

Here are some things you should know, and know to ask, to make your relationship with your lab mutually beneficial, and as problem-free as it gets.

BY WENDELL BENEDETTI

# What a GET THE BEST RESULTS BY BEING AN EDUCATED CLIENT *lab* wants

When we talk about professional photo labs, it's usually from the photographer's perspective —what services, pricing and turnaround do photographers expect? (*See box, opposite.*) Rarely do we consider what the lab needs from the customer, even though the answer could dramatically improve the quality of the products the lab delivers.

From the lab's perspective, professional

photographers should ask two fundamental questions before using its services: Does the lab provide services for professional photographers, and if so, does it handle the kind of work you're doing?

A visit to the Web can often answer the second question. The Allstar Photo Imaging site, [www.4allstar.com](http://www.4allstar.com), for example, quickly confirms that the lab caters to sports photog-

raphers. Its entire list of services is geared to action photography, and would likely be an inappropriate lab for wedding or portrait photographers. In the same vein, sports photographers wouldn't find much to their liking at Boston Photo Imaging's Web site, [www.bostonphoto.com](http://www.bostonphoto.com), which clearly identifies the company as a high-end scanning and giclée lab. Most professional color labs handle a variety of print options, on many kinds of media. Many offer inkjet output as well as conventional laser prints made on Lightjet, Chromira and similar devices.

Bill Smith, owner of Boston Photo Imaging, believes clients should try to know what the lab does before calling. "Communication now is probably more important than it was back in the wet days," he says. "A photographer or a client coming to us has to spend some time getting to know what we do, so *communicate.*"

As digital became prevalent, Smith repositioned his lab to meet the specific high-end scanning needs of educational institutions. Scanning now accounts for nearly 80 percent of his business, and the lab no longer does machine printing. "I don't particularly like the word *giclée*, but that's our approach, doing really high-end printing," says Smith.

Mark Wyse, a representative of the digital imaging section of A&I Photographic & Digital Services ([www.aandi.com](http://www.aandi.com)) in Hollywood, Calif., says, "Labs have different target customers. One might do fine art printing, where the printers are accustomed to doing several proofs. Another might be great at printing fashion portraits, where skin tones are important. When people try to find the right match, I think they get what they're looking for."

Labs that cater to your particular photography niche, as Allstar Photo Imaging does for sports shooters, may offer all the services you're looking for.



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Spiro Nichols, owner of Nichols Photo Lab, inspects a custom print with noted photographer Eddie Tapp.

vides suitable professional services, the next logical question is whether it supports film-based and/or digital photography. Until recently, almost all pro labs could process color negative/positive film and make Type C prints, but that's no longer the case.

Boston Photo Imaging's Bill Smith puts it this way: "We changed our name to imaging center about 12 years ago for that reason. We have no wet processes."

Spiro Nichols of Nichols Photo Lab ([www.nicholsphotolab.com](http://www.nicholsphotolab.com)) in Salt Lake City, Utah, offers some digital services. Although his lab uses digital-imaging equipment in its workflow, his primary service is traditional processing. The workflow often includes developing the film, digitizing the images, and printing them on the laser-based Lambda printer. "It's a photographic process with photographic paper, photographic chemicals."

## WHAT MATTERS TO YOU

We've dealt with some of the main miscues labs get from photographers, but the flip side is also valid. Are labs responsive to the needs and desires of their customers? Mark Lane, president of American Color Imaging, asked the 169 professional photographers who attended the ACI 2007 Inspiration seminars in February to list a dozen or so important things they want from a pro lab.

To no one's surprise, the top three were customer service, quality, and price, in that order. They also listed turnaround, new products, flexibility and Internet ordering as important factors, as well as online hosting for the studios' customers' ordering, sales reps that come to the studio, a guide print and/or digital target with every order, and a no-fault quick/fix policy. Rounding out the list were a free, user-friendly ordering program, a user-friendly staff, and yearly in-house educational opportunities.

Wyse says the choice of one's lab is key. "Some labs will not like working with artists because artists are generally very particular, and they reject proofs. But we don't mind continually proofing and making tests until the job's perfect. We have to bill for those tests, but we'll go the extra distance. People have come to us because they couldn't get that kind of hands-on experience. That's kind of our niche," he says.

There isn't general agreement on what professional lab services should include. For some photographers, it might be simply fast turnaround. For others, professional services should include specialty services, unlimited remakes, 24/7 availability, and many output options. Richard Markham of Allstar Photo Imaging says, "Clients need to be asking about variety of product and how we handle customers who come to us if they have a problem. Can we get them out of the problem relatively fast, not treat them like just another number?"

Markham believes professional services really means personalized care. "Customers always ask about price and delivery time, but not many ask about service level. When

somebody approaches our lab, I'll call to make sure he knows what he's doing. [Quite a few labs have to compensate for the digital learning curve, whether it's helping photographers gain a better understanding of white balance, color management, file formats or the kind of photographic specialty the lab supports.] Because we're relatively small compared to some of the big labs that are out there, we have a little more personal touch."

Doug Morganstern, also of A&I, says many callers ask whether the lab does digital output or gallery printing, and if A&I uses Lightjets. "What they don't ask us," he says, "is what other digital services we offer. And we offer a wide range of digital services, including print press, which has come of age now with digital."

Print press allows the lab to create custom books in small press runs. "If a photographer wants to do a mailing or send out promo cards, he doesn't have to order thousands. He can order 50. If he wants to do a promo book, we can do just one," says Morganstern. "Photographers should ask, 'What services do you offer that would help me as a photographer or that you think I would use?'"

Once the photographer knows a lab pro-

## THE GOODS: PHOTO LABS

The lab also offers inkjet prints, but Nichols believes the Lambda provides the best quality.

A&I Photographic and Digital Services processes color and black-and-white film, and offers clients fine-art black-and-white prints and some color machine prints, but no Type C hand enlargements. Everything else is output digitally on Lightjets.

When the industry was film-based, photographers were primarily concerned about correct lighting and exposure, but it's different now. Photographers and lab personnel need to understand not only white balance, color management, profiling, and digital file formats, but also uploading software, if the images are sent to the lab on the Internet.

Dick Darling, owner of Darling Digital in Valley Center, Kan., once a professional photographer, understands both perspectives. Until he became a lab owner, he hadn't fully realized that neither labs nor photographers fully understand the digital realm. While he'll work with other file formats, Darling prefers getting images in the RAW format. "It gives you some flexibility and from a quality standpoint, there's just no comparison."

Markham of Allstar Photo Imaging, on the other hand, recommends clients use the

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H&H Color Labs' clients are 90-percent digital, but some still need technical help with order preparation.

standard JPEG file format. "If we were doing high-end portraiture, I'd definitely have them on RAW. But for the type of work we do, JPEGs are the best option."

Sharon Jegen, a service rep with more than 30 years experience at H&H Color Lab ([www.hhcolorlab.com](http://www.hhcolorlab.com)) in Kansas City, Mo., says nearly 90 percent of H&H's customers use digital cameras. "They know how to take great digital pictures but fail many times with the technical side of order preparation." Some

of her clients use inappropriate file formats or fail to white balance. "You do have latitude if you shoot RAW, but it's not like having three exposures to the plus and one to the minus if you were doing film." It is easy to get a digital look or crossover if you don't use the correct procedures.

File format and white balance are relatively straightforward, but profiling an imaging system, says Wyse, of A&I, "is a very complicated subject," adding, "I wish clients would ask us more about profiling. We're always happy to set them up, to get them making better prints." He has no problem with investing time in his clients; it not only increases customer satisfaction, it also increases sales. The more customers know about the production process, the larger orders they tend to make.

A growing number of labs are hosting workshops and seminars to explain the finer points of the digital process, among them American Color Imaging (ACI) ([www.acilab.com](http://www.acilab.com)) in



©American Color Imaging

American Color Imaging offers seminars and online tutorials to instruct clients on the finer points of the digital process.

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Cedar Falls, Iowa. "We have a photography seminar every year," says Mark Lane, president of ACI. This year's seminar included a variety of topics, each covered by experts in the field. The company's seminars have become so well regarded that 169 ACI clients paid the \$250 registration fee to attend.

H&H Color Lab's Sharon Jegen agrees that education is important. "We recognized the importance of education many years ago and developed a very successful education program for our customers, H&H University. We have at least 10 classes a year covering all areas of photography, including such subjects such as the importance of shooting RAW, lighting, workflow, marketing, software, and much more."

Robert Markham of Allstar Photo Imaging encourages clients to attend Allstar's University. He suggests they also join professional photography associations, like SEP, the Society of Sport and Event Photographers. "There's so much information out there available for the photographer now that we didn't have when we first started all of this."

Communication and education won't eliminate all problems, but they will go a long way toward preventing those minor day-to-day problems from becoming major headaches. ■

*Find a list of labs and the services they offer in the Web Exclusives section of [www.ppmag.com](http://www.ppmag.com).*