



Focus on Imaging February, 2002

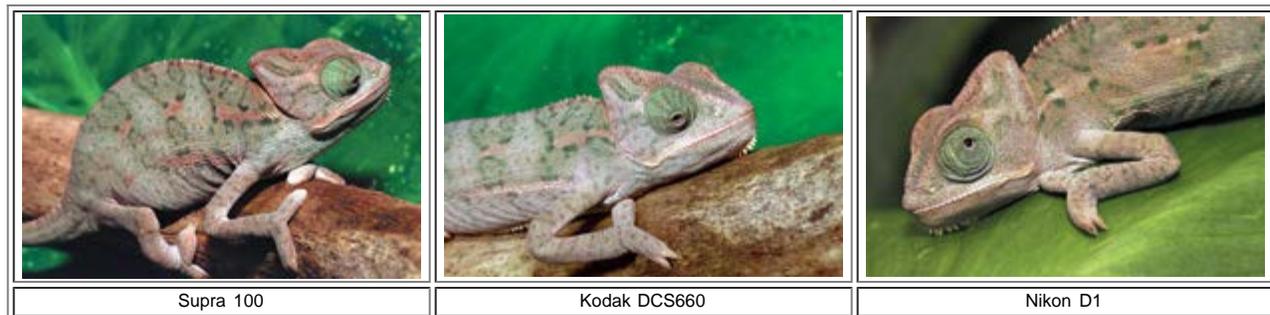
Film vs. Digital by Jack and Sue Drafahl

One of the hottest topics in photography today is the issue of film versus digital. A lot of people are talking about it, but not many want to write about it with indelible ink. When you commit it to paper, you have to have all the statistical data to back up your thoughts. Unfortunately, this is a numbers game that, when manipulated, can easily make one side look better than the other.

SOMEONE WHO believes that film will last forever will tell you that film usage has greatly increased over the last couple of years. What they fail to tell you is how much digital has increased in comparison.

On the other side, a digital proponent brags that the revenue from digital camera sales is greater than from film camera sales, but they neglect to say that digital cameras cost more. So you see the dilemma?

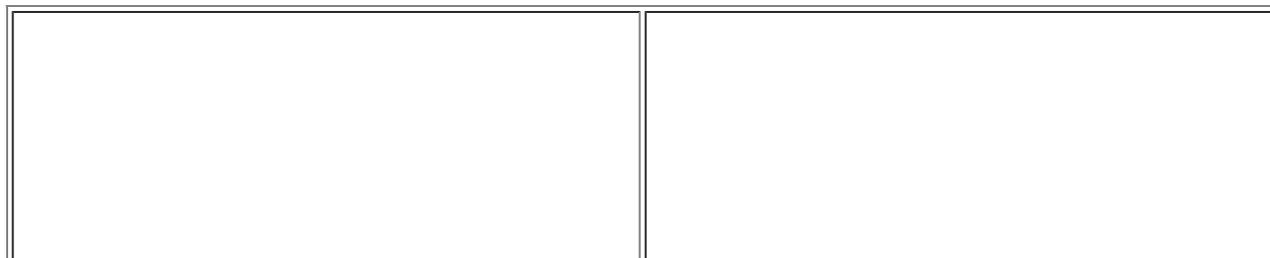
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Recently we saw an article that compared the cost of a digital and film system and determined that it would take several years for the digital camera to come out ahead financially. The author made the assumption that because photographers normally have all film negatives made into prints, digital camera users would do the same.

Film photographers generally have all images printed, because it is easier to print them all rather than try and select just a few orange-masked negatives. With digital images, you see the final image right away, so you can select only the images you want to print. If you subtract out those un-printed digital images, then the numbers change again and the dilemma continues.

Adding to all this confusion is the professional photographer. Most articles on the subject of film vs. digital are written by professional photographers who have been in the photo business for years and are staunch film users. They contend that a 3 megapixel camera cannot match the quality of most color 35mm film. Although that may be true, keep in mind that the bulk of the images taken by amateur photographers today are printed no larger than 4x6 inches.





The Quality Perception

It really all boils down to a perception of quality, which unfortunately today is often about 720 x 480, the resolution of television. As we venture into the 21st Century, we find photography evolving from the traditional silver process to digital. This road is not an easy one and photography is having growing pains. We need to view digital photography as an extension of the traditional, not as a competitor.

Keep in mind that everyone involved in this debate is slightly biased to one side or the other. We started our career using film, and have derived much of our success from this photographic media. But we also understand the marvels of technological advancement, and understand the importance and future of digital.

When we look back at 8 track tapes, typewriters, phonograph records, and 8mm movies, and study their demise, there is a trend. Although it seemed like they were replaced instantly, in reality it was a transition.

With film's lengthy history, the digital transition is going to take quite some time. Most film cameras have a long life span and with millions of them in use, the attrition rate will spread out over a long period of time. This should allow more than enough time for the smart lab to adjust to changing technologies.

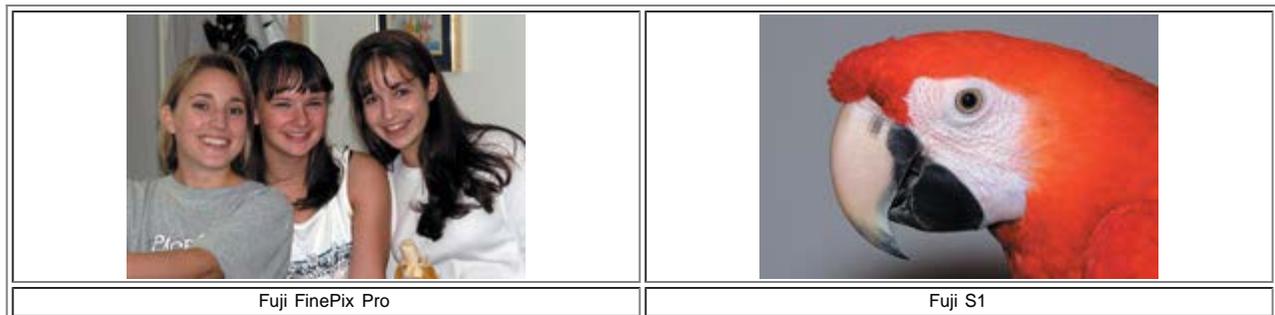


Chart Your Future

You need to analyze numbers to decide how to steer your lab, but make sure you compare apples to apples. Take a close look at who is providing the numbers and see if they have something to gain by swaying your decision. Better yet, look at your lab's own numbers. Compare your film processing figures, tradition paper printing revenue and dollars accumulated from various lab services. Then look into your crystal ball and try to project where it is all going.

Unfortunately, with such a fast-changing world, you will have to monitor these numbers often. It will be worth it because this constant updating of market research will help you plan equipment purchases, and better estimate investment recovery times.

We have found that even with the convenience of digital photography, most people just want to take pictures and let someone else make the prints for them. It's really no different than with film photography. Granted, digital is easier to do, but it still takes time and the right equipment to correctly do the job.



Large digital panorama image taken with three digital images and stitched together.

Evaluate Your Services and Educate Your Customers

Look for potential services that augment either the film or digital side of your business. Eliminate services that are no longer money-makers and try to replace them with newer services designed to satisfy the demands of today's customers.

Be open-minded to new technologies as they may help you create new services. For example, when 8mm movies were discontinued, many customers had their precious memories converted to video tape. With reduced prices, DVD recorders can now be used for transfer and provide an even longer life span.



Shot with the Nikon D1

Digital is such new technology that it involves educating your customers and staff. They need to know that film images can be scanned for manipulation in a home computer. You may have to explain just how to off-load their digital images via a card reader so they can later erase the digital film.

Some of your customers may even try printing their own pictures on their home inkjet printers, so you need to be creative. Give them the speed and print quality that will give them incentive to have you print their images instead. You may have to look beyond the norm and create new services to satisfy both the film and digital camera user.

Both film and digital have a place in photography at this time in photographic history. We use both types of systems, and we find the resolution of digital camera more than acceptable for many of our lab applications.

Over the last few years we have provided updates regarding digital applications in the photo lab and will continue to do so as the transition continues. We don't fight the digital transition; instead we use it to our best advantage. If you want to survive in this world of uncertainty, you will have to be open to change.

Jack and Sue Drafahl are freelance writers and professional photographers living on the Oregon Coast. Web address: www.jackandsuedrafahl.com

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