

Printing Pictures

With all the attention during the first half of the year on new product lines coming out from the likes of Canon, Olympus, Nikon, Sony, and other heavyweights, there is always another heavyweight to consider: your paper choices.

There has been a lot of literature recently that have looked into the performance of hardware during the post process (or development) of imaging, primarily printers. Literature abounds measuring every nuance of printers from picoliters to dpi, ink cartridge costs, accepted paper dimensions, speed of producing prints, etc., etc. etc. What very few resources have focused on though is what papers people are printing to. PCPhoto is the one notable exception. They have done two articles recently actually, and in back to back issues. In June, Wes Pitts walked the reader through the whole process of “Choosing Photo Paper”, and Ibarionex Perello followed up in their most recent issue (July/August) with another lesson in how to “Display Your Photos Right”. Clearly a void was seen in this discussion and PCPhoto stepped up to the plate.

The long and short of it is that there are three fundamentals to consider before converting your digital images to paper prints: the types of prints you are producing, how the paper will interact with your printer, and the quality of the paper itself. This essay will look at these three considerations collectively.

Are you sitting down ready to churn out the 50 shots from your weekend at Uncle Bernie’s? Or are you about to print the 12 shots you spent 2 hours composing, adjusting white balance, color correcting, and enhancing in your favorite image editor? If it’s the former, then most likely the standard papers made for your printer will provide accurate enough prints for your needs. These are the types that are readily available from your nearest Best Buy, Wal-Mart, Circuit City, or office supply store. If it’s the latter though, you may want to consider a higher end paper as well as some of the characteristics of such papers.

A well-known online resource that rates various ink and paper combinations for a wide variety of printers is Wilhelm Imaging Research at www.wilhelm-research.com. Some of the factors that are considered at the high end of papers include paper weight, paper whiteness, and paper surface (or type).

Paper weight refers to the thickness of a particular paper, and the greater the paper weight, the greater the thickness. Thicker papers have heavier absorption rates so more ink is needed to produce a print. Likewise, because there is simply more paper and ink, prints made on this type of paper are more durable – they last longer. One thing to keep in mind is that different printers have different capacities for handling thick papers. As Wes indicated in his article, “top loading printers...do much better with thicker papers than do front-loading papers...” due to the way in which the printer feeds the paper (straight feed through versus curling a paper over rollers). It is just good sense to check your manual or through your printer manufacturer to determine weight tolerance limits of your printer of choice, if such information is available.

Whiteness refers to the brilliance of papers, as some are simply brighter than others. In general, the rule of thumb to follow when choosing a paper based on its whiteness is: the brighter the paper, the higher the contrast and brilliance of your prints. If you are looking for a subdued or muted effect, whiter paper would probably not be a good paper selection. Rating papers for whiteness can be troublesome as some may provide ratings, while others do not. Check with the Wilhelm Imaging site to see if the paper you like has a whiteness rating or contact the manufacturer directly if you cannot find the information on your own.

Finally, there is paper surface to consider: gloss versus matte, coatings used, and texture, as well as substance are all elements here. Glossy papers produce more crisp detailed prints while mattes and those with rougher textures will naturally soften details. Some terms that fall in between gloss and matte include pearl and luster, so these would be other alternatives to consider. Substance can also be a factor as higher end papers tend more toward cotton and cotton-rag in their composition, which will yield higher absorption rates to increase longevity.

So how does this help you choose a paper? It really doesn't because ultimately, you have to print it to see if you like the results. The best suggestion for determining print quality is to obtain sample packs that have various paper weights, whiteness, texture and substances, the compare identical prints. Once you find the ones you like the best, now it's time to get those papers profiled for your specific printer...but that's a whole other story!

© Jason Anderson, 2006

Online Resources & Photo Paper Manufacturers:

PC Photo: www.pcphoto.com

Adorama: www.adorama.com

BF Inkjet: www.bfinkjet.com

Canon: www.usa.canon.com

Crane: www.crane.com

Epson: www.epson.com

Forte: www.omegasatter.com

Hahnemuhle: www.hahnemuhle.com

Hawk Mountain Paper:

www.hawkmtpaper.com

Hewlett Packard: www.hp.com

Inkpress: www.inkpresspaper.com

Kodak: www.kodak.com

Legion: www.legionpaper.com

Moab: www.moabpaper.com

Tetenal: www.hpmarketeingcorp.com

With the permission of managing editor, Wes Pitts, PCPhoto has graciously allowed the SCPG blog to offer the two articles mentioned above as reference materials here, so to view the original articles, please follow this link:

www.scphotogs.com/articles