Your Bottom Line

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Future shock

When image-makers began to hear about the many changes that high-tech electronic imaging innovations would bring to professional photography, many rejected such prognostications as ridiculous and impossible. However, as tangible evidence rapidly demonstrates that these predictions are becoming true, many photographers react with alarm and fear.

In recent months, numerous photographers told me they were going to "sit tight" and not purchase any new equipment. They reasoned that in a few years, equipment purchased today would be outdated as film is phased out of the image-making process. Rather than upgrading their studios with today's technology, these photographers plan to wait for the arrival of total electronic imaging, where electronic signals will be sent directly from a camera to a lab or in-studio printer to produce near-immediate results.

This technology is definitely on the horizon, but it is important to place such advancements in proper perspective. Monumental changes are not likely to occur tomorrow or the next day. While some hi-tech systems, like instant video proofing, are now available, many innovations will have a much more difficult time finding a realistic and profitable role in photography studios.

The glitz of hi-tech video, CD-ROM, and other innovations can be blinding. If they are not careful, photographers may soon consider new technology more significant than it really is. The word "new" carries a special aura with it, especially when associated with video technology—it catches people's attention, and may encourage them to believe that current equipment is inferior.

Film is the most fundamental photography component threatened by electronic imaging. The development of still video cameras and digitized images raises serious questions about film's role in the future. However, the total elimination of film is presumptuous.

Today's still video analog images and digital prints are judged against images created via film processing. This is an important distinction. Granted, a 4x5-inch still video print looks almost as good as an image made via traditional film and paper printing. But when working with 8x10-inch prints, the video image begins to fail, and it fails miserably with larger sizes.

Film is decidedly superior over today's processes as a means of capturing and storing images. Because film and computers both store information, they are, in fact, similar. A conventional camera translates an image into billions of dots on a negative, whereas a computer converts an image into digital bits. Film holds an advantage over computers, however, because it stores more information more effectively, in less complicated and cheaper methods. A conventional camera that employs film includes relatively few mechanical or electrical parts, while a digital-based camera requires a relatively complex series of components.

Many professional image-makers are excited about the Kodak DCS electronic camera system. However, it's important to note that this device is not intended for all photography situations—it is targeted to photojournalists and other image-makers who are willing to sacrifice image quality and pay a high price for quick image transmission. While lower image quality may be sufficient for certain uses, it is not acceptable for most professional portrait or commercial applications.

Other generations of electronic still video cameras are definitely on their way. The Kodak DCS 200 electronic camera is designed for environments where slightly higher image quality is more important than vast storage or speedy transmission. The new Sony Electronic Portrait Camera system produces retouched 8x10-inch color portraits in minutes.

However, improvements and innovations such as these take time to implement, and are usually quite expensive when introduced. For these reasons, I believe the best image capture medium for professional photographers continues to be film.

New technology offers more options for using film. Besides normal printing techniques, image-makers can "read" their film into computers and receive digital prints created via a thermal or laser process. The important point is that film remains the preferred and practical capture method.

Professional image-makers should not get paranoid that electronic technology will take over the industry, because traditional photography will be around for a long time. Instead, they should formulate plans that will effectively integrate new technologies into their operations. One approach is to take advantage of both processes. For example, photographers can profitably serve customers by utilizing the advancements of instant video or transparencies to create projectable proofs, and rely on traditional film capture to produce high-quality enlarged prints.

Some photographers will go to great lengths to incorporate as much video technology into their studios as possible. However, studio owners must try to avoid becoming equipment junkies. I've always been a pragmatist—if a job could be done by hand in 2 minutes, or by computer in 2 hours, I'd take the shorter route every time.

For the "everyday professional studio," image-makers must constantly educate themselves on the latest photography innovations and equipment. By staying informed, photographers can implement these technologies in meaningful applications, like instant video proofing.

By accepting new technology and incorporating it wisely into photography studios, professional image-makers can maintain a healthy bottom line, both now and in the future.