Web Picture Formats

When you want to place artwork or photos on the web, which file format is best? There are three that are used on web pages with any regularity. They are JPG/JPEG, GIF, and lately, PNG. The first two are the most common, as PNG is only lately universally supported.

JPG

JPG format is best for photographs, especially for those which have subtle gradations of colors. It uses up to 16 million colors with beautiful depth, and compresses nicely for use on the web. A disadvantage is that when you work with them and save them several times as you go, the picture "adjusts itself" for depth every time, losing a small bit of data each time, especially when you are reducing the size. (It's therefore called a "lossy" format). Many photographers work with photos in an alternate format such as Camera RAW or in Photoshop's native PSD format before a final save in JPG format for web use, to reduce data loss.

GIF

GIFs work best when you have large areas of flat color. If you use the JPG format for large areas of flat color, the "lossy" save process alters the pixels slightly each time, and that's why you get that moiré look in JPG flat backgrounds. The GIF format saves without changing depth each time (a "lossless" format). Another advantage of the GIF format is that you can make pixels transparent, which works great when you want to put an irregular shape against a contrasting background, something you can't do with JPG. But GIFs do have a disadvantage. They can only use 256 of the 16 million colors at a time. It doesn't have to be the "web safe" 256: A green logo may use many greens and few reds in the palette, while a gold logo may use browns and oranges but few purples or blues. Each graphic file may use 256 colors, but it's not the same 256 from project to project.

Summary

If you want to convert your artwork, such as a logo, to a web format, choose GIF or PNG. But keep your photos in JPG format. I've experimented to see whether a photo looks best in either format. Sometimes they look great in GIF after all, but generally the JPG compresses photos better, and ends up being a smaller-sized file. Which is good news for visitors to your web site, because the pictures download faster!