DIGITAL DIRECTIONS

Can We Avoid FUTURE SHOCK?

Sue and Jack Drafahl

IF WE HAD TO look back over all the years of operating a photo lab, we would have to say that 1994 was one of the most difficult. The reason can be summed up in one word: change. It's not that we don't like change, the problem is that when we added electronic imaging to our business, we incurred change faster and more often. It has not always been easy to move forward in our business. We are sure other readers are going through this process, so we put together our thoughts on how our electronic imaging business survived 1994, in hopes that the information will help you make 1995 a great year!

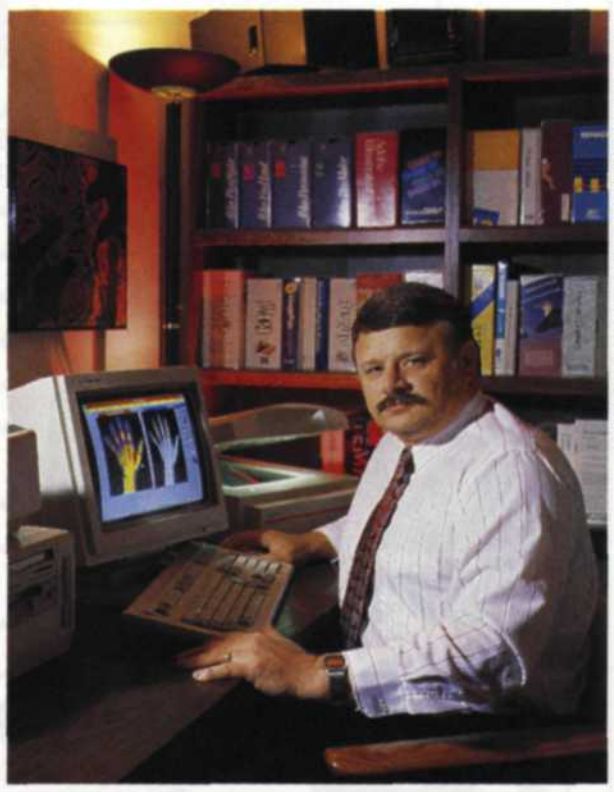
Software Upgrades

In past years we had few problems with software programs, other than learning how to use them. Upgrades would come out every 2-3 years, so change was pretty simple. In 1994 we had to upgrade every piece of software we have in our business and even had to add several new ones. We had already upgraded some of these in 1993, but it now appears that software manufactures are copying auto manufacturers, and coming out with new versions every year. Each upgrade costs 20%-40% of the original price, so it really adds up quickly.

These new versions are supposed to be better than the previous ones, but are they really? It's true that most of the upgrades have many new features, but they often come with new headaches. In order for software manufacturers to stay ahead of competitors or make trade show deadlines, they often release these new versions before they have all the bugs out. So, they let the consumer find the bugs, and a few months later they offer a maintenance release.

This may sound like we are against upgrading. On the contrary, we favor upgrading in order to take advantage of all the new features, but upgrade with caution. Until you are sure that the newer version works well and is backwards compatible, you should install the new version along with the older version. To keep them separate, use their version numbers as part of their name.

When an even newer version comes along, you can delete the oldest version and add the new. This way you will be up-to-date but still fully compatible with customers who haven't yet upgraded. We also recommend that you keep all your older versions available, so that you can reinstall them if you have a customer with a large order created on a very old version of the software. When you do run into a problem, most software manufacturers have a variety of technical support services to help you solve your problem.



Craig Brubaker, M.S.R., Burrell Professional Labs.

Jack Drafahl works at one of two main workstations . Here he edits an enhanced medical x-ray.

Digital Education

As more and more customers ask for electronic services, we have found it necessary to provide customers with an educational program of sorts. If they have a better understanding of what they need, and what the lab can provide, it will eliminate problems and the confusion often associated with digital imaging jobs. One of the most difficult areas for customers to understand is image resolution vs. image quality.

We have talked about this subject in past articles but need to re-emphasize how important it is for the lab staff to ask customers the right questions. You need to ask them what they are going to do with the image and what type of output they intend to use. At first the customer may wonder if it is any of your business, but you need answers in order to provide the best product.

For example, we had a customer say that he wanted a 35mm image scanned at the highest resolution possible. When we asked him how he was going to use the image, we found that it was going into a company newsletter printed on a 300 dpi laser printer. We suggested that an image scanned at 1/4 resolution would cost less and would closely match the quality their laser printer could output. We could have scanned it at a higher resolution for more money, but we have found that if you work for the customer's best interest, you will both benefit. The customer will trust you and soon become one of your regulars.

Digital Imaging Services

The technology of digital imaging changes faster than traditional imaging, so the types of services you offer will change as well. In past years, we would establish various services in the lab, and make price changes on a yearly basis. Digital imaging changes too fast to remain status-quo for one year on either services we offer or prices.

With new advances in software and hardware monthly, we find that we can do jobs faster and better from one job to the next. This forces us to analyze each service bi-monthly, and make modifications to our job costs, which is then reflected in our final price to the customer. We now order paper with pre-printed colored backgrounds so we can print limited quantities of prices lists on our laser printer anytime we need a change. Other digital imaging competitors in our area are springing up like wildflowers, so we also have to monitor their services and make sure that we keep our competitive edge.

Purchasing Equipment

Purchasing equipment for the digital photo lab is a lot trickier than purchasing traditional lab equipment. We always look at several aspects of a digital purchase before making the final leap. How will this piece of equipment improve services and increase income? Does it replace a service or add a new service? What is its life span? The most difficult question to answer is: When do I make the purchase?

The problem with digital equipment is that newer, improved versions come out every few months, and are usually lower priced. A case in point. In late 1993 we wanted to start recording our own CD's. We researched the potential use for it in our lab, the price of a unit, and how we could offset the cost. At that time, the cost of a recordable CD was almost $4,000. Nine months later, the same company offered a unit twice as good, for $1900 list. Remember, just a few years ago CD writers were over $20,000, now they are under $2000!

So when do you jump in? Do you wait until the price goes down or do you bite the bullet? It really depends on how much you

can use the item in your business, or how much money you would lose without the unit. The prices will continue to go down as the products get better, so if you wait for them to level off, you may be out of business because you didn't make the plunge.

Digital Ethics

This is one of the most talked about subjects in digital imaging. Many professional photographers call it cheating and others cry foul. Even professional photo-related magazines are blasting electronic imaging, saying that digital photos should not be allowed with traditional photography, or extensive labeling should be on each image, branding it as manipulated.

We think many of these people are overreacting, and if they were to really take a close and unbiased looked at electronic imaging, they would see that there are two distinct types of digital imaging.

The type most seen and talked about is called manipulated digital images. Parts are added or subtracted from the image so that the content of the image has changed. Examples include changing backgrounds, adding products, removing clutter, or changing the color of one part of an image.

Most of the users of digital manipulation are from the advertising marketplace, and have been manipulating images long before computers came into being. The problem occurs when a manipulated image is created for an editorial purpose. This creates a problem because it infringes on all that we hold to be true. Mistrust tends to breed anger.

The second, less known type of digital imaging is called *enhanced* digital imaging. This is where the content of the image is not changed, but technical aspects, normally accomplished in the darkroom, are now done on the computer. Color balance, exposure, spotting, cropping, burning and dodging, are some of the more common tasks accomplished by enhancing the digital image. Some of the traditional darkroom terms have changed with computer editing. Instead of *spotting* an image, we now use the clone tool to *fill in* scratches and dust spots. If you have to change the *exposure* of an image, you use the *brightness* tool. Other terms remain the same. Gamma is Gamma. Contrast is contrast.

Most of the digital image work done in our lab is the enhanced type. We consider an enhanced digital image to be no different from a traditional image created in the darkroom. Most of these images are scanned in and dropped into a photo window. These images are then used in lectures, brochures, or print displays. When a manipulated job comes into the lab, we look to see if it fits into the advertising or promotional category. The only time we would question such a job is if the copyright is in question.

If the image fits into the editorial category, we take a close look at the manipulation required and its proposed use. In most cases, we refuse to manipulate images used for editorial purposes. Those few exceptions include portrait composites where the customer wants to have family members from different photos in one composite image. Instead we take each image on its own merit, and decide whether to refuse the job or not. We do get many requests for gag photos, but have decided that the potential problems of performing head swapping outweighs the profit.

The digital revolution now has a past. The future is quickly becoming the present. One thing for certain is that digital imaging is here to stay. 1995 holds potential for all of us. Let's make the most of it. Happy New Year!

Jack and Sue Drafahl own and operate a custom lab in Portland, OR. They are also professional photographers, specializing in underwater photography.