

**EXECUTIVE
SUMMARY**

Studies show that only half of potential homebuyers have broadband Internet access. Yet even the most successful builders continue to bog down their Web sites with slow-loading graphics. It's a sure way to drive buyers to the competition.

People in Green Cars Need Not Apply

Excessive Web site graphics can cost you sales. by Blair Kuhnen

I was checking out a new neighborhood in Dallas last Saturday. There it was, a sign right by the sales center that read, "If your car is green, we request that you park in our West lot. Thank You." I looked, and the lot appeared to be at least a block away. How odd, I thought. Well, good thing my car is white.

No, this builder doesn't really exist. But most builders I've seen do something just as uninviting with their Web sites: They make their sites hard to access for many potential homebuyers by overloading them with graphics or flash animations that are slow to download on a dial-up modem.

But don't most Americans have broadband these days? Not according to Nielsen/NetRatings, which reported last November that just 28% of at-home Web users and 41% of at-work Web users had broadband Internet access. The combined number is probably less than the sum of the two, so for the sake of argument let's assume that half of your potential customers have broadband. That still leaves the other half on dial-up. Giving them a poor experience by using excessive graphics is like telling them to park their browser on some other builder's site. Even if 80% of your potential customers had broadband, would you really want to give the other 20% a poor first impression of your brand?

From Browser to Buyer

By the time most people arrive at a model home, they are motivated 80% by emotion and 20% by reason. But it doesn't start out that way. I'm not sure about you, but I have trouble getting emotionally attached to a Web site (excluding those I build, of course). Likewise, when the above buyers first arrive at a builder's site, they're more likely to be operating 80% on reason and 20% on emotion. Their reason wants objective answers to whether you can build a home they want, in a location they like, for a price they find agreeable. A Web site's goals should be to answer their questions, start a dialog with them, and move them to visit a model. Only then will they get emotionally attached to a home design.

Excessive graphics get in the way of the above goals. Yes, visitors want clear floor plans, attractive elevations, and lots of photos, but they want them now. You need to create an attractive and appealing home page that welcomes the visitor while still balancing for speed.

How Fast is Fast?

Many usability experts suggest a maximum download delay for your home page of 10 seconds on a dial-up modem. After that, people will start to bail out. To see how your site stacks up, try this test:

1. Delete your cache on your PC by opening Internet Explorer. Click on Tools, then Internet Options. Then click on the Delete Files button under the "General" tab. By deleting all temporary Internet files, this lets you duplicate the experience of a first-time Web site visitor.
2. Now use your modem to dial up to the Internet. Note your connection speed. With my DSL link, downloads can be blindingly fast. When I dial up with my modem (a 56K model), I usually connect at somewhere between 36K and 44K.
3. Now, go to your Web site and find the phone number and driving directions to the neighborhood closest to your home. Were you satisfied with the time it took?

I tried this test on 10 sites from the top 25 U.S. homebuilders. It took 33 seconds, on average, just to load the navigation buttons. The exceptions were Richmond American, Standard Pacific, and Centex Homes. Centex took 21 seconds to fully load, Standard Pacific 15. That's still longer than the ideal, but much better than average. According to Darren Cobb, Standard Pacific's IT director, "The buzz words we were given for developing the current site's look and feel were 'elegant' and 'easy to use.'" On the Centex Homes Web site, the movement is also quite fluid. You find driving directions in just a few clicks, with very reasonable downloads along the way.

The graphics on these sites show real homes and real people—not superfluous images that have nothing to do with the product. There are no Flash introductions or sound clips. Virtual tours and Flash floor plans are available, but the user does not have to navigate through them. Would these elements demo well and look good over my DSL line? Yes. Would they help drive physical traffic and increase sales? You need to think hard about that one.

Leading Isn't Easy

Of course, many sales and marketing managers, and most Web site designers, are visual, so there's a lot of pressure



to add graphics to a site. Let's face it, good-looking graphics demo well, and the user experience is great on a high-resolution monitor connected to a high-speed Internet connection. Your graphic designer will rarely complain when the home page size tips the scales north of 100K and contains 30 separate images. Heck, he might even win a design award.

How do you win the "less is more" argument? The answer is not to argue. Instead, ask your users what they want, whether in surveys or in focus groups. Test your Web site with real users in a lab with the help of a consultant. Once you've optimized your site, measure visitor traffic and calculate the ratio of visitors to leads. This will show that less is in fact more, much more.

Just remember, even people in green cars buy homes.

THB

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Large Builder HomePage Load Time

1	D. R. Horton	www.drhorton.com	41
2	Pulte Homes	www.pulte.com	42
3	Lennar Corp.	www.lennar.com	33
4	Centex Corp.	www.centexhomes.com	21
5	KB Home	www.kbhome.com	31
6	Beazer Homes USA	www.beazer.com	63
7	The Ryland Group	www.ryland.com	NA
8	NVR	www.ryanhomes.com	14
9	Hovnanian Enterprises	www.khov.com	40
10	M.D.C. Holdings	www.richmondamerican.com	29
11	Standard Pacific Corp.	www.standardpacifichomes.com	15

NOTES: Test run on July 22, 2003, at 2:45pm CDT accessing via dial-up modem at 44,000 bps. Flash introductions, if any, were skipped. Actual page load time may be affected by bandwidth, Internet traffic, and other factors beyond design of your Web page. Ryland Web site non-responsive at time of test. Time is in seconds. Load times (right column) are in seconds.