

The Importance Of Photo Prints

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Digital cameras have found their way into a significant number of households worldwide (94 million in the U.S. alone, according to recent statistics), and the numbers continue to increase. Plus, as the technology becomes more and more mainstream, even those last digital holdouts are finally crossing over so they can capture important family memories.

But what happens to these images after capture? While the number of pictures taken overall has surely increased with digital, it's safe to assume that many of those electronic files never find their way off the media cards or personal computers—not to mention the images that are automatically deleted in-camera at the touch of a button because they weren't "portrait perfect." And even if Dad takes the time to sit down one day and backup all the family's remaining digital images on the hard drive to CDs, meticulously label them, and place them into CD holder "albums," how long will it be before this storage medium goes the way of the floppy disk and becomes obsolete? How many precious pictures will be lost?

Enter the Certified Digital Photo Processors (CDPP), an affiliation of independently owned photo labs and camera stores behind the innovative PicturesMatter campaign and website www.PicturesMatter.com.

The group's mission: to convince consumers to rescue their digital files from the hard-drive black hole and get them printed, as well as to provide a crash course on everything from using a digital camera to finding a photo processor online.

"PicturesMatter was really created to explain why pictures are important in society," explains Steve Lasher, director of the CDPP and PicturesMatter.com. "We're trying to educate people and to preserve their memories."

For photo retailers who have seen their profits drop off as film cameras, and the prints that inevitably go with them, fade into oblivion, efforts to boost printing from digital are vital.

"PicturesMatter's mission is critical to our industry," notes John Albright, owner of Fromex Photo & Digital in Long Beach, CA, and a member of the CDPP.

"Unless the general public recognizes the importance of printing their pictures, very soon a whole generation of photo memories may be lost forever. Most consumers are totally clueless when it comes to understanding how to preserve their images for future generations. Printing them on archival photographic paper is the easiest, simplest, and most economical way to do this."

But what's the big deal, really, if you keep images from little Johnny's birthday party safe on your desktop instead of in a traditional hard-copy format? According to at least one expert, it could have more of an impact on your wee ones than you might think.

"We've retained renowned child psychologist Dr. Kenneth Condrell as our spokesperson, and he's begun a media tour promoting the importance of printing digital images to help promote the importance of self-esteem in children," says Lasher. "The positive comments that are initiated when these pictures are passed around within earshot of Johnny are very important for his self-esteem. Honestly, if parents care enough about their child to carry pictures around and show them to people, that's an illustration to the child of the importance they hold in the family."

Why Digital Files Aren't Enough

The tremendous benefits of digital imaging are undeniable, yet this new form of instant gratification presents a slew of unique shortcomings as well.

"What's really sad is that the delete button has made it so easy for people to get rid of pictures that are anything other than portrait-quality photos—that delete button gets rid of 23 percent of the images right off the top," explains Lasher. "And the reality is that those less-than-perfect photos are the ones that really express the true personalities of your subjects. Many photo processors have experienced a situation where people have come into their shop, taken a look at a photograph, and said, 'This is a wasted photo—there's Uncle Harry looking stupid again.' Those same people may come back a month later and say, 'You know, this is the last picture we have of Uncle Harry, and this is how the guy was. He was goofy and fun.' If that image had been on a digital camera, they may have deleted that picture."

Paul Rentz, president of Rush Hour Photo (Corvallis, OR) agrees. "As a recent article in USA Today states, consumers are throwing away hundreds of images by deleting all but the best," he says. "I've even known a few that have confessed to deleting everything on their memory card by mistake, trying to 'edit' those images down to only the best. The question is: Who determines what images are good and which are bad? All of us have seen pictures of ourselves that we hate, but that other family members love. If we delete those, they're gone forever, and an important memory of someone is gone with it. Consumers aren't aware of how fragile those images may be."

Obsolescence is another pitfall that eventually affects every adopter of the latest and greatest imaging technology. "I've personally lost two hard drives in a 24-month period, and I've had innumerable 5-1/4-inch floppies that I've thrown away because I can't read them and have no idea what's on them," says Lasher. "Even if we save today's files onto a CD, unless we continue to keep those CDs up with current technology, those images have a very high probability of being totally lost."

"People may be leaving all their images on their computers—until the day their hard drive 'fries' and all those memories are gone," says Rentz. "The photographic print still has value, and that piece of 'software' will never be outdated or unviewable as new technologies emerge. Plus, it's hard to pack a computer in a wallet or purse, like you would a small photo album, to share images with co-workers or friends."

The CDPP has stepped in to boost image permanence through an intensive educational campaign and accompanying website. "We estimate that only 13 percent of digital images are actually being captured and put on paper," says Lasher. "Contrast that with film, which was probably 98 percent. Once images are on paper, the chances of them surviving are great—people just don't throw out pictures. So our focus is to get people to go to a lab that can print their photos, make the color and density corrections, and fix the file so they can produce as good an image as possible."

"We want consumers to be comfortable about using their cameras and truly preserving these images as prints," says Lasher. "It's amazing to me that I still meet people almost daily that don't know photo labs can make prints from digital cameras," says Rentz. "We're still fighting for the customers' prints, but right now they need hand-holding and education."

"We're up against the millions of advertising dollars being spent by the HPs and Epsoms of the world who are trying to convince the public to print their photos at home," adds Albright. "Their home-printed inkjet prints may be lucky to last a few years without fading. Once they're educated, however, the consumer soon realizes that it is faster, more convenient, better quality and less expensive to print those digital images at a professional photo lab. We have everything in our favor—we just have to get the message out."

Getting the message out includes a major media blitz for the CDPP as a whole (including Dr. Condrell's satellite media tour and article placement in major consumer and trade publications), as well as individual efforts by the individual members of the photo processing group. Rentz created a Certified Digital Photo Program at Rush Hour Photo and teaches digital imaging classes to educate consumers. "The holidays were a great time for us to promote PicturesMatter," he says. "With a \$5-off coupon funded by the program, we promoted photo calendars, greeting cards, and general processing, and we used an insert in our local newspaper that directed customers to our website for information on these products and services. We also provided a link to PicturesMatter.com so they could locate both our lab and the coupon. The insert also featured information on Dr. Condrell's articles about the importance of prints to families and especially to children."

Albright's efforts at Fromex have included all forms of customer education, including instructional classes, television ad campaigns, in-store displays, and the store's affiliation with CDPP and PicturesMatter.com. "We're very hopeful that the PicturesMatter.com website will grow to become a major contributing factor in the growth of digital camera printing," he says.

So consumers shouldn't shun technology—they just have to learn to harness its powers and get those pictures printed. "The digital camera is a wonderful device," says Lasher. "We've had such a great opportunity to take pictures and preserve our history and our family memories. Let's not throw those away just because we can hit the delete button or because obsolescence takes its toll."