



iStock HubSpot
by Getty Images™

12 Rules for Using Marketing Imagery Effectively

How to choose the best images for your digital marketing efforts



Distilling the elements of a great piece of content into a dozen rules is never easy. However, what we can say without question is that great imagery is key to great content. By understanding how imagery affects our emotions and which images audiences respond to, we can create content that people will want to share.

In this ebook, we'll walk you through 12 steps towards using images in a more effective way. From storytelling to composition and optimization, you'll learn how making some simple changes to your visual content strategy can have a positive impact on your success.

So here's to the power of great imagery – photographs, illustrations and video – and to creating brilliant, effective content every time.

1

Find a story
that's begging
to be shared

1

Find a story that's begging to be shared

The undeniable advantage images have over words is that images transcend language barriers. Cultural and social factors and our knowledge of the world will nuance our individual interpretation of each story. But the visceral emotions that each picture initially sparks are likely to be universally felt. Emotions connect us and make us human.

Starting with a great image gives richness to digital storytelling. It adds layers of meaning that we want to dissect, discuss and debate. When an image provokes mixed emotions, even contradictory ones, we somehow feel more drawn to it. That investment of emotion into experiencing stories is what gives them value – and things of value get shared. Stories are the currency of the digital world.

Finding a story that's begging to be shared is about choosing and using images to evoke a deeper, sustained emotional response. [From Love to Bingo](#), a Getty Images film by Almap BBDO, shows the journey from youthful love to old age, using 873 Getty Images stock shots. It tells a familiar story in a unique and unexpected fashion. While it lasts only one minute, seven seconds, during that time we experience strong, tangible feelings that we want to revisit over and over. The film has now been viewed over 3.6 million times online, and has won several prestigious advertising awards including Cannes Lions, proving the power of storytelling.



A woman with safety glasses on her head is looking down at a large sheet of paper on a workbench. She is holding a pencil. The background is a workshop with various tools and equipment.

2

Use
meaningful
images

2

Use meaningful images

Stats indicate that worldwide every day 300 million photographs are uploaded to Facebook, 70 million are shared via Instagram and more than 7 billion videos are shared through SnapChat. Add in figures for YouTube, Weibo, LinkedIn, Twitter, WordPress, Tumblr, Pinterest and other social media sites, and we are scrolling in a maelstrom of images.

The images we pause for have a degree of meaning to us. They are the ones that explore the edges of our experience or reinforce the known. They also provoke happiness or sadness, surprise or fear, anger or disgust, or another of our many complex emotions. We ignore the emotionally neutral and we are often unwilling to explore that which is completely beyond our current understanding. What we seek is connection.

There's evidence to support that audiences use brands for more than personal consumption, particularly in this era of branded and native content. The New York Times' Customer Insight Group researched why people share content online. They uncovered five key reasons: to bring valuable and entertaining content to others, to define themselves to others, to nurture relationships and stay connected, to feel more involved in the world, and to support causes or issues they care about. The imagery within your content should strive to connect you to your audience by meeting one of those needs, just as your written content should.

The Malaysian Nature Society's [poster campaign](#) makes that connection. We know that killing animals is wrong, but the poster's creative use of strong imagery and simple text resonates in a way that is both immediate and emotive.



KEY TAKEAWAY

We know that content featuring images is more shareable, but if your imagery meets the emotional needs of your audience and helps them communicate their emotions, opinions or beliefs succinctly, it's even more likely that your content will be shared.



3

**Match your
brand values**

3

Match your brand values

Brand values are the link between a company and their audience. The best brands understand the importance of living their brand values – it takes more than saying “we believe in a particular brand value”. This isn’t just a line from the best practice handbook. If your brand stands for transparency, for example, that’s what you need to emulate throughout all of your marketing materials, including your images.

Shiseido’s **‘High School Girl?’** campaign is a brilliant example of how visual content (video, in this case) can form a connection between brand and audience without focusing on selling product. The goal of beauty brand Shiseido is to help people live more beautifully, in their words – ‘This moment. This life. Beautifully.’

When they wanted to reach out to younger consumers, they tapped into one of the internet’s much-discussed subcultures of Japanese youth. Without giving anything away, the tagline for their viral **High School Girl?** was ‘Everyone can be pretty’. What made this transformative campaign so enormously successful was that it resonated with the brand’s values, rather than their products, allowing them to make a very human, emotional connection with their audience.



KEY TAKEAWAY

Your brand values should be present in your visual content, just as they would in written content. Brand values communicate who you are and what you stand for, allowing you to develop brand affinity and delight your audience without pushing your product.

4

Let images
breathe



4

Let images breathe

Most of us are familiar with the notion of ‘white space’ and how it functions within a design. Leaving space around an element brings focus, establishes a hierarchy within the design, provides balance and helps us, the viewer, to better understand the message. It may also allow us to become involved with crafting the story around the image, rather than deciphering a more complex grouping of images. In doing this, we become emotionally invested in the content.

Another strong argument for white space is that much of the content we consume today is via social media. The space makes it easier to understand and read an image when scrolling quickly. HubSpot, for example, utilizes white space in the majority of their social imagery, and they find these posts gain significantly higher levels of engagement.

This [integrated advertising campaign](#) by One Watch was created to raise awareness of violence in relationships. The campaign imagery uses ‘white space’ – in this case, it’s blue – to ensure we are able to decode the message; we are shocked, outraged and upset; we feel compelled to share and to help put an end to each victim’s suffering.



KEY TAKEAWAY

Use ‘white space’ tactically to help your images gain more traction on social media, as they’re more likely to stand out amongst the ‘noise’.



5

**Feature real
people, with
real emotions**

5

Feature real people, with real emotions

Social media plays a large part in today's thirst for authenticity. Audiences feel empowered and are able to give immediate feedback on everything from customer service to marketing. They have found their voice in a public arena. They want to be listened to and represented in all their diversity. The advertising of last century frequently glossed over ugly truths in favor of aspirations and dreams. Today that aspiration is still represented, but it's tempered by the audience's strong desire to connect with others like themselves.

Visual content that features real people and explores raw emotions – from a thrill seeker's exhilaration to a parent's love – hits the sweet spot for sharing. Like Dove's Real Beauty campaigns before it, skincare brand SK-II's [Marriage Market Takeover](#) aims to empower Chinese women and shatter stereotypes. What makes it moving is that the unmarried women featured in the 4-minute film are presented in the context of their families. We can see the separate pains of the parents and adult child and their shared urge to stay connected with each other. By focusing on human relationships and the stories of real people, SK-II's video is able to move its audience to share and connect.



75058867, Roberto A. Sanchez/iStock



53756638, KIVILCIM PINAR/iStock

KEY TAKEAWAY

Don't shy away from exploring topics that aren't often talked about publicly with your visual content. If it's something that you know will resonate with your audience, exploring emotive topics in a sensitive way can help you build positive brand sentiment by adding real value to people's lives.

A close-up photograph of a barista's hands. The barista is wearing a blue apron over a light blue shirt. They are pouring coffee from a shiny metal pitcher into a clear glass cup. The background is blurred, showing a wooden surface, likely a bar counter. A green circular graphic is overlaid on the center of the image, containing the number 6 and the text 'Use visual forms of social media to differentiate your brand'.

6

**Use visual forms
of social media
to differentiate
your brand**

6

Use visual forms of social media to differentiate your brand



36713702, deImagine/iStock

When using the internet, people are generally seeking two things: to be informed and/or to be entertained. They want to think or feel, to be touched by the rational or the emotional, or both. It's now second nature for us to ignore banner ads. We subconsciously tune them out as we search for something more interesting and less intrusive to capture our attention. Your content can fill that void, but it doesn't have to be restricted to one platform (like your blog, for example). This is where social media comes to the fore.

Having a presence on primarily visual channels like Pinterest, Instagram and Snapchat allows you to connect with your audience at multiple touch points using imagery. Using these platforms as part of a campaign widens your reach and allows you to tailor content to different segments of your audience, who naturally consume content via different channels. The majority of your campaign content will be hosted on your website, but you can use these social channels to raise awareness of your message and drive traffic back to your website.

In New Zealand, the NZ Transport Agency's [Snapchat anti-drug-driving](#) campaign is a powerful example of using point of view to innovatively connect with a hard-to-reach audience. It gained huge amounts of media attention, and allowed the organisation to communicate its message to its target audience, as well as the wider public.

If the NZ Transport Agency had decided to deliver this message via a blog post with a few simple images, it's highly unlikely it would have been such a huge success. Spending time creating visual content for social media can help widen your reach, boosting awareness and driving traffic back to your website.

Taking a different approach to visual content, Smirnoff's [Instagram Your Fridge](#) encouraged audience interaction by enabling people to share the contents of their fridge with a professional bartender via Instagram and get a personalised video in return. The campaign had over 1,000,000 views and increased sales by 58%. With the rise of ad blocking software, the way to your audience's heart is through creating compelling visual content to achieve real audience engagement via multiple channels.

KEY TAKEAWAY

Think about how creating custom visual content for channels like Instagram and Snapchat can support a wider campaign. Don't ignore the fact that different segments of your audience might want to consume your content via different channels, and that what works on your blog won't necessarily translate well on Instagram.



92075187, vgajic/iStock

Now that you've got some inspiration for what your visual content should include, it's time to discuss how to optimize those images for success. There's no point in creating beautiful visual content if you don't know how to make it work for different purposes to help you reach your goals. Ultimately, your content needs to help you drive maximum brand awareness, conversions or any other goal set for yourself.

Here's how.



7

Get your
dimensions
spot-on

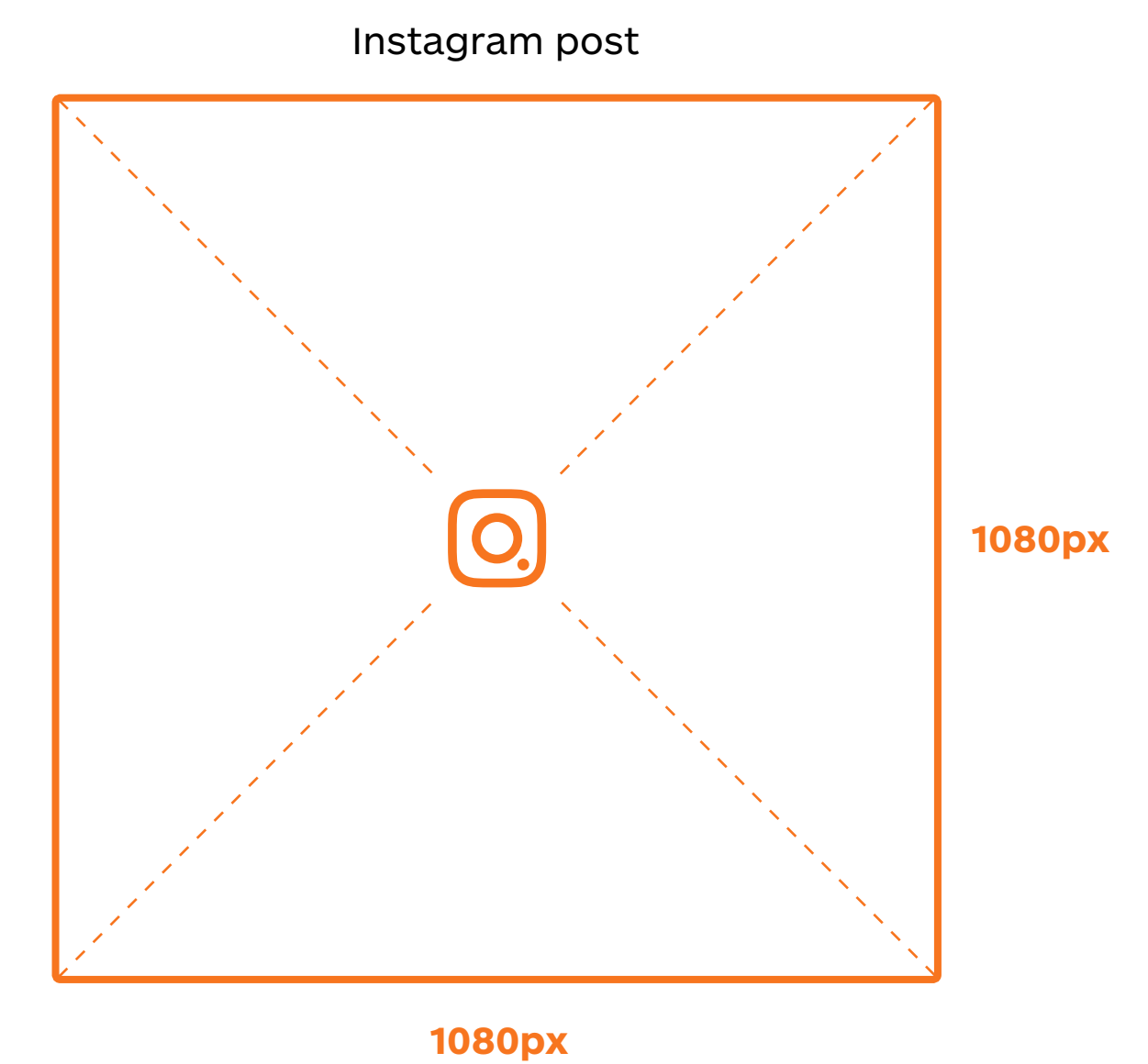
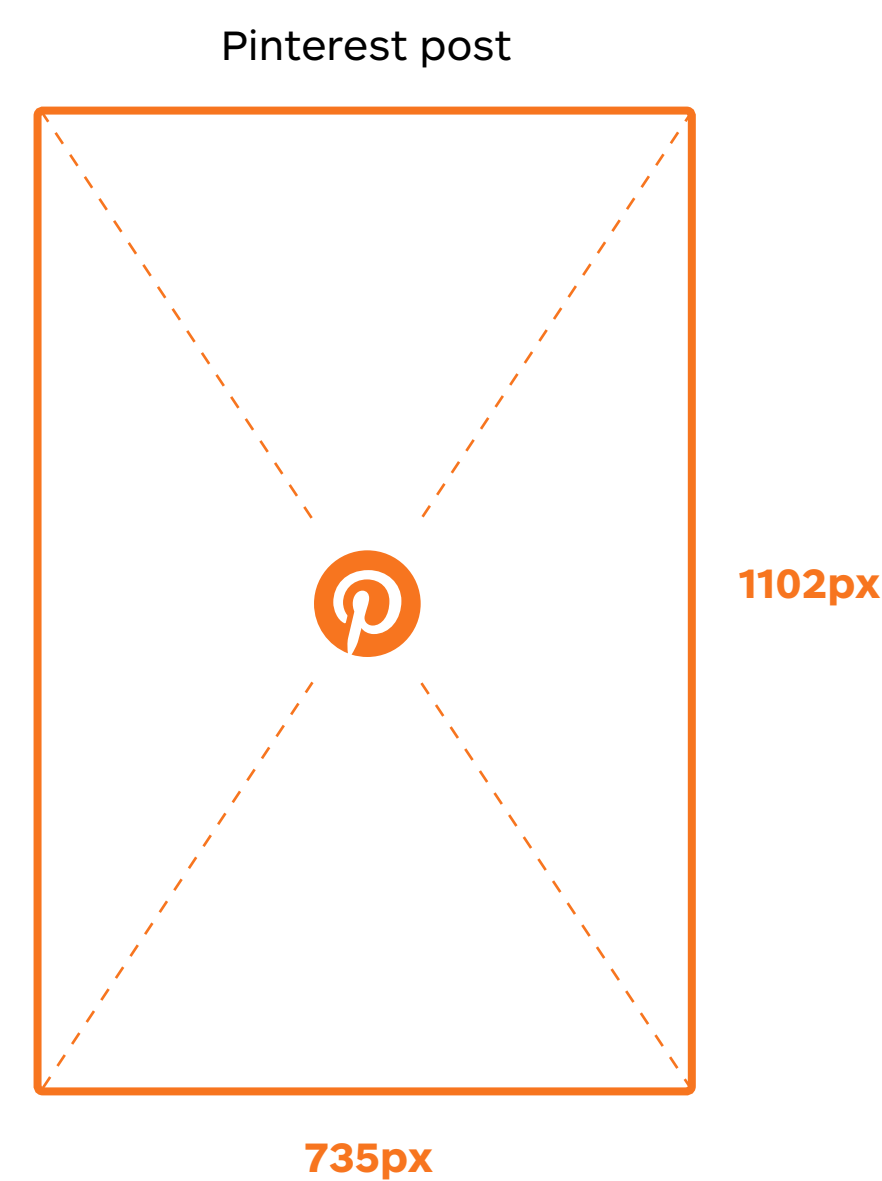
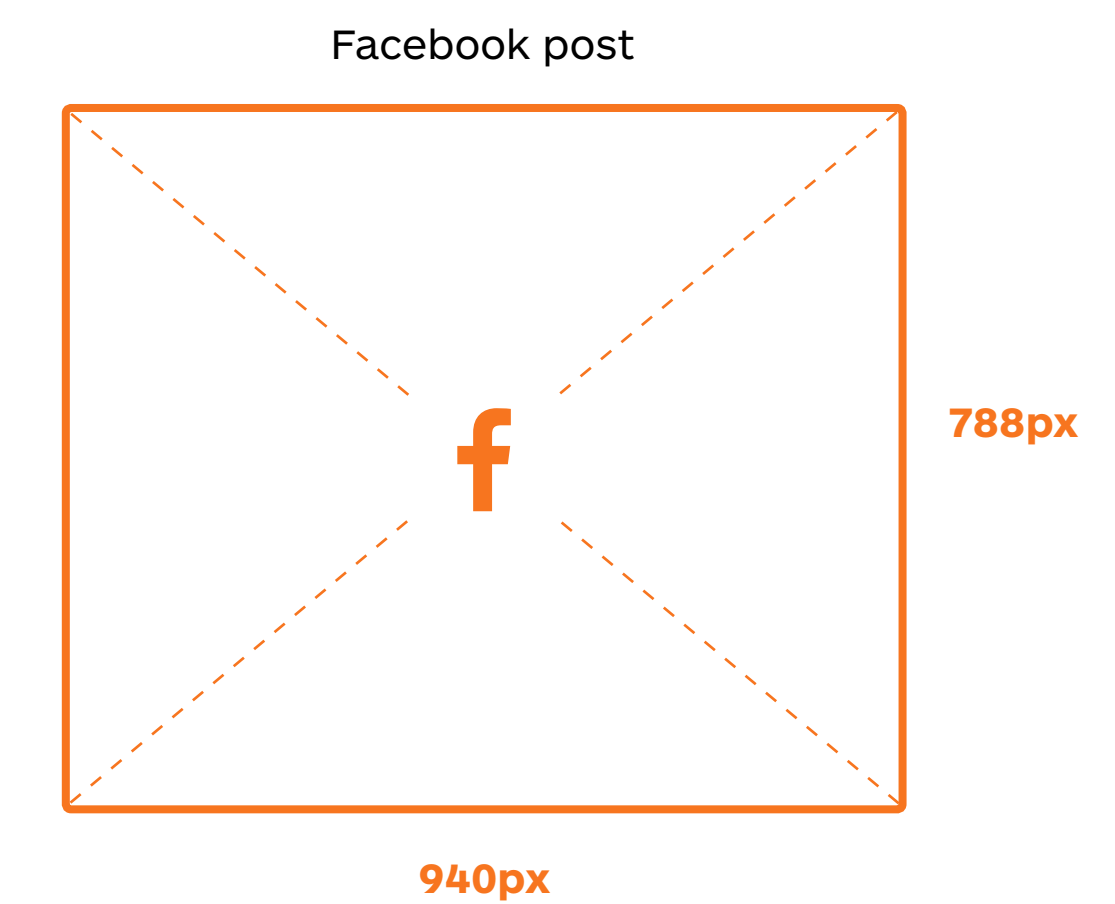
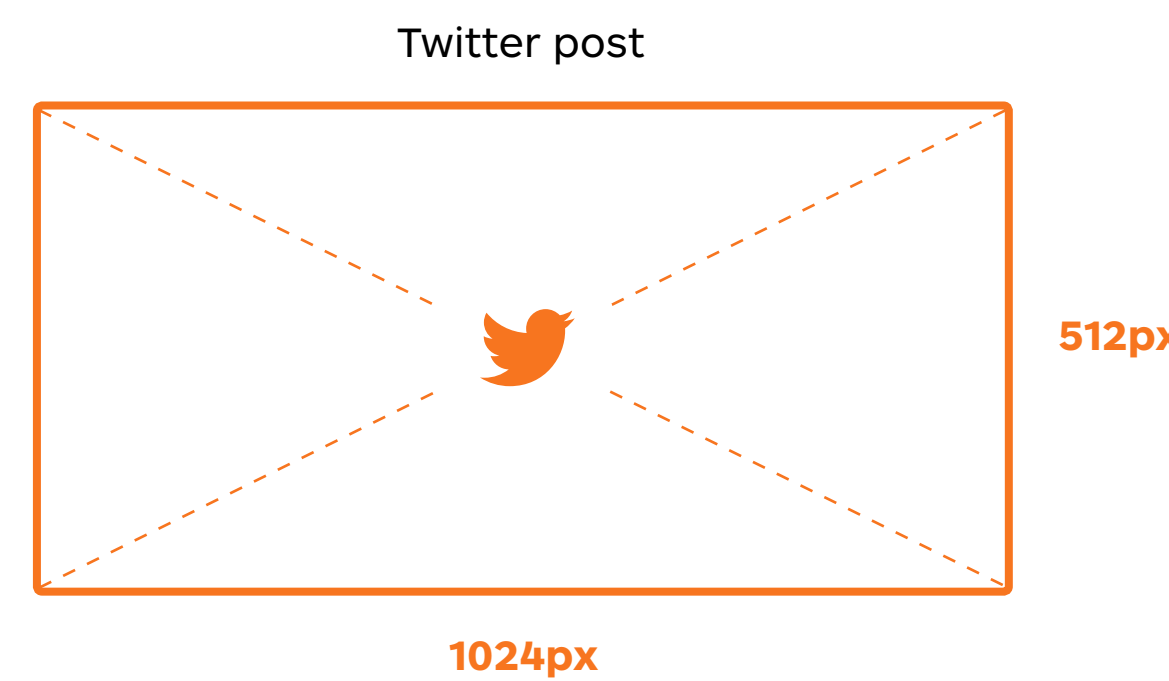
7

Get your dimensions spot-on

FOR SOCIAL MEDIA

When you're using imagery to support your social media posts -- which you absolutely should be, as it's proven to increase engagement -- the dimensions are critical. Each social media platform has different image sizes, so make sure you're using the correct ones to ensure your images aren't being cut-off when you post them.

You should also think about how the image looks when viewing on a mobile device. Twitter, for example, will cut off the far right hand side of your image for people viewing on a mobile device, so it's best to keep any text or focal points in the centre.



PRO TIP

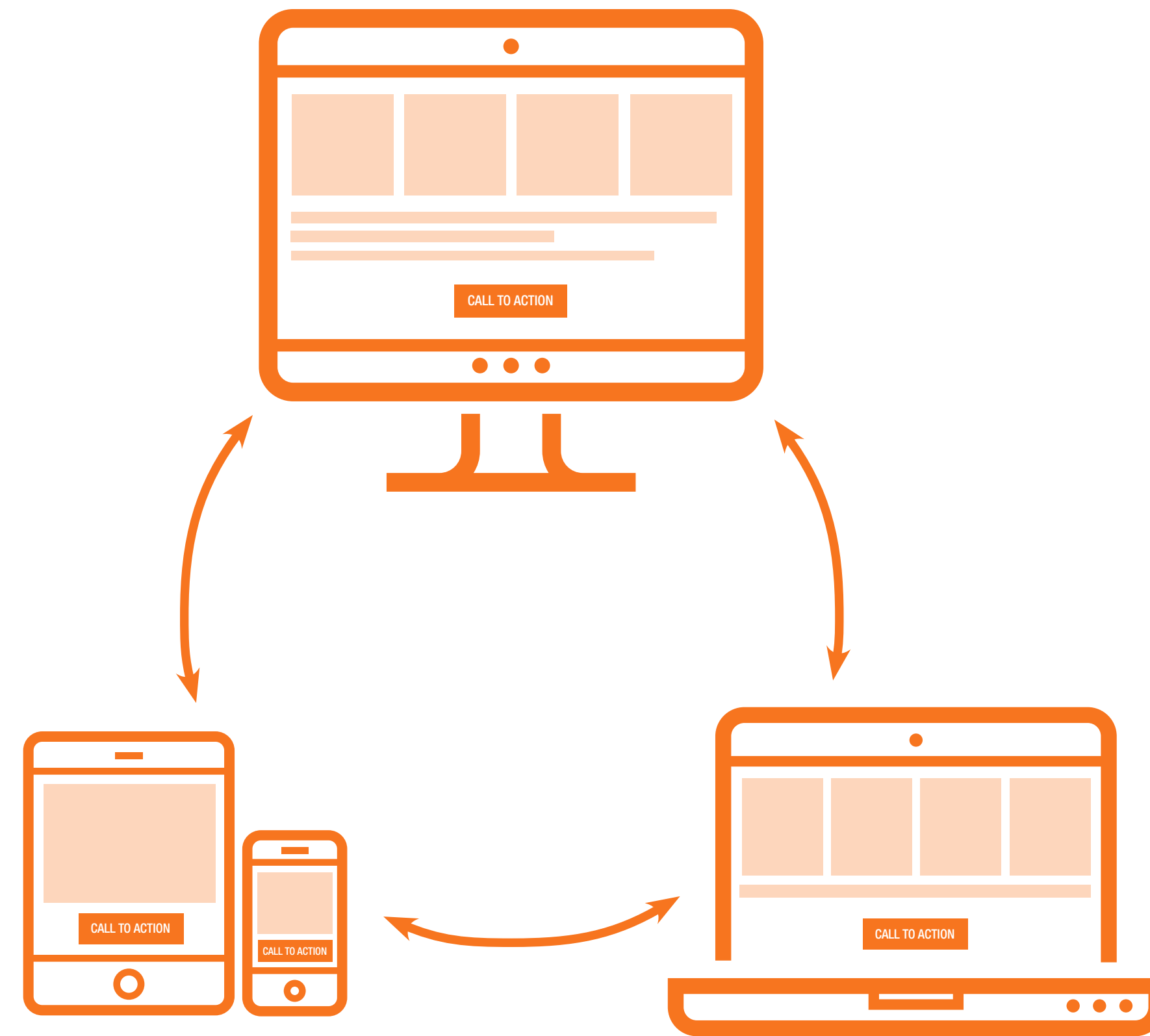
Social networks are constantly adding image sizes to their list of options for marketers, keep up to date on the new changes [here](#).

FOR LANDING PAGES

The importance of using the right dimensions also comes into play on landing pages where the primary goal is to have someone fill out a form and convert. Getting your image size spot-on can help increase conversions on landing pages, so it's worth spending some time getting it right.

At HubSpot, we always make sure our images are small enough to allow our CTA (call-to-action) and some of the form to sit 'above the fold' of the page. By doing so, we ensure the action we want people to take is clear from the moment they land on the page -- no scrolling required.

Every landing page is different, so play around with the dimensions until you find the size that works best for your website, and always be sure your images are optimized for mobile!



KEY TAKEAWAY

Don't waste all the time you've spent creating a beautiful image for it to be wasted by poor sizing -- get your dimensions right for desktop and mobile!



8

**Optimize your
image file sizes
for a better user
experience**

8

Optimize your image file sizes for a better user experience

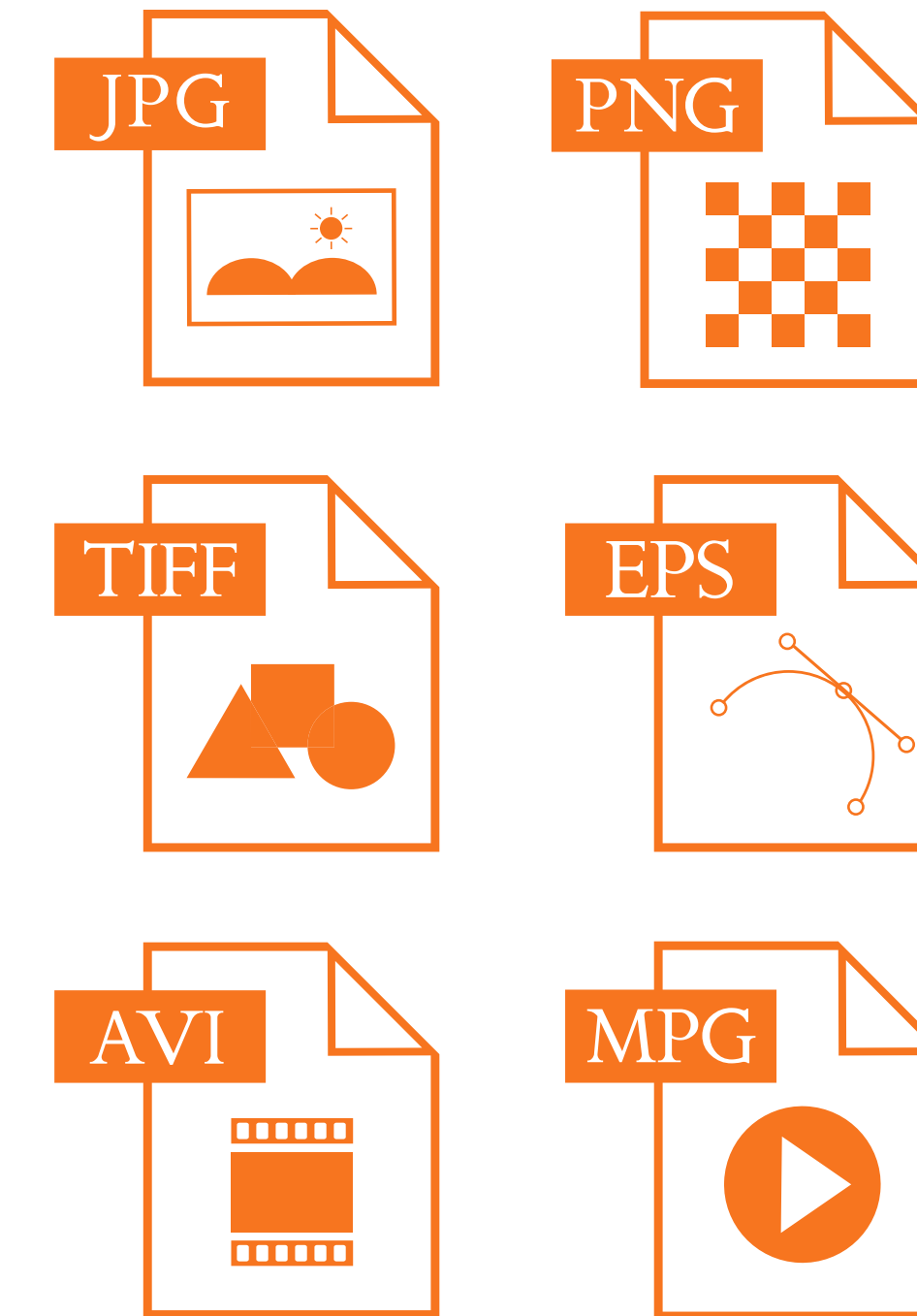
Beyond the dimensions of your images, you should also be aware of the file sizes of the images and videos you're using on your website. There's nothing more frustrating than a website or blog that takes forever to load. It creates a bad user experience, and people are more likely to leave your website before the page has even finished loading.

Google acknowledges that site speed is an important factor for creating a positive user experience, and websites that load content quickly are consequently more likely to rank highly in search results and therefore receive more traffic.

What you might not have considered is that your images could be contributing to a poor site speed. Amongst other factors, you need to make some changes to your images to ensure you're not losing out on traffic and conversions as a result of having a poor site speed. This is increasingly important considering around half of your traffic is likely to be coming from mobile users, who are browsing on-the-go with slower download speeds.

You can test your site speed using [Google's Page Speed Insights tool](#). It highlights whether your images could be the culprit for your site's slow page load speed and offers tips to help you rectify it. Here are some solutions you could be implementing when it comes to images:

- Ensure your images are no larger than they need to be
- Compress them for web use wherever possible
- Choose the correct format - PNGs are usually better for graphics with fewer than 16 colours, and JPEGs are generally better for photographs



KEY TAKEAWAY

Your images and videos could be hurting your website. Make sure you compress them where necessary so they don't affect your page load speed.

A young man with dark hair and a beard, wearing a blue and white plaid shirt and a dark apron, is focused on a silver laptop. He is standing in a bicycle shop, with several bicycles hanging on the wall behind him. The background is slightly blurred, emphasizing the man and his work.

9

**Optimize your
alt text**

9

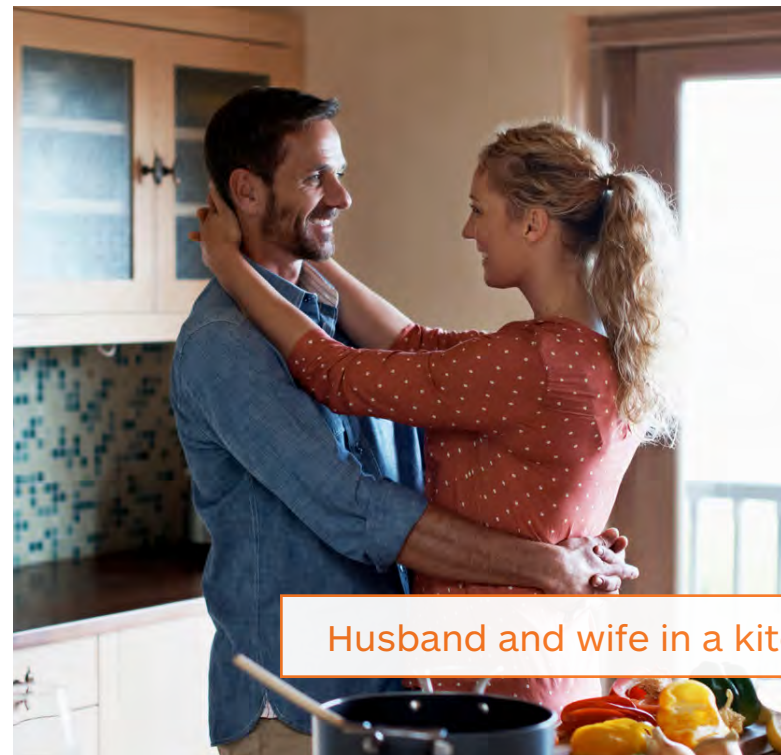
Optimize your alt text

Optimizing the alt text (or alternative text) of the images on your website or blog can bring in additional traffic from image search results.

Search engines can't read images on web pages to determine what they are, but adding alt text to your images can help a search engine to understand how the image contributes to the content on a page. Alt text is also used by screen readers for the blind or visually impaired. You might have come across alt text if you've ever been reading a page that hasn't loaded properly, and the images are replaced by text to add context for the user.

It's important to add alt text to your images from an SEO perspective as if search engines are able to understand what your images mean, they are able to decide where to rank them in image search results. This can provide an additional source of traffic that content creators often overlook.

It's worth noting that the alt text of your images isn't an opportunity to cram another one of your keywords onto the page. The alt text should be brief and describe what the image portrays. If it makes sense for your keyword to be in the alt text, then include it, but this won't always be the case.



Husband and wife in a kitchen

69224831, kupicoo/iStock



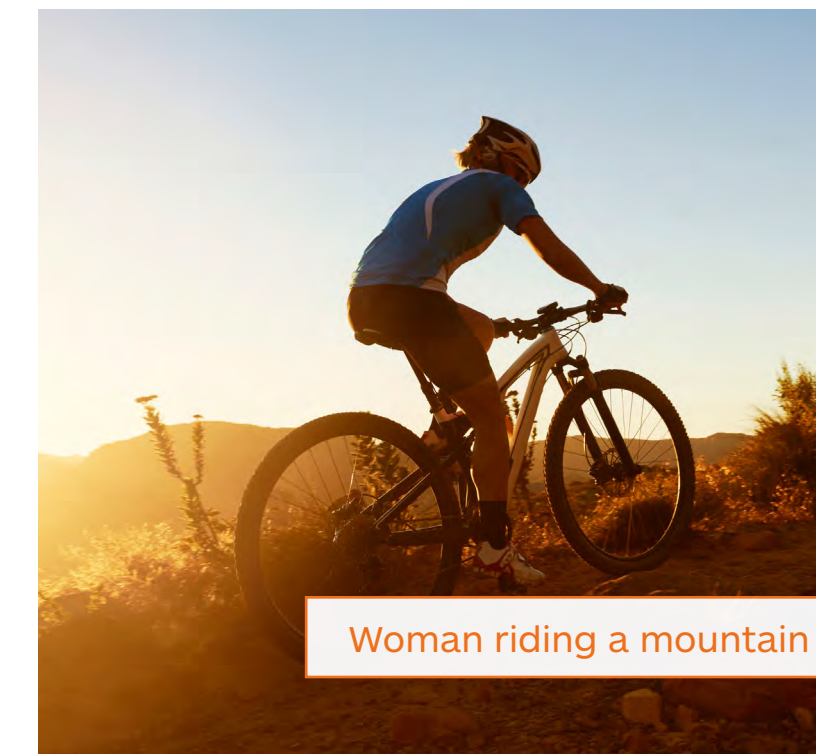
Young boy on a skateboard

87732227, Kontrec/iStock



Snowy mountains

83475933, Leonardo Patrizi/iStock



Woman riding a mountain bike

60729714, pixdeluxe/iStock

KEY TAKEAWAY

Make your images work harder for your website by optimizing the alt text to bring in additional organic traffic.



10

Use color
strategically

10

Use color strategically

Emotion plays a huge role in the way we respond to content, including visual content. So consider: how do you think your chosen image will make someone feel? What action will it encourage them to take?

Color is important when you want to someone to take action. This comes into play on CTA buttons, where you might usually spend time coming up with the perfect, action-oriented language, but don't think to consider how the colour of the button might be affecting your conversion rate.

The same goes for all of your marketing imagery. On a psychological level, different colors are believed to have different -- and often subconscious -- connotations depending on the context in which they're presented. For example, if you saw a Tweet about a company's latest webinar called 'How to Become an Influencer in Your Industry' accompanied by a graphic with a red background, you're unlikely to associate that with danger. Instead, in this context, you might associate red with action or importance, subconsciously making you more likely to click on the link.



Of course, our perceptions of different colors is dependent on personal experience, but there are **plenty of studies** that suggest color is an important factor for brands when it comes to portraying personality and creating a brand identity.

Here's a guide to the different emotions that tend to be associated with certain colours. Consider correlating the colors you use in your imagery with the emotion or characteristic you want to invoke:

Red = action and excitement



488471764, xavierarnau/iStock

Orange = friendliness, cheerfulness and confidence



481297808, AleksandarNakic/iStock

Yellow = optimism, clarity and warmth



529667388, ValentinRussanov/iStock

Purple = knowledge and imagination



509112518, narvik/iStock

Blue = trust and strength



517011174, Bicho_raro/iStock

Green = peace, growth and health



524382074, AleksandarNakic/iStock

Grey = balance and calmness



524085469, OGphoto/iStock

KEY TAKEAWAY

Don't choose a color simply because it looks good. When choosing colors, think strategically about how that color might be perceived by your audience considering the context it's presented in.



11

Represent your
audience in
your images

11

Represent your audience in your images

The backbone of any marketing strategy is knowing your audience and having clearly defined buyer personas. You might have a whole strategy that revolves around these people, but are you overlooking them when it comes to your imagery?

It might seem obvious, but cultural nuances are massively important when choosing your imagery. For example, don't choose a stock photo of a woman with blonde hair and blue eyes in your feature image for a blog post aimed at mothers in Indonesia -- your audience won't relate to it.

If you can't find a culturally appropriate image, it's best to stick with something more generic that doesn't include people. However, as mentioned previously, having people in your photos can help your audience to have a more emotional connection with your content; even more so if they can identify with those people, so it's best to include them wherever possible.

Nowadays, image libraries like iStock have a great diverse selection of **fresh authentic-looking imagery** (like the visuals used in this e-book). Use conceptual keywords - family, togetherness, authentic - and geographic keywords to narrow down your selection.



79382455, LaraBelova/iStock



97130165, Yagi-Studio/iStock



12

A/B test what works for you

12

A/B test what works for you

The same advice doesn't apply to everyone, so find out what works for you, for your audience and for your product. Try A/B testing how different images affect your conversion rates -- whether that's on social media, your blog, your product pages or your landing pages -- to figure out how you can use visual materials to elevate your existing marketing efforts. You might find [this guide to A/B testing](#) helpful to avoid making mistakes which result in incorrect assumptions about what images people like and what makes them click -- decisions that could easily misinform other parts of your strategy.





79136791, coloroftime/iStock

Visual content comes as an afterthought for most marketers, but when you combine the right ideas with the right execution, your images can unlock the final step towards making your content marketing efforts a huge success. Consider your images as a core element of your content. Ensure you're thinking about the story they tell and how you can optimize them for maximum results, and you'll be well on your way to creating your best content yet.