

The Digital Gurus

Ian van der Wolde



These articles profile some of the experts in digital imaging technology working in Australia. This month Barrie Smith continues his interview with Victorian professional photographer Ian van der Wolde who also works as a DI consultant.

In last month's article, Dandenong-based photographer Ian van der Wolde described his first moves into digital capture, the lessons he learned and how this experience is now helping others, especially in the always thorny area of colour management.

The logical next question is to ask how you finance the changeover to digital capture and post-production. Ever methodical, Ian sat down and worked out, pre-digital, how his financials would change when he made the switch to digital.

"First I worked out what I was charging per roll of film," he explains. "For example, if I was charging \$50 for a roll of 120 film with ten exposures, that would equate to \$10 per frame. So I still charged my hourly rate, but instead of charging for my film in processing, I decided to charge per shot download. So, if I did ten shots in an hour I would charge my hourly rate and then I would charge them \$10 for each shot.

"I've started charging more now for the files than I used to, but then I have a sliding scale. If somebody wants 'straight' captures and doesn't want me to do anything to them, but there's a large quantity of files, I might be prepared to do them at \$10 a file, on top of my hourly rate — plus the cost of burning to CD and so on."

He stresses this rate applies to table top, still life shooting for catalogue work, with the images neither deep etched nor contoured.

"The product is just on a light table so I could probably do around 20 shots in an hour. Obviously, I charge less for this sort of set-up than if I had to spend a lot of time setting up and then took only two or three shots."

Lease Or Buy?

Currently, Ian is leasing his digital camera system, but actually feels it's a better idea to pay up front if you can afford to do so. However, he's adamant you shouldn't jeopardise your cash flow.

In the past, Ian says he has always bought his equipment outright, but on this occasion he went for the lease option as he was making a significant shift to a full Canon D-SLR outfit, having previously used another brand of 35mm equipment.

"It was such a big changeover that I decided to lease the whole lot. Buying a whole new system of lenses outright would have represented a very big outlay.

To determine what the monthly lease payment figure would have to be, Ian assessed his expenditure on film and processing and then calculated how much he would have to charge per file when he went to digital capture.

"The monthly lease payment had to be less than or, at the very most, equal to my average monthly film and processing spend. So that, as far as my outgoings were concerned, nothing would change."

Six years ago, Ian recalls, he leased his first digital camera on a three year plan. The camera was one of the first into the country, but he miscalculated on the



normal run of shots it would be called upon to capture. "I hadn't counted on the fact that people would want me to take a lot more images," he explains.

When shooting film, Ian recalls, usually fewer frames were exposed at each session. With digital capture, even though clients were paying for each file, they typically wanted more images.

"Instead of requesting, say, five shots, the client might get me to take 10 or 15 and I would charge for them. If we had been shooting film we would have been spending more on it — so I was actually making more money."

Cautious Approach

Let's say a photographer is about to outlay around \$30,000 on a digital camera system. How far out should he or she expect to get a return on that investment?

Ian Van der Wolde contends that such an investment could generate a financial return instantly.

"I had one client that was forcing me into going digital, and I say "forcing" because I really was hesitant to go down that road... I had no understanding of it at all. So I found I was budgeting the whole process of going digital on that one client's income. But what I didn't anticipate was that all my other clients, when they saw that I had it, would also jump onboard. It was my major client — who probably about represented about 40 percent of my business — so my lease was based on 40



percent of my film processing and expenditure."

As Ian's other clients also then wanted to go digital, it ended up representing 95 percent of his business "...so the profit margins went way up".

In spite of this positive outcome, Ian still feels it's better to be conservative when doing your sums. He cautions, "Stay well within your means".

However, does 'going digital' have market appeal?

"As professional photographers, we've been trained to see, to compose, to record life. That's the difference. It would be like me buying a set of Sidchromes and expecting to instantly become a professional mechanic."

"Yes, it certainly does. The most common thing clients would say to me was, 'It's going to be cheaper now that there's no film', and my reply would be 'Why would I spend \$30,000 on new camera equipment to save you money?'"

These days Ian tells clients that using digital capture will save them money, but not at the photography stage.

For example, one of his clients was in the retail sector and needed around 18 products a month shot on film for a catalogue. Well aware that this client

was paying around \$10 a scan, Ian explained that while he couldn't save the client money on the original photography, he would make subsequent savings by avoiding the scanning process.

"This was additional to the fact that the client could leave the studio with colour corrected images on a CD that could be dropped straight into a catalogue. So, not only was I saving the client money down the line, I was

also saving time and effort. As a result I felt that they should actually pay me more — and they agreed!"

Understanding

This discussion logically led to the next question.

What level of understanding do photographers have about what happened to their film frames after they were handed over to a client? This is important when it comes to preparing digital files for whatever application is required by the client.

"I think it probably depends on what area of photography they're in," Ian answers. "Certainly most of the commercial photographers would have a good understanding of what happens down the line."

So, are the clients themselves educated enough to use digital properly?

A firm "No" is the response which Ian backs up with an example of a recent experience shooting a range of products for a kitchen cabinet manufacturer. The job involved photographing kitchens installed in fairly exclusive homes. Noticing that the client was watching his activities fairly carefully, Ian says he had the distinct feeling that his client would fall over when he finally got the bill for photography.

The client's attitude, he assessed, was "Jeez, for the cost of two jobs we could buy ourselves a half-decent digital camera and do it ourselves!"

Which is exactly what the client did. He then proceeded to shoot his own products for use in a brochure. However, later Ian learned that the client had admitted to the graphic designer who produced the brochure that he now knew why, "There was a good reason for using a professional photographer and it was quite obvious which images I'd taken and which ones he had!"

Trained To See

In Ian's opinion, everyone needs to realise that capture is only part of the whole process. An important step is what happens to the image when it reaches the



and buy a good digital camera and put us out of a job. I think this is very wrong. They are discounting the fact that, as professional photographers, we've been trained to see, to compose, to record life. We understand concepts like depth-of-field and other technicalities. It would be like me saying "Well, I'll go and buy a set of Sidchromes and instantly become a professional mechanic. I can buy the tools, but it doesn't mean that I'm suddenly qualified to do the job."

If not exactly the \$64,000 question, there is the matter of how a photographer can charge a reasonable figure for digital retouching and recoup the cost of this labour without upsetting the clients.

"I actually have an hourly rate," Ian says, "and if I'm sitting in front of the computer retouching or if I'm out shooting, that hourly rate is the same. If the client says, 'I want you to drive down to Myers and pick up this vase, we need it for a prop' then he pays my normal hourly rate."

Ian has worked out a pricing routine which he feels is fair, doesn't jeopardise the photographer-client relationship, but does set a monetary value on his image editing expertise.

One option is to hand the client a set of uncorrected, very low res JPEGs on a CD. For this he charges a flat rate. Then, when the client selects specific images, he supplies them at high res and charges a much higher rate per image with each having basic retouching in terms of colour and density correction.

"If a client came back to me and said, 'Ian I want you to remove that lighthouse at the back of the shot and cover these patches in the grass', I would go back to my hourly rate and I would quote on that before I did it."

The Film Question

A question that is asked of all the 'gurus', is whether they believe there is still a place for film in commercial photography?

Ian van der Wolde answers, "Most definitely, but for me any film usage is now very minor. I shoot with a '35mm' digital SLR which is very sharp and does the job most of the time. However, there are still some instances where I need a larger file and then I'll revert to using transparency film, but those instances are becoming fewer and fewer. When I was originally shooting with a Nikon D1, I'd say that anything that had to go over A5 size reproduction, would have to be shot on film. With the Canon EOS-1Ds I use now, there's much less need to use film."

Ian foresees there will come a time in the future that it will be possible to get 4x5-inch quality out of a 35mm-based digital SLR.

"Then, I suspect, there will be no need for film at all."

In Ian's opinion there are certain things that digital capture still doesn't handle as well as film.

"One would be landscape photography or commercial photography where you're shooting at twilight. Film always delivered such rich and lovely tones in sunsets. With digital capture it seems to be more true to life, but not necessarily better looking."

Next Month: In the final part of this profile, Ian van der Wolde voices some criticism of what he calls digital capture's "perfectness". P



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