousendit.com/ which works for files up to 1GB (1000MB). You send the file to their server. They send a link to the person whose email address you give. The file is deleted from their server in 7 days’ time.

Others of this kind include http://www.youshareit.com (started earlier this year) and some others which have lower filesize limits and/or require you to set up an account even if it is free, giving them additional info about you.

All these have simple websites which invite you to browse for the file you want to send. On clicking the button you open a standard file dialog on your computer as you would to select a file in any program resident on your own drives.

Most of these sites have a limit on the number of downloads of any one file to try to limit misuse.

Most give little indication of upload taking place, so I would suggest trying a small file first to assure yourself it is working and see what the indication is of a successful transfer. If you are paranoid about the likely effect on Aunt Daisy of getting an email which is sent by the service telling her to download the file, then fill in your own email address as the intended recipient. Then you will get the message giving the file address details and you can send this link in an email which really does go direct from you.

*This article started life as a presentation by Gordon Woolf of worsleypress.com for the Peninsula GIG of MelbPC. Gordon also has a blog (thanks to the clear instructions in a past issue of PC Update and comments sparodically on subjects of possible interest to those involved in publishing at http://blog.worsleypress.com

captions (four captions for five pics)

FTP1.tif
WS_FTP is a common FTP program, available at most download sites and on many magazine cover CDs. To contact a site you need an address (which will often start with "ftp."), a username and a password. For public FTP sites, the username will be the word "anonymous" and the password will be your email address.

FTP2.tif
When you are connected you will see a list of files for the remote computer's directory in the right hand frame. You can drag files across or highlight them and use the arrow buttons between the two lists.

Browser.tif and notepadcode.tif
If you use your web site to make large files available for download, you may want to create a web page which makes the process easier. Here is a very simple web page which also helps the user. And below is the actual code for the page, as written in Notepad. You can transfer this page (and the file you want to send) to your site with an FTP program.

sendit.tif
YouSendIt.com is one of several recently established sites specialising in sending large files. Fill in the recipient's email, select the file from your drive, add a note to accompany the email and your file will be uploaded to the server. The recipient will get an email telling them how to download the file using their browser. Much easier and quicker than trying to send a large email attachment.
