

Sticky Labels

Remember the days when photographic prints had sticky labels on the back? We were drilled, as photographers, to write the three C's on the label – caption credit and copyright – along with the picture number. Publishers sometimes mysteriously 'lost' the labels, and couldn't track down and pay the photographer, but at least we knew the labels had what we used to call 'stick'.

You can imagine some bright spark in production back then might have hit on the idea of scanning the information from the back of the print. After all, the post office had machines to read addresses as the letters whizzed through the Mount Pleasant Sorting Office, so why not pictures? A publishing machine would read the information as the picture went through, and match the credit and caption to the picture number when it went to print. Perfect, the production team would say, we can do without all those grubby bits of paper in brown job bags we have to read and type back in.

For this to work, says the production person, we would have to specify where the different bits of information should go. That way they'd be scanned in to the correct field in our new publishing system. But how do we get suppliers to comply with that? They're used to putting all the info together in the middle of the print. And if the information gets mixed up we could find ourselves sending the picture payment to Posh and Becks for an image captioned Papphotographers UK. We might have give up on our dream of automation and go back to licking our pencils.

Perhaps its just as well digital came along. Now the three C's, and their picture number, are securely held within the image file and the publishing machine can pick up the information automatically, or so the idea goes. But the reality is more like our imaginary machine from the days of silver bromide. Lo and behold, there are even more publishers now telling us the labels have dropped off the pictures. The electronic picture labels, it seems, have no stick.

Industry bodies like Adobe, IPTC and Dublin Core have all had their thinking caps on, and there are a number of places in the image file where you can now put standard information. But they keep changing their minds about what to call the fields, and these labels can be removed with a swipe of the mouse by anyone using File/info in Photoshop. More importantly, for the removal of labels is often unintentional, the information can be stripped out or simply ignored by uncomprehending publishing database systems.



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Still, you will say, it's better than sending a text file with the image; that's much more likely to get lost. But thing hasn't changed - there are still too many places to put the information. You can put copyright information in no less than three different places. And the naming of the fields is all over the place – it varies between one version of Photoshop and the next, and between different labelling schemes. Just to make things that extra bit irritating, you have to enter the three C's and the picture number on two different panels in Photoshop. How can we insist that people look at the information, if no-one knows where it will be?

People in the picture industry want to be able to use the new-style electronic picture labels. They will save a lot of time. Picture researchers and designers want the information from the moment they download the low res in the selection process; picture libraries and photographers want sticky labels so that publishers will credit properly and know who to pay; and publishers want to stop the crazy business of re-keying information which someone down the line has already carefully typed in with the correct spelling.

A number of industry bodies are at work on this; interesting plans for the future are cooking in committee rooms around the world, some of which will use the labelling to carry complex licensing information with the picture. But picture library association BAPLA, and PPA's Pic4Press committee, have decided it's important for now to get the basic label back on the picture before current practices degenerate even further.

By the autumn, the two organisations will have agreed on a simple basic schema, using the fields already provided in Photoshop's XMP fields, and viewable through a single, free-to-download, Photoshop panel. The three C's and the picture number will be back in place, and there will be some simple fields for licensing and job information. Everyone will now know where to look.

The challenge here was to write a piece about image information without once mentioning the M word. The challenge for the picture industry will be to find out how and where to make the label stick.

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