Google is all set to cash on its map API and has now set a usage cap, exceeding which users will be charged a fee. Here are a few interesting and easy tips to effectively use the API, while maintaining the usage count below the fee limits

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After six and half years as a free and unlimited-use companion to amateur cartographers and map heads everywhere, Google Maps API now has a usage cap. Exceed the cap and you'll incur overage fees, payable to Google.

The cap currently sits at 25,000 map loads per day, but there is no guarantee it won't decrease, if maps-based ad revenue (98 per cent of Google's revenue comes from ad placement) fails to impress their shareholders.

So, here are four easy ways to optimise your maps and keep them flying below Google's radar:

Upgrade to V3

Google Maps API V3 is not only faster and more versatile than V2, but its overage fees are much cheaper: only $4 per 1,000 map loads vs $10 for V2 (all figures in US dollars).

Avoid stylised maps

Google Maps default styles, colours and iconography are effective and well recognised internationally, with regional variations that reflect local tastes (e.g. roadways for UK and US look different).

Nonetheless, stylised maps were launched in 2010 to let you override these defaults. To heck with convention or usability! But save yourself some money (and your users some grief) and keep your stylised maps off the Web, because its usage cap is 10 times lower, and overage fees twice as expensive.

Reduce page loads

The usage cap measures the number of times your map is loaded into a browser, and equates to a single page load. Most websites (especially enterprise-class) refresh page content via the page load, with a user typically loading dozens of Web pages during a single session. You will quickly exceed the usage cap, if your map refreshes its markers, polygons and other content this way.

Instead, load the map into the browser once and keep it there until the user closes the browser or navigates away from the map entirely. When a map needs content, don't initiate a page load. Instead, use a JavaScript controller within the map to send a request to the server, and refresh map content after the response arrives.

Use the API Console

Sign up for the Google API console at https://code.google.com/apis/console, create an API key, then decrease the setting for "Per-user limits for API project." This will prevent a minority of users from using a majority of your daily quota.

Overage fees apply only if your map exceeds the cap for 90 consecutive days. Monitor the console regularly. If your map has exceeded the cap for the previous two months, schedule one day to throttle public access to the map. After just one day below the cap, you'll be fine for another three months.

Google Maps API remains a free-to-use service – but only if you use it efficiently.

For more information on usage limits, please visit http://code.google.com/apis/maps/documentation/javascript/usage.html.

Note: A small correction to my February column: The URL to the HTTP Archive website is http://httparchive.org, not http://archive.org