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# Your Bottom Line

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By Dr. Henry J. Oles, Cr.Photog.

## Be alert to options

In the past, professional photographers had few concerns regarding film and paper processing, since it was standardized throughout the industry. There was only one kind of color paper and most of it was manufactured by Eastman Kodak Company. The few automated film processor manufacturers used exactly the same chemistry, operating at precisely controlled times and temperatures, recommended by Kodak. The only uncontrolled element was lab personnel competence.

Times have changed. High processing standards, which photographers once took for granted, no longer exist. This dramatic change began when a few technicians decided not to adhere to engineer specifications. They learned that chemistry for film and paper processing could be adjusted to operate faster by increasing solution temperatures. Some lab technicians began running processing equipment so hot, the increased temperatures almost caused emulsion to slide off photograph surfaces.

The highly competitive one-hour mini-lab industry expanded more rapidly once faster processing became available. Equipment manufacturers were anxious to prove that their machines produced more volume per hour than the competition. They operated the machines faster and installed a hotter, more efficient dryer. Lab owners purchased these machines and advertised faster service. They did not understand that unauthorized manipulations of time and temperature can cause quality decline.

The one-hour lab soon became the 59-minute lab, then the 45-minute lab. Today, many labs advertise that they can furnish finished prints from unprocessed film in less than 30 minutes. Manipulating film processing became so common in the one-hour industry that it began to spread into professional lab businesses.

Realizing that their long-time standard materials did not react well to higher temperatures, film, paper, and chemistry manufacturers began competing to develop both sensitized materials and special chemicals designed to perform at higher

temperatures. A leader in the race is Eastman Kodak Company, with its Rapid Access (RA), chemistry and paper.

To complicate matters more, a manufacturer developed the washless process several years ago. Instead of washing film or prints in a continuous flowing bath of clear water, this process involved bathing sensitized materials in chemicals that attempt to remove or neutralize unwanted residues of other chemicals, and is becoming a standard process.

The new RA paper and chemistry seems at first, to be the "cat's meow" because it is both fast and washless. But, it doesn't always offer the most desirable results. RA prints are often more contrasty than most traditional professional portrait photographers favor.

To perplex the situation more, various manufacturers of film and color paper created a huge variety of products that produce different results. Eastman Kodak Company now competes with Fuji, Konica, Mitsubishi, and private label brands—each offering a number of different products.

While a lack of high standards is more likely to be present at one-hour lab operations or smaller custom labs, it is not unusual to find large professional labs drifting from original Kodak standards. Traditional EP-2 Process materials are destined to be replaced by RA-4. More than ever before, professional photographers should be aware of the situation. In fact, Kodak recently announced that Vericolor VPS III Professional film should not be processed in high-temperature film processing machines that are recommended for amateur films. This indicates that some professional labs have been processing this film improperly.

I generally prefer a soft portrait "appearance" and request that lab technicians utilize processing materials and techniques that produce pleasing skin tones. However, many sensitized products manufacture "pushed to produce" paper with whiter whites and blacker blacks. This produces higher contrast,

which many commercial photographers like, but few portrait photographers prefer.

The issue of longevity is a major consideration for professional photographers interested in the bottom line. While "grocery store" photo finishers can get away with color snapshots that fade quickly, professional photographers can only accept maximum longevity prints.

Even under ideal conditions, color dyes lack stability—even more so when processing time and temperature is manipulated. I've tried to get definitive information on fading from research chemists who are responsible for creating professional photographic products. Although they generally don't discuss these issues, some admit that they are also concerned about what the market forces them to create. Their companies are driven by our fast paced society to create faster products—even if faster is not better. And many photographers are not aware of this problem.

One alternative to poor-quality film processing is for professional photographers to do it themselves, using traditional methods that produce pleasing results and maximum longevity. Another choice is to investigate which labs employ desirable techniques. Ask what paper, chemistry, and processing times they use. Find out how long they immerse sensitized materials in each solution. All of this information affects print quality.

What's awaiting professional photographers in the future? Offering a vast array of different options to customers before competitors do—such as color intensity. For clients who prefer "colorful" photographs, photographers may have to choose film, paper, and chemicals which yield exceptionally brilliant colors. For wedding and portrait clients who dislike dark backgrounds resulting from flash, creating more naturally illuminated photography may become mandatory.

Photographers can not take their profession for granted. They must get actively involved in every aspect of the industry, because quality and customer satisfaction reflects in the bottom line. 