

# Management in the marketplace

While, for many pro labs and bureaux, the whole subject of colour management is seen as a mechanical process necessary for ensuring the client receives images showing the shades and hues of colour he expected, for the client, or image intermediaries such as picture libraries, it can mean the difference between running a successful business or being written off as operating too low a quality service.

Alamy is one of the UK's largest, and most successful, image banks, and takes the matter of colour management very seriously. Company CEO James West believes that colour can often be deceiving, whether it is on a monitor or appears in print.

"Potential hurdles can include the different chemicals being present in various types of paper," he says, "and a chromalin failing to warn you of a colour disparity between low and high res images could mean you are stuck with umpteen thousand printed copies of something you can't use.

"Without guides, such as original film to examine on a lightbox, how can you know whether what you see is what you will get when you go to print? The WYSIWYG ('what you see is what you get') challenge is one of the biggest facing digital picture libraries today. They need to employ the most effective colour management tools internally, and deliver colour management knowledge which will enable their customers to work in parallel with them.

"However, just having effective internal tools will not be enough if a monitor or laser printer isn't properly calibrated. One answer lies in profile based, ICC (International Colour Consortium)-approved colour management systems. These allow users to choose and work with RGB images – which they prefer – and to preview, proof and deliver files in CMYK for accurate output.

"Compatibility between Microsoft and Apple colour management technology, and the platform-based programmes which run on them, eg: Adobe's PhotoShop, has been a huge step in

the right direction, putting the user more in control while the use of colour management profiles for RGB stock images has made a science out of the black art of output control."

## Standards at source

Many professional photographers also understand the need for colour management once their images are extracted from whatever capture device or medium they use.

Chris Knapton and David Hoffman, both of them regular contributing photographers to Alamy's vast library, echo their client's concerns: "The big thing is accurate screen calibration," says Knapton. "There is a general international agreement that we all use Adobe RGB as the standard colour space, so if your screen is correctly calibrated, you should see what I see wherever you are.

"Of course, we live in a world where decisions on colour are often made in widely varying colour conditions – you might have set up the image with perfect luminance 6500K light and you are selling to a designer or image buyer with tungsten lighting, or fluctuating daylight, or weird fluorescent tubes.

"However, if your original is OK, it seems to look good across the board, as I've found when making up digital slide shows and videos for clients who take them away and play them on any old equipment that they have. So, the original is king, and critical users across the world will appreciate your care and quality.

"Many of us use Photoshop and Apple computers, and this has given us a [ITAL] de facto [END ITAL] 'colour community', so it can be a surprise when you view an image in the Windows environment with its higher native contrast. Photoshop gives us the ability to check out our image in a simulated Windows environment so that subtle tweaks can be applied to accommodate this difference."

## Consistency down the line

Hoffman, like many photographers, has long been aware of the differences which can be caused when viewing the same images under different conditions. While welcoming the consistency which modern colour management systems provide, he notes that it is yet another skill being required of photographers



Chris Knapton.



David Hoffman.

dealing with high quality digital images. Unfortunately, though, not everyone else in the chain applies the same criteria.

"For most photographers, colour management is a new and baffling area," he says. "Traditionally, we have worked on closed loop systems where the scanner/monitor/printer are all set up to work with each other to give good results. There was no connection between the set-up used by the photographer/agency or by the publisher/printer and other graphic suppliers. Any colour accuracy depended on the skill of the printer and plain luck.

"Profile based ICC approved colour management systems are the only professional way of working now. All files should be prepared on a calibrated monitor using profiled scanners and printers. The files are delivered to the client with ICC tags embedded, and will look just the same on the client's monitor and the printer's proof.

"Particularly in editorial work, many printers and designers are yet to embrace this way of working, ICC tags are frequently ignored; Photoshop is set to 'ignore profiles' and CMYK conversions are made by simply clicking the 'CMYK colour' menu item. This makes no allowance for press, paper, ink, etc. with unpredictable results, and the photographer/agency gets the blame!"

Until everyone in the industry gets their respective acts together, it seems there will always be breakdowns on colour follow through somewhere along the line. However, like most aspects of achieving high quality images, it is the acknowledgement of the need for accurate colour management, and the constant adherence to its principles, which will separate the serious professionals from the also rans.



James West of Alamy.