

This affordable new technology makes it easier than ever to give customers a preview of their new signs

Using the digital camera as a design tool

by Gray Hodge

The camera has always been a helpful tool in the sign business, from bringing home visual information to recording an image of our final masterpiece. I used to carry a Polaroid camera to capture an instant photo of a building or vehicle to be lettered to serve as a reference when I returned to the shop. Sometimes I scanned that photograph to get it onto the computer.

Now all this and much more has been made so much easier with the introduction of cameras that use no expensive film and give great results direct to the PC, called digital cameras. Let me tell you how it works for me.

Types of cameras

One needs to consider the quality of lens, storage media, picture resolution and quality as well as the method by which images are transferred. A year ago, the world of digital photography was new technology and I am a cautious pioneer with a limited budget. I decided to buy the cheapest entry-level digital camera on the market, the Kodak DC20. It's the digital equivalent of the Kodak Instamatic—a simple point-and-shoot camera with no frills. While there are better and much more expensive cameras available now, this one still works fine and

**With digital cameras,
there is no film,
no processing costs
and no waiting
for photos
to arrive.**

does the job well.

Most of the camera manufacturers are now producing digital versions including Canon, Nikon, and Polaroid. The factors that influence your choice are not much different than choosing any other type of camera. As with most purchases, you get what you pay for.

My Kodak has no flash, which is usually not a problem since most of my photographs are taken outside. The internal memory chip will store eight "high quality" images or 16 "low quality" images. Since the low quality shots are pretty useless I just count on the eight.

The best features with digital cameras are that there is no film, no processing costs, no waiting for photos to arrive and no negatives to store. When the images are

downloaded and saved to the PC, the memory in the camera is erased and you start afresh.

Spending more bucks will buy a camera that can save your image on removable media. One approach uses "smart media"—a small removable chip that can be taken out of the camera after the shots are taken and fits into a special floppy disk. Another type of camera uses a standard removable floppy in the camera itself to store the photos, or the big brother to my lowly Kodak DC20.

As any typical 'net-head' would, I tend to search the internet for information on the latest cameras. One good web page is C-Net at <http://www.cnet.com>. This site has all the latest prices, reviews and where you can buy a camera.

Camera to computer

The DC20 uses a serial cable to connect the camera to the computer. This is, in hindsight, a drawback because the software insists on requiring the COM-1 port and most computers use COM-1 for the mouse which means that port is not available. I have a plotter on COM-2 so the mouse cannot be moved there either. Fortunately I have a notebook computer in addition to my main computer with COM-1 free so I use that.

Most cameras include software that allows you to preview your photos before you transfer them to the computer. When your selection is downloaded to the PC, the software gives you many options for picture editing such as cropping, changing color, size and brightness.

I prefer to use other software such as Thumbs Plus, a shareware program from Cerious Software (<http://www.cerious.com/index.html>) but any image editing software [such as Micrographix Draw, Corel-Draw, or Photoshop] will do fine.

Once the image is in your computer it can be imported into whatever sign software you use. Then the real fun begins.

In our shop we use CADlink's SignLab, but as I said, any software should work fine as long as it is Windows-based. Either the "import" feature or "cut and paste" methods may be used. When the image is originally saved

from the camera's software you will be given a choice of file formats. See what formats your sign program likes to import best. SignLab will import any bitmap image, which are picture files with file extensions (the three letters after the period in the file name) such as .bmp, .jpg, .tif, etc. I generally use .jpg images because they take little space. Sometimes .bmp files will give better results, though.

Applications for sign design

When I take a photograph of a building or a truck to be lettered, I take a measurement or two, such as the truck door width, the building width or height. When the photo is brought into SignLab, I can size the image to actual size by using that measurement. Then I superimpose the lettering or logo over the photo. Once the lettering is placed on the photo it can be sized and resized until the optimum dimensions are reached to get the look you want.

This gives the best possible idea of what the final project will look like to both you and your client. In addition, I have found this a good way of estimating hard-to-get measurements such as the height of a building, so that I can decide what ladder or lifting device I'll need.

Again, with buildings this is especially useful since other measurements can be taken that are needed for the job (such as start and finish distances for lettering). This makes installation of the sign even quicker and easier. All the guesswork is taken away. When I arrive on the site I can know exactly what to do. This leaves more time to sit and have a cup of tea!

These images also assist at the quotation stage. With a visual reference, the price of the job is easier to determine.

If the photo shows existing signage that must be removed before the new sign is installed then that sign can be edited out with image editing software before the new lettering is inserted. In one case recently, a vehicle was to be sprayed a different color before signwriting. I used the photo editor to change the vehicle color, then place the lettering over the

Using the digital camera as a design tool

top to show the final look without lifting a spray gun. It looked great.

I am not going to use that worn out phrase: "the possibilities are limited only by your imagination", but it is true!

Outputting the image

Where possible, I like to bring

the client into the office, sit them in front of the computer and amaze them with my artistic abilities, my technological skills and my modest nature. This also ensures that any changes that need to be made can be done quickly and efficiently to close the deal and get on with the work.

It's true that giving the customer a hard copy of the design before a firm order is received is a minefield littered with wasted hours and lost contracts. But I must confess that I've not yet found that sure and certain path through such a minefield. I sometimes do give the client a print to consider before final approval. To get this far in the process of taking the photo and designing a layout without a firm order and a deposit, though, is unwise. When I do need to produce a hard copy I print the whole design on a good inkjet printer with great results.

Another way of getting the design out to the client is by e-mail. SignLab allows me to convert the whole design to a bitmap image, which can be viewed on most any computer. The image is then e-mailed to the customer who can see my brilliance in all its glory a few minutes later.

Be warned, though, when sending images: the file size can easily blow out to one megabyte and often more. It is considered bad manners to send large files over the internet without first forewarning the client and gaining their consent.

Finally, let me say that if you don't yet own a digital camera, but have a color scanner, you can still use the technique I've described above by starting with a normal color print of the subject and scanning the photo. It works just as well except that you have to get the photo processed first which takes longer.

If you don't have a scanner, many photo-processing labs these days offer a service whereby your photos can be placed on disk as well as printed for an extra charge.

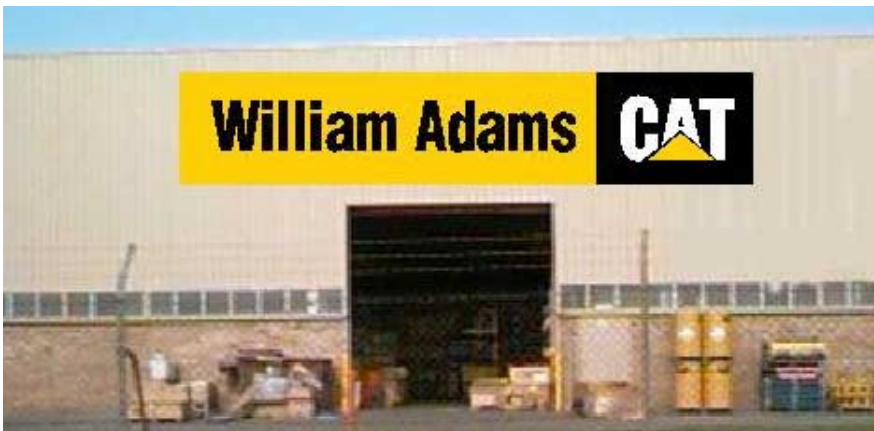
Truly, digital cameras are one of the coolest tools to emerge in recent times and one that offers very special uses in the today's sign



This is the digital photo of the existing building.



Here it is after the existing sign was removed with image editing software.



This new sign design is added to the retouched image, giving the customer a preview of the project.

shop. While at present, digital photos cannot compete with standard photographic prints for image quality without spending a very large number of dollars for the high-end cameras, it may not be too long before we see the end of photography as we know it now.□



Gray Hodge's shop, Cam River Signs, is in Somerset, Tasmania, Australia. Originally trained as an engraver, he has been owner/manager since 1984. He can be reached via e-mail at camriver@southcom.com.au.