

HOT ON THE HEELS OF the internet and DTP came the digital image revolution. The old transparency workflow, though still alive and well in parts of the industry, is on its way out. It's the digital file that now passes down the line to design and print.

But a digital file requires new skills to "read" and is often sent without a hard copy colour proof to check against. In the past, a practised eye could judge image quality, the printer knew what colour to aim for and everybody knew what their job was. That has all changed.

Picture libraries have been grappling with the issues for some time. Their investment in scanning is substantial and they know they can't afford to lag behind when the industry tumbles into an all-digital workflow. That time has more

well repro aware in the CMYK workflow, but a relatively small number are aware of the advantages of a colour managed RGB workflow." He takes a pragmatic view, and provides both RGB and CMYK files on the same disc. He is also a firm believer that future-proofing his operations by choosing a relatively large 75 MB standard file-size and routinely tagging his image files makes good business sense. "We've invested huge amounts of money in our products, and we want them to last a number of years."

Carol Sharp of Flowerphotos concurs, repeating a sentiment widely expressed in photography circles, "It's astounding that most designers don't seem to understand colour spaces and don't think they should have colour management". Clearly, the botanical field is one where

prevalent attitude in the US too, where, despite the industry's head start over Europe in the digital field, image libraries and clients manage quite successfully without colour management.

So do picture buyers know what they want? There is still work to do in this area observes Debbie Hughes, picture manager at MacMillan publishers: "The problem is that everyone assumes that someone else knows what is going on. In the past we relied on repro houses and designers getting it right, but now designers say they have no way of checking the colour against the original." The company has embarked on a training programme and is currently evaluating the need for colour management.

Now that the repro man is largely out of the loop, who exactly is responsible for getting

colour and retouching and delivering tagged image files, sometimes direct to the printer. But designers do need to know more, he says. "I certainly do."

For some, a properly managed digital workflow makes economic sense. John Laing of design group Hey Moscow prefers to receive tagged files. "It does save us a lot of time. Inconsistency in image files means we have to work on them and the time does mount up. There should be a standard where images are always supplied in a set format, and tagged." Jerry Kennelly has noticed the difference in production of Stockbyte catalogues. "Colour management gives us more confidence and more predictability. It means we are tweaking the last 5 per cent rather than the last 25 per cent."

coming together to discuss the issues. Only then can standards evolve across the industry to connect parts which previously only understood the issues on their own turf. A new initiative, The Image Network (TIN), is providing the means for this to happen. Supported by The University of Westminster, and modelled on a successful new media initiative, New Media Knowledge, TIN has set up a series of seminar discussions about developments in the industry and is running training courses geared to the needs of designers, picture editors, photographers, libraries and others working with images. The website is a developing knowledge resource.

A half day course entitled, Understanding Colour Management is being run in December, following a seminar

FILE UNDER CONFUSED

THE SWITCH TO DIGITAL IMAGES HAS BROUGHT A NEW SET OF PROBLEMS SAYS SARAH SAUNDERS

or less arrived. Picture users, schooled by the giants Getty and Corbis, are increasingly asking for digital files. They like searching on the internet, and receiving ready-scanned pictures which can be sent straight through to print. It's supposed to be cheaper. But is it that easy?

The change has caught many people on the hop and there is still a lot of confusion, as picture users and design professionals cling to familiar territory. Picture suppliers have all had conversations with customers who quote DPI but don't understand file size. And when it comes to the RGB/CMYK debate, hackles rise on all sides as picture libraries, photographers, designers and pre-press people slug it out on the shifting sands of mutual incomprehension.

Jerry Kennelly is CEO of royalty free supplier Stockbyte. He says his customers are "pretty

colour can be critical, but there's more to it than that. "In my library, quality is paramount," she says. "At some point along the line it's important to get a reasonable idea of the colour that was intended. A matchprint from a colour managed workflow travels with our digital files on CD, but doesn't help with high-speed file transfer."

But many picture libraries take a different view, based on customer feedback. Travel and lifestyle library Robert Harding sends un-profiled files to customers. "No-one's asking for it," says Robert Harding, adding "We haven't had a single colour problem in all the time we've been sending digital files." Digital manager Michael Kelly adds "We asked our best clients but some of them didn't know what an ICC profile was. And people will play around with the colour anyway." This is the


an image file safely to press? Jerry Kennelly thinks the designer needs to take over, but "Generally speaking there's a dodging of responsibility. Designers think printers should do it, but by the time it gets to the printer it's too late. Our catch-phrase is 'What could possibly go wrong?' If you go to Computer To Plate, things will go wrong ten times faster."

Neil Smith, creative director of design agency Howdy concedes that some designers are slow to grasp the nettle. "We were always happy leaving the printer and repro house to handle colour. If it's all working OK, why get involved?" He points out that designers resist their job becoming even more technical – they already have to learn HTML and web design skills. Commissioned photographers now often take on the pre-press role, handling

More photographers are now supplying digital files to libraries, but in this area many lack the knowledge needed to produce a good scan. Image libraries, like publishers, have to deal with the results of badly scanned, or wrongly specified images, so it's in their interest to make sure photographers are up to speed.

Carol Sharp has her own standards of good practice for contributing photographers and believes there should be a "best practice" document for the industry. This ties in with work being done by the Digital Imaging Group of the Association of Photographers, which has launched the ProFile accreditation scheme to give image suppliers and customers confidence in the colour accuracy of digital files.

The struggle to make sense of the new workflow is dependant on people from different sectors

discussion on the same topic. Jerry Kennelly, like many others, believes that it is time more people understood the subject. "There's a vast need for training in the industry and it needs to be kept much more simple," he says. "The basics can be explained in a very short time." This is good news for those who have struggled with indigestible technical material in the past. Most of the issues are about retaining information with the digital file that we took for granted on the transparency – and why throw good data away? As Kennelly says, "it's just a matter of communicating with people". The aim of The Image Network is to do just that. 

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