cPanel Hotlink Protection

Image hotlinking is a very serious problem for many sites, especially those that are very image heavy and get a lot of traffic from image searches.

With a hotlink, a website other than your own decides it wants to include an image from your site on its page and, rather than download it and upload it to their server, finds your image URL out, usually by right clicking the image, and then creates an IMG tag with that URL. That means every time someone visits their page, your server feeds the image to them, spending bandwidth and other resources to do so. Copyright issues aside, this means you are essentially paying to host the image for someone else.

Hotlink protection looks at the URL that is referring the request and denies requests not from your site. In short, if someone tries to load the image from yourdomain.com, they will get the image, but if they try to load it from hotlinksite.com, they will either get nothing or a substitute image of your choice.

To enable this feature simply look under the security heading in your CPanel and click on “Hotlink Protection”. Then input the domains you want to allow to link your images, including both www and non-www variations, and then list the image types you want to protect, separated by a comma. You can choose to allow direct requests, meaning those without a referral at all, such as someone visiting the image directly in their browser, and you can also optionally redirect the request to another image, for example, if you want to have a “No Hotlinking Allowed” image to display on the hotlinker’s site.

In addition to images, you can also use this to prevent direct linking to any file type you want including downloads, such as zip files, or anything else you don’t want someone else offering directly on their site.

However, before you eagerly enable hotlink protection in a bid to stop the evil bandwidth thieves, you need to be aware of the limitations and potential problems that might come with enabling the feature.

Potential Concerns

The biggest concern that comes with using this tool is to remember that there are legitimate uses for hotlinking. For example, if you include images in your RSS feed, those who read it via their web-based email clients or Google reader will be blocked as the sites they are on will appear as the referrer.

The other issue is that hotlink protection adds another task for your server, and that can have an impact on site speed and the amount of processing power required. With every request the server has to check and see if the request is for a file type that is protected and, if it is, check and ensure that the referring URL is one that is allowed.

This probably won't have a discernible impact on your server or your site's speed, but if you are working to optimize your site and take the view that every little step is important, you need to be aware that hotlink protection is a step backwards, even if it is minuscule.

In short, if you want to allow people to access your content on other sites, turning hotlink protection on is a headache waiting to happen. It's also a bad idea if you are trying to ensure your site is completely optimized for speed and efficiency.