
DIG Discussion - Book Publishing

These notes recap a group discussion at the December, 2007 DIG meeting about publishing photo books. We had a chance to examine 29 books published our members, and about 70 people participated in the open discussion.

1. Overview

Although the books displayed at the meeting portrayed a wide diversity in content and style, they reflected a uniformly high level of photographic and publishing skill and creativity. Their high level of publication quality reflects significant advances in the publishing products that have come on the market during the last year or so.

2. Publishers

A large number of publishers are competing for market space, but the great majority in our group is working with either My Publisher or Blurb to publish their books. Both of these vendors have strengthened their page layout software to provide an increasingly rich set of features while retaining reasonable ease of use. Both have upgraded the physical publication quality of their books while retaining a reasonable price. It still seems incredible that you can create a personally customized, hardcover, bound book containing high resolution, high quality color images, with all the refinements of high priced coffee table books, for less than \$100.

The software provides great flexibility in book design, which demands a whole new set of considerations beyond our usual expertise in cameras, photography, and Photoshop image processing. You can select from many pre-formatted page layout templates, a different one for each page if you so desire. The templates support photos in portrait and landscape orientation, multiple photos per page, and nicely arranged captions, text blocks, and page headers. You also have many options for a glossy dust cover design with front and back photos, front and back flaps with text and photos, and fancy fonts for the title text.

All the book design is accomplished on your own desktop at a time of your choosing, the publishing order is placed in a highly automated dialog over the Internet, and the finished product is delivered to your door a few days later - amazing!

3. Design Choices

Several parts of the discussion focused on design choices. These are matters of personal preference and there was little consensus, but it reveals some of the things you have to think about in creating a book.

- Mixed or uniform photo sizes
- Mixed or uniform landscape or portrait photo orientation
- Black, white, or gray page backgrounds
- Amount of white/black space around the photo
- Full bleed photos or not
- Captions and headers or just photos
- Borders on photos or not

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- Two sided pages or not
 - Use and placement of page numbers

4. Issues and Concerns

Although most members were very pleased with their books, the discussion revealed a common set of issues and concerns that created uncertainty during the publishing process. The vendor forums also reflect the fact that this is a rapidly evolving process with the usual problems and inconsistencies that come with that situation.

- Photo image sizing

Common steps to prepare images for a book include flatten, change to 8 bit mode, convert to sRGB color space, and save in a high quality jpeg format, but a common area of uncertainty is the size and resolution of the images. Blurb recommends an optimum pixel size for every page layout option, and also flashes a warning message if it thinks the resolution is too low. On their website they warn against sending overly large files apparently concerned about the softening that may occur when they have to resize. It seems that your best practice is to resize and sharpen images in Photoshop to match their recommendation or at least get close - it may depend on how much time and patience you have.

Aspect ratio is another issue. For panoramic photos and for those of us who crop images for best composition, regardless of the resulting aspect ratio, Blurb offers a “no crop” option when placing the image in the photo area of their template. That preserves the original cropping but leaves non-uniform black space on the page.

- Sharpening

There is no sharpening facility available in the page layout software. Perhaps the publisher applies a sharpening step, but there are numerous cases where the printed image appears softer than the original image. Again, sharpening a properly sized image in Photoshop before sending seems like the best strategy.

- Color Management

Although most were satisfied and positive about the image quality in their books, this is a troubling area of uncertainty since tonal quality, color matching, and color saturation are so critical to the quality of printed images. Blurb recommends sending images in the sRGB color space; however because any individual book could be exported to any one in their network of printing partners, they do not support a fully color managed workflow and do not designate a profile that can be used for soft proofing. You can find lots of discussion and a variety of “solutions” on the website forums, but the best strategy may be to calibrate your monitor and hope - which makes for a nervous time waiting for the printed book to arrive. When ordering multiple copies, a recommended strategy is to order one “review” copy to verify color and layout details before proceeding with a second order for the additional copies.

- Page layout with Photoshop or with the publishing software

Although the publishing software offers many page layout templates, there are some situations where it would be useful to do the page layout in Photoshop rather than the publishing software. For example, if your design uses consistent image sizes and orientation and no captions or headers it might be faster to do the layout in Photoshop. Another situation for a Photoshop layout is for a page containing a collage, or multiple images, especially if the images are different sizes or overlap each other. Several folks reported success in using Photoshop to create a single panoramic image spanning a two page spread in the book.

- Proof reading

One item of consensus was the need for careful attention to proof reading. The publishers do absolutely no content checking, so it is important to scrutinize each page carefully before submitting it to the publisher. And they don't "fix" any content errors after the fact - typos, missing headers, wrong sequence, missing borders, etc - if you want even one small change you resubmit the whole book. Furthermore, several people have observed that the software has many default settings and that after a shut down and restart of the application it may insert these defaults in places you didn't want them. Therefore it is very important to use the Preview facility in the software to carefully review every aspect of every page immediately before submitting the book - even if you just did it an hour before - very tedious and time consuming, but very important.

4.1 Conclusion

There was varying experience and lots of opinion, but little consensus on how to best resolve these issues, so publishing a photo book continues to be sometimes perplexing but usually rewarding experience.