

Costing the digital workflow discussion

Following the questionnaire earlier this year, a seminar was held to further explore how members were charging for their digital workflow. A panel consisting of Bob Marchant, Ian McKinnell, Colin Thomas, Adam Woolfitt were assembled and the evening was chaired by Derek Seaward.

Around 40 people attended the majority of whom were shooting solely digitally, doing all the retouching themselves and supplying RGB files. The majority were not confident that the work they supplied would be reproduced, by the client, at the right quality. A small minority of the audience still used some film, mainly because some publications still did not accept digital files.

The questionnaire results showed that the majority of respondents (who were fairly equally split across the various photographer disciplines) charged relatively low digital capture fees – it was surmised that this was either because clients weren't prepared to pay, photographers weren't explaining the charges properly or they were simply undercharging.

It was noted that we must all charge for digital capture but that photographers themselves need educating on this point. It is very important that we both learn and equip ourselves, by thoroughly understanding the entire process, to work properly and deliver very high quality. Every photographer should try to arrange one to one education with their own clients. Some Repro houses give out incorrect information which makes it awkward for photographers to explain the photographic process to clients. Repro houses are now making more money since photographers are doing more of the repro work. But the repro houses are not lowering their charges to take account of this!

The following four questions from the questionnaire were identified for discussion on the night. The views expressed by individual members of the panel, and members of the audience, are cited below each question:

1) What are the most important things that clients want from you as a photographer?

- Clients want to feel confident with their photographer regardless of whether they are shooting with digital or film and they want value for money, as with any other service.
- According to the survey, Digital is now the normal way to supply images and the process should be seamless with the client feeling they are in capable and confident hands and that the images they receive will fulfil the brief.
- Clients should be able to have confidence that excellent reproduction is possible from the files the photographer supplies
- We need to make a clear distinction between ourselves and the non professionals who are often producing and supplying low quality – most clients can immediately see the difference between good and bad quality
- Photographers now have more responsibility for the end quality of repro and must therefore be thoroughly conversant with the whole retouching and repro process before supplying digital files.

2) How do you submit your final images to your most regular clients?

- Good RGB files are not a problem provided the people receiving them understand how to deal with them. You need to offer an accurate colour proof with standard bars on the bottom.
- Photographers need to feel confident about what is being handed over and that the client is confident about reproducing it.
- A big educational process may be required to stop client's altering finished files, to make them look good on their un-calibrated, and possibly inferior, low end monitors.
- The client's monitor's **MUST** be of high quality and calibrated properly and often.
- Clients should only ever sharpen images immediately prior to conversion to CMYK and even then **ONLY** if they know what they are doing.

- It may be advisable to make a CMYK conversion and supply a guide print if the client must see what they are getting. The repro house can produce a chromalin overnight if required
- After all cleaning up and system work is complete it is very quick to convert to CMYK and sharpening (an integral part of 4 colour). Good tools are available – NIK sharpener is the industry standard. Ask your client what they want and be prepared to advise them if they don't know.
- IQA, UPDIG (US), Pic4Press (UK magazines) have guidelines on supplying and pic4press has instructions to send to clients with the images:
www.iga.org/digital/digital_guide.shtml
<http://www.updig.org/guidelines/index.php>
http://www.pass4press.com/public/downloads/pic4press_v3.pdf
- Digital chromalin DP10, is seen as a generic – DPT US standard is out of date. pic4press is now moving towards establishing a ISO standard.
- Repro houses are now much better at handling RGB files and getting good results. CMYK conversion is also much better since v5 photoshop – perfectly good files can be reproduced by anyone with sound understanding of the process
- Repro houses complain that work supplied is poor and tend to want proof that a quality camera system is being used. They should be advised that it's not the **system** that is at fault but their **reproduction process**.
- Clients used to know exactly how images would be reproduced when given CMYK – no longer easy as consistency in the process is missing. Digital Chromalins bear little resemblance to the file or finished product.

3) Which specific elements do you generally charge for?

- To set realistic charges for digital work it is necessary to assess your overheads, your time, and your client and set your charge based on these figures – the same as if you were setting day rates: digital is no different. Then set an hourly digital rate flat fee – ie £100 covering time and overheads to produce the digital work.
- One panel member charges 3 hrs per day's shoot, for 'digital capture and processing', to all clients on top of the day fee. He has experienced very few problems charging this, it's very transparent on the quote - not itemised or open ended. Charges the same on all jobs regardless of advertising, design or editorial – some jobs he loses on, some he wins.
- Once explained (at length) quality, money saving, etc most clients don't have a problem with the charge.
- Clients understand the terminology F & P, so some photographers still charge for F & P (worked out on basis of film that would have been used) plus digital fee – still uses this wording with a built in digital fee, this is a way of not being technical on a quote. If queried advises that it covers digital work. Clients are generally onsite during the shoot, so know that the work is being captured digitally.
- Depending on the client a charge can be at a flat rate / or per file – design agencies are more resistant than Advertising Agencies.
- Editorial photographers have considerable problems with additional digital or post processing charges – Magazines would have paid F&P so why not for digital capture? The NUJ have pricing guidelines for editorial use <http://www.londonfreelance.org/feesguide/index.html> Photographers should point their clients to them to show what is industry practice.
- Colour correcting should not be charged for as a separate service – if equipment is set-up and managed correctly RGB colour should never be an issue – “accurate” colour should automatically be within the capture fee.
- Cost of the kit should not be mentioned – this is a part of a photographer's overheads but, like money saving strategies such as buying stock images, is not a way of justifying prices. Explaining your service and creative input is the way to sell your service as something special
- The Pic4press workflow guidelines are now accepted across a wide section of the UK publishing industry – and have been agreed with a very wide range of clients. AOP/DIG digital workflow guidelines in 2000 were not agreed with clients. Tonight is the 1 step in a process of working with clients, not agreeing prices, but deciding what is included in a digital shoot and

what therefore needs to be paid for. The next stage will be to produce a paper that can be taken to clients for further discussion, and hopefully agreement.

Due to a lack of time, the following question was not directly addressed by the panel during the evening, but produced some interesting data in the questionnaire.

- 4) How true do you consider each of these statements to be?
- a. Clients and/or agencies do not fully appreciate the amount of time needed to complete the whole job
 - b. Clients and/or agencies do not fully appreciate the amount of skilled specialist work involved in digital processing
 - c. Clients and /or agencies don't fully understand usage rates and periods
 - d. Other photographers under-charge significantly on shooting, usage and other rates to win business
 - e. Clients are deeply resistant to paying post production charges – they expect perfect images straight out of the camera
 - f. Clients don't appreciate the difference between global or batch image adjustments on the computer, as against detailed hand retouching of individual files
 - g. I don't have any industry guidelines to help me cost and charge out my work

21/8/07 Gwen Thomas