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Our Digital Challenge

by Christopher Bain

A few years ago, the marketplace answered the question of whether or not digital images are "as good as film." The qualified answer is yes. A large percentage of photo buyers have come to rely on the nearly instant delivery of digital photographs to solve their most time-sensitive projects. Photographers and agencies alike have bought into the "digital-can-do-it-all" mantra, investing many thousands of dollars on scanners, camera backs, printers, software and color management systems. For many of us, shuffling around scores of high-resolution images, often 30 to 200 megs in size, with cryptic file names and multiple adjustment layers are the order of the day.

There are, of course, exceptions to the new order. The trend toward digital delivery has brought new challenges for all the participants, along with a drastically altered workflow for many photo buyers. The skill set for the tasks involved keeps escalating, while the high price of entry for some up-and-coming photographers is through the roof.

When a photo buyer's needs are specific -- for example: a quarter-page vertical color shot of a dog walking in the woods -- there is no need for submissions of valuable originals in order for the selection process to commence. The photo sources, whether individual photographers or photo agencies, can post images to the web (or email them directly to the buyer). It is easy for everybody, with no shipping charges, no liability, and often a quicker response. When the photo source has an on-line catalog, a virtual and visual database of photo files, the perfect image may already be sitting online, waiting for the photo buyer to find it. If the image isn't scanned, a low-res scan can quickly be made and uploaded to a website or emailed to the buyer. The buyer can log on and view everyone's images at his/her leisure.

At the other end of the photo-needs spectrum is the buyer who is working on a project with multiple categories of a much broader nature. Such requests often require photo buyers to review thousands of images from multiple sources. To walk through the challenges of a more demanding example let's look at a 16-month wall calendar entitled "Scenic Ireland." The photo suppliers, whether individuals or agencies, have been informed of the buyer's terms and budget. Five thousand dollars is about to be spent on photographs for this calendar, and everyone with appropriate imagery wants a slice of the pie. Here are three typical responses to the request.

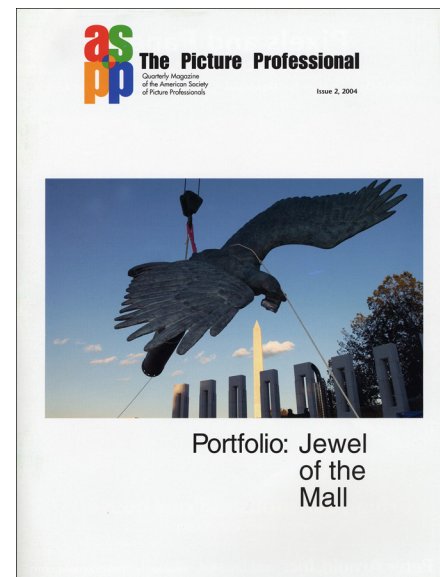


Photo source #1 may be a film-based traditionalist or a technophobe depending on your perspective. He/she sends in 100 tightly edited transparencies from 35mm through 4x5, with short identifications of each subject on computer generated slide labels. After checking the count, making sure each image has the source's identification attached, and logging them into the system, the photo buyer arranges the chromes on a light table.

Armed only with a loupe and years of experience the buyer can determine the *two critical pieces of information* while viewing each individual image: First, is the shot appropriate to the need – scenic Ireland? And, second, is the quality sufficiently high for the need (in this case, to enlarge to 14 inches x 12 inches)? Those images with "yes" answers to these two critical questions can make the initial cut. Those wide of the mark in terms of subject or quality can be returned to the source or placed in an "initial outtakes" box. The photo editor can then begin grouping and comparing similar images on the light table, perhaps dividing them into folders: Thatched Cottages, Sheep, Pubs, Castles, Sheep, Coastlines, People, and of course, Sheep.

Photo source #2 prepares a virtual light table of 100 images and emails the web address (URL) to the buyer. The buyer logs onto the Internet, hopefully with a very fast connection, and views the thumbnails. Clicking on the thumbnail enlarges the image so the buyer can have a better look. This source has file numbers and the briefest of information alongside the thumbnails, so determining the exact location of each subject, not to mention the name of the Irish monastery, castle and village scene, will have to wait. Some sources watermark the enlargements – imprinting their logo somewhere on the image – to deter image theft.

Photo source #3 sends a CD with a selection of images. The images are low/medium resolution JPEGs in a single folder. Caption information is contained in each image's meta-data, found after you open each shot in PhotoShop and pull down the File|File Info menu. As a buyer, if you multiply that chore times 100 images, you realize that you have a morning's work ahead of you just to get the information that is on Photo source #1's slide mounts. This source, however enclosed a printed subject list keyed to the image numbers: Image #IR_22-3724 is Doonogore Castle in County Clare. This will cut down the review time from four hours to just under two.

If it isn't already obvious, here is the crux of the challenge. Although Photo sources #2 and #3 submitted a great many beautiful images, the buyer can only answer only one of the two critical questions necessary to select an image: Is it appropriate to the subject needs? But what about the second critical question? What about the quality of the actual files that will be needed for final reproduction? Will the quality be sufficient for enlarging to 14 inches x 12 inches for the Ireland calendar?

There is no way to determine the quality at this stage since all the buyer has to judge is an image on a computer screen, which is typically 72ppi (pixels per inch). If the usage was a quarter page or even a half-page insert into an encyclopedia then the chances are pretty good that a scan of sufficient quality could be obtained. But the sheer size of wall calendars – not to mention full-page reproductions in large-format illustrated books, point-of-purchase displays, full-page magazine ads and corporate brochures – demands unusually high standards.

Although photo sources #2 and #3 each have beautiful images, which likely started off as sharp originals in a variety of formats, the quality of the scans is the crucial factor. Were the images scanned on a \$99 scanner that was bundled with a computer purchase? A \$300 Minolta Dimage? A \$1999 Nikon Super Coolscan? An \$18,000 Imacon Flextight 848? Or, possibly, a drum scanner (dare to dream)? All scanners are not created equal and many photographers and agencies have bought into the advertising hype from manufacturers intent on capturing market share.

Unfortunately, even if you have great equipment, other issues must be considered. Who is making the scans? What bit depth and color space are the scans made in? Must a scan be delivered as a JPEG because of download times? A photographer or agency who invests in a quality scanner; who spends the time necessary to learn the difference between scanning in 8, 12 or 16 bit and the difference between Adobe RGB vs. sRGB vs. CMYK, and, who knows the problems caused by saving images as JPEGs will probably deliver great scans and will gain the trust of the photo buying community. Photographers and agencies are quickly getting reputations not just for the quality of their images but on the quality of their scans.

The right equipment coupled with a talented scanning person who has knowledge of the craft is often as critical to the quality of an image (and thus the final sale) as was the glass lens and perfect exposure used to capture the original image. This is true whether the image is on film or digital.

Many photographers and photo agencies have gone to great lengths to stay abreast of the changing technologies through formal training, seminars, books, videos, trade associations, the Internet and sheer determination. Others have turned to hired hands knowing that it is often a full-time job to scan large numbers of images well, not to mention maintaining a digital library and staying on top of the ever-changing standards. However, a surprisingly large number of photo sources, their heads buried partially in the sand, have learned *just enough* to get by in the new digital-speak. They assure their clients that a large digital file (lots of megs) is all they need, and/or they assume that through the magic of PhotoShop, the client will be able to make a beautiful reproduction. Depending on the eventual use, this may or may not be so.

Photo agencies that only accept digital submissions from their photographers have an additional challenge. An all-digital agency representing 50 photographers has 50 different people doing their scanning, all to varying degrees of quality. These agencies usually set standards, though monitoring the quality of incoming submissions is as difficult for photo agencies as it is for buyers. Agencies can state their standards – minimum 50 meg files for instance – but as I’ve said, file size alone is meaningless. Anyone can take a scan of any size and upsize it to 50 megs in a matter of moments. That doesn’t make it better; in fact, it usually makes it worse. When two agencies merge the problem is compounded with one agency inheriting the assets of the other, including the scanned images that may or may not be up to snuff.

These challenges will lessen, of course, as more and more photographers are capturing images digitally from the outset, utilizing larger and better chips in increasingly sophisticated cameras. For film-based photographers, the equipment and software for scanning continues to improve as well, though making sense of the important specs in an advertisement are as confusing as ever.

That’s all the technical stuff. What about all the changes to the photo buyer’s workflow? How do you compare the thatched roof cottages from the two digital sources with those on the light table? Most buyers have learned that you can’t trust the nice little print from the color printer.

At Barnes & Noble Publishing, we typically enlarge the chosen thumbnail image on a web page, save it to a folder on the computer, open it in PhotoShop, print it out on a color printer, and then place this low-res print in the same folders as the transparencies. Once we’ve culled the selection to the best shots in each category, we’ll meet with the project editor, the designer, and the calendar buyer to review the selects. In the early days of digital submissions (for example, in early 2001 for the 2003 calendar line) we naively assumed that the final scans the sources would eventually supply would be great.

Selections were made, hi-res files were requested, and the test prints that we made in-house from the hi-res files sent to us often turned out poorly. This eliminated some of the digital images we had settled upon and forced us back into the selection process. We now insist on getting the final hi-res file from the photo source before we can commit to a selection, since this is the only way to accurately compare a digital image with the razor-sharp images on the light table.

Supplying hi-res files "on spec" puts a tremendous responsibility and cost on the source to digitize and have ready for delivery an increasingly large portion of their collection. It also adds a responsibility to the buyer to accurately track all incoming hi-res files, deleting or destroying files and/or CDs not under further consideration, lest they mistakenly make their way into a layout by an unsuspecting designer months or years later.

The final output makes a difference as well. I can take a 17 meg TIFF straight out of my Nikon D1X and make a pretty nice 18 inch x 24 inch on an Epson or HP large-format printer. But that same file wouldn't hold up to that degree of enlargement on an offset printing press at a high quality line screen of 175 lpi.

Originally, I had titled this article "Our Digital Dilemma" but my dictionary defines "dilemma" as "a situation in which somebody must choose one of two or more unsatisfactory alternatives". Quite the contrary! I love digital imaging right alongside traditional film photography. That's why I've used the word "challenge" throughout this article. Challenges beg solutions, which are crafted out of industry standards, which are still emerging. We're right in the middle of the revolution, which will continue for the foreseeable future. Although it sometimes feels like a runaway train, it's a very exciting time to be in this industry!

Chris Bain is the Photography Director for Barnes & Noble Publishing. In his file under ancient history (the 1980's) he photographed in the U.S., the Philippines, and China for clients as diverse as A.T.&T., Philippine Airlines, and *Life* magazine. Your thoughts are welcome at cbain@bn.com. (Copyright 2004)

[This article originally appeared in *The Picture Professional* (Issue 2, 2004) the publication of The American Society of Picture Professionals (ASPP). Published four times per year, *The Picture Professional* is a forum for distribution of information about use, purchase and sale of pictures. Information about ASPP can be found at www.aspp.com]