Organize Your Digital and Paper Photos!

It is time to clear out you attic, toss out old shoeboxes, and put all your photographs - digital and paper - into your PC.

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Are you still keeping photographs in shoeboxes? Do you think of your paper prints and digital photos as two separate collections, never quite sure which one contains that great family picture from a 2000 holiday? Do you crave a little organization for your memories?

People contact me on a regular basis for my advice as to how to organize their digital and paper pictures. The following is based on what I have garnered from talking with other professional photographers and reading many of articles on the subject.

Many people have both digital and paper photographs they need to organize. Some even have slides and negatives.

This is basically a two-part project. First, you have to create order among the hundreds of randomly named JPEG files that you probably have taken over the years with your digital camera. And second, you have to find a way to pull your 35mm prints and negatives (and maybe even slides) into your PC, so you can start to build an all-digital photo album.

The results are going to be great. After following my suggestions, you will probably have thousands of photos dating back to forever, taking up relatively little space on a hard drive on your computer. When you do this, your pictures will not yellow over time. You can print photos whenever you want, email them to family or friends, or post them to your Web site, Facebook or Twitter. As a side benefit, you will reclaim your closet space where those old shoeboxes used to be stored.

Getting Organized

First you will have to get your digital photos under control by creating a filing scheme that makes sense to you. With a comprehensive and cogent filing scheme, you can find photos easily or let a photo management program sort things out based on your organization.

It's all about folders. In Windows go to the My Pictures folder and created a bunch of folders by year: 2000, 2001, 2002, etc. In each of these folders, you can create twelve subfolders, numbered 1 to 12, representing each month of the year. In most cases, the file dates displayed in Windows File Explorer records the date and time you transferred each photo to your PC. So it now becomes a simple matter to drag JPEG files from their current location into the appropriate folder for the month and year the photo was taken.

You can rename the photos as necessary to give you a better idea as to what is in the photo, or who is in the photo. Keep in mind that the computer does not know what is important to you and will organize the photos alpha-numerically. What this means for you is that you cannot organize

the photos in the different folders based on location where you see them on the screen. That will not work. You will need to keep in mind how the computer will organize them – via their position in the numeric scheme and the alphabet.

If you want or need to get more specific, Windows can help you even more with its built-in Thumbnail View, which displays tiny previews of image files in a folder. This feature makes it easy to organize your photos and move them to a folder dedicated to their specific subjects in a particular month folder.

Photo Management Tools

It is one thing to organize photos by month and year which we have just done, but quite another to really organize a collection. For that you need software that lets you view, track, and manage digital photos. Fortunately, there are many programs that can automatically scan your existing photo directories and create a database. From there, you simply add information about the files into the program. You can select one or more images and assign keywords like "family," "reunion," and "vacation." As long as you are consistent about the way you assign keywords, it becomes a snap to find every last photo of each family member or every vacation.

These programs usually also recognize data produced by digital cameras that is stored in JPEG and other file formats. Information such as the camera model, lens aperture, exposure time, and the time and date the photo was taken can all be displayed and used to search for pictures. Want to find every photo taken with a flash? No problem. Want to find every photo taken with a certain exposure? No problem.

In addition to viewing photos, this type of software allows you select files and create custom slide shows or build Web photo galleries. Many of these packages offer limited editing capability for rotating and cropping images, removing red-eye, and performing minor touch-ups. Other nice features to look for are sophisticated file renaming - so you can easily replace cryptic file names like IMG0257.JPG with something more descriptive (cousin Bill) - and the ability to perform batch operations like resizing a set of images or converting them to another file format.

There are so many programs out there that it would be an impossible task to list all of them or even a few; besides the list keeps changing. When I first wrote this article, I listed about a dozen different programs. When I rewrote the article for republication, that list had changed drastically as many of the programs are no longer being made and new ones have come onto the market. Instead, I would recommend to do research and find what would best work for you.

From Silver to Silicon

Now that we have talked about your digital files, what do you do with the thousands of pictures you took with your 35mm camera? Most people started taking digital snapshots only in the past few years. When I decided to unify my photo collection, I knew I couldn't spend thousands of dollars on a professional-grade film scanner. Fortunately, it is possible to get analog photos into your computer at a reasonable price, although a good price doesn't always guarantee quality or convenience.

Consider purchasing an inexpensive flatbed scanner for less than $200. Consider getting one that can scan negatives in addition to your pictures. The bigger issue with any inexpensive scanner is image quality. 2400 DPI scanners will give you more resolution than you will probably need. In addition, scratches, lint, and dust can mar many of your scanned negatives. You can use a photo editor to brush those flaws out, but it takes time to do so.

If you are going to get a scanner specifically to digitize your negatives, you should certainly consider investing in a unit that supports a technology called Digital ICE, known as FARE in Canon scanners, which finds and removes scratches and flaws in the negative surface. (Flatbed scanners are starting to use Digital ICE to help remove flaws in prints as well.) Expect to pay $700 or more for a desktop film scanner with this advanced capability.

Now, Where to Put It All?

By the time you are finished scanning all your negatives and prints, and moving and managing your collection of digital photos, you might have created something of a crisis. I would consider adding a fast 120GB or larger hard disk to my system to make room for the photos. Even better purchase a 250GB external hard drive that uses USB 2.0 to connect to the PC. Viewing your photos on another computer is now simply a matter of plugging in the external drive.

Another option is to store digital photos on removable optical media like DVD-RW or DVD+RW discs, or even CD-R or flash drive. Photo management software as we discussed above now comes in handy, letting you manage your image database information and view thumbnails without even opening the files themselves. The only drawback is that swapping DVDs can become a nuisance with very large collections.

Even if you don't plan to access your digital photo library from DVDs, make sure you back up your collection. Again, photo management software can help, letting you save both your images and the metadata you have assigned to them to another location.

It all sounds like a significant amount of work, but most PCs are well equipped for hosting a digital photo library. Massive hard disks and fast rewritable DVD drives are standard equipment on home and small-office PCs. You can find low-cost flatbed scanners that double as film scanners. And there is no shortage of capable photo management software to turn your pile of digital snapshots into a powerful, searchable database of visual memories. All that is left is to rearrange your closet to take advantage of the newfound space. Good Luck with your new project.