

You don't know what you'll get until you've got it in your hands, so it's wise to take time to preview a supplier for service and quality.

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Spring *tryouts*

HOLD YOUR OWN PRODUCT AUDITIONS

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Adding a new item or two to your product lineup can freshen up your sales presentations and boost your profits. But before you make the investment to incorporate a new product in your Web site, marketing materials, promotions and price lists, you need to know that it's right for your brand and that the lab will deliver what's promised.

With such a bounty of eye-catching specialty products available from professional photo labs, you need a strategy for choosing both the products and the provider. First, go window shopping to find products that excite you—if it doesn't excite you, you can't sell it. Then narrow the list to the products that will sell in your target market. Once you've settled on a product, you're ready to hold your tryouts.

A big part of working with a professional photo lab goes beyond prices and products, to customer service, prompt delivery and the ease of integrating the ordering system with your workflow. With this in mind I set out to order several print products from selected labs. (I chose labs advertising specialty products that I'd noticed attracting interest at trade shows and, while not exclusive to a single lab, were not saturating the market yet.)

Without identifying myself as a *Professional Photographer* editor, I signed on as a new client with three labs. I researched the products, went through the ordering process, and contacted customer service.

For comparison, I ordered similar products from two of the labs, metallic prints on Kodak Professional papers from MPix and prints on Fujicolor Crystal Archive Pearl Paper from BWC. I ordered a product sampler from

Dalmatian Black & White Custom Lab offers a Digital B&W Sample Packet that features seven print types using your own image for \$110. It's a great way to sample the line and see how your photos work with different print methods.

Dalmatian, specialists in black-and-white printing.

As you would probably do, I made a list of the product qualities and lab services that are most important to me, and kept notes throughout the ordering and delivery process. It's easy to get fuzzy about the details, and such notes help you make a sound decision.

DALMATIAN BLACK & WHITE CUSTOM LAB

By partnering with Ilford and Durst, Dalmatian's product line includes digital black-and-white silver gelatin fiber-based 400dpi prints on True Ilford Multigrade Fiber Base Paper processed through True B&W Chemistry.

Dalmatian gives you a choice of three sample packs under the Customer Service tab on its Web site. One is a free sample pack of six different print types, including silver gelatin fiber, and silver gelatin RC and black-and-white giclée. On request, they'll add samples of canvas and traditional fiber. The two Studio Sample Packets contain 8x10-inch prints of a user-provided image. The Traditional B&W pack includes five types of prints and costs \$70. I ordered the Digital B&W Sample Packet, which includes a borderless digital machine print; a full-frame black border digital machine print; a custom digital RC print with your choice of border; a custom digital fiber print with a border of your choice; a B&W giclée on photo rag paper; a giclée on photo rag paper with your choice of color or sepia ink; and a giclée on canvas with your choice of B&W, color, or sepia ink. This sample packet costs \$110. Other kinds of print samples are available for an additional fee.

Account Setup. Call customer service or fill out an online form with a field for you to describe the kind of photography you do. Fill out a payment and shipping information form and fax or mail it to the lab. A Dalmatian repre-



Mpix prints on Kodak Professional Metallic Endura paper with pearlescent finish (top) made colors more vibrant and shadows darker than in BWC Photo Imaging prints on Fujicolor Chrystal Archive Pearl paper (above).

sentative will call you and answer any questions.

Ordering. The online order form has fields to type in your own file names, order specs (size, quantity, etc.), and room for additional instructions—no pull-down menus. A lab rep calls you if an item on the form needs clarification, such as when I inadvertently combined the names of two borders when requesting just one. If you have questions about such things as supported file formats, resolution, color space or dpi, you'll find

answers to most of them in the FAQ under the Resources tab. If not, call.

Customer service. I called to ask how to fill out the order form to request a sample pack. I also asked about my choice of borders in the sampler; they weren't on the Web site as of press time. Within minutes of my call, Dalmatian e-mailed me a PDF showing the choices. I got prompt response, straightforward answers and excellent personal service.

My original image. A 3,008x2,000-pixel



Mpix prints on Kodak Professional Endura Metallic paper (left) punch up the yellow and make shadows rich. The Fujicolor Chrystal Archive Pearl prints (right) from BWC Photo Imaging portray skin tones more realistically and retain more detail in the shadows.

color file converted to grayscale in Adobe Photoshop Lightroom, unsharpened. Saved as a TIFF at 400ppi, and zipped for upload. Dalmatian encourages clients to send RAW files along with unsharpened TIFFs for certain print types.

Costs. Sample pack \$110; shipping \$8.50
Turnaround. Order placed February 22, shipped UPS ground service February 29, arrived March 4.
Packaging. Sturdy corrugated cardboard

box padded with bubble wrap, prints placed in glassine envelopes. The 8x10s were in an order envelope, and the canvas print sandwiched between corrugated cardboard flats. All well protected.
Quality. Sample prints are identified by type, paper and ink on the backside in clear handwriting. The giclée prints on Hahnemühle Photo Rag had a velvety feel, and the B&W version was still slightly warm-toned, likely due to the combination of the

paper and the Ultrachrome Inks. Shadows and midtones were a bit richer than the original. The machine prints looked fairly standard and true to the original. The sepia canvas print (about 12.75x11 inches with a 7.5x5-inch image area) held surprising detail in the trees and water reflections, and even in the subtle ripples in the water. The Ilford fiber-based silver gelatin print looked and felt as you might expect, with rich, deep blacks, sharp detail and definitely darker in the sky and shadows than the original. The custom digital RC print was the most impressive of the lot. The printmaster had noticeably improved the file, bringing out fine detail in trees and shadows, better defining muddy areas and bringing up the tone of the building on the right to make it pop.

MPIX

A division of Miller’s Professional Imaging, Mpix provides easy online ordering for pros, and requires no credit application as Miller’s does. Mpix offers a range of specialty and press products and papers, in addition to forums and photo-sharing galleries. I ordered 8x12 prints with a pearlescent finish on Kodak Professional Endura Metallic paper.

Account setup. Easy as joining any consumer online photo sharing site, requiring only your name, e-mail address and a password.

Ordering. A simple create-an-album setup. Create an album of your images, then order prints of selected images. You can request only one kind of paper per order, but with a variety of optional frames and finishing services. You can crop images directly in the ordering interface and request color correction services. Go to Help > FAQs for info on file formatting and technical answers or to request an ICC profile. Under Tips for great images, you can download some questionable advice in a document called “Simple Color Management Techniques,” which suggests you adjust

your monitor to match your print order.

Customer service. E-mail contact only. There's no phone number for personal service. I e-mailed a question about color correction and got a response within 5 minutes.

My originals. An album of 3,872x2,592-pixel color JPEG files at 300ppi. The album upload interface was a little quirky with Firefox, better with the File Browse option.

Costs. 8x12 prints at \$3.99 each, shipping \$4.95.

Turnaround. Order placed February 25, shipped priority mail on the 26th, arrived on the 28th.

Packaging. Flat cardboard box, prints in glassine envelopes, sealed with plastic to a corrugated cardboard sheet and cushioned with packing foam. Very well protected.

Quality. The pearlescent metallic prints brought out a vivid color that practically radiated like an RGB display. Blacks were super rich. Yellows were particularly pumped up. Medium-brown skin tone became a warm coppery brown, and a pale pink complexion gained color as well but was not overly yellow. Specular highlights and metallic subjects gleamed. In some areas the shadows went dark enough to obscure some color and detail.

BWC PHOTO IMAGING

This full-service digital lab also provides visual communication and marketing products. BWC offers creative services and products that most labs don't, like trade show exhibits, design services, and store merchandising decor. Of the three lab Web sites I tried, BWC's was the least intuitive. Customer service indicated that site revamping was going on. Some tabs were still in development, including Price Book. There's a host of products and services under Photo Lab Services, where I found Photo Digital Printing. But there is no one

list of products, just e-mail links to a specialist in the department.

Account setup. I could order without setting up an account. To get an account, you fill out an application. I called to have mine e-mailed to me. The Customer Access account tracking feature was being revamped at press time and was not available.

Ordering. I should have used the simple browser-interface E-ZPics option, but I went directly to Send Us A File and tried to use the ROES ordering system that many pros use. ROES populated my desktop with many windows, some convoluted with the text overlapping until I enlarged them. I found the Welcome to ROES window at the bottom of the stack, and from there I could figure out the ordering.

As an individual making a first-time order of a few prints, this interface seemed overly complex; a studio that orders specific sets of print types and sizes would benefit more. Unlike the Mpix album setup, your files don't go through the upload process until you've placed the order. I liked that you could have your logo added to the image, but I didn't try this option. I ordered a set of Signature Portraits on Fujicolor Crystal Archive Pearl Paper with the same images from my Mpix order.

Customer service. My e-mail to digital-printing@bwc.net was bounced back to my Yahoo account. I e-mailed info@bwc.net and

received a response within 15 minutes. There's no customer service or help tab. I found phone numbers and a customer service description under the About Us tab. I called the 1-800 number, asked a question about metallic and pearl prints and got a clear answer.

Costs. 8x12 prints \$5.57 each, pearl adds 16 percent to the base price of \$4.80; no shipping charge.

Turnaround: Order placed February 25, shipped UPS ground commercial on the 27th, arrived on the 29th.

Packaging. UPS box, prints in a glassine sleeve with thin cardboard backing tucked into another plastic sleeve, wrapped in brown craft paper. Well protected.

Quality. The color in the Fujicolor prints was much truer to the original than were the Kodak pearlescent metallics. The colors were vivid but more natural, and without the punch of a boost in yellow. The shadows were not as dark as in the Mpix metallics, and showed more detail. As the BWC rep explained when I called, the Fujicolor Pearl finish is recommended for portraits because it's truer to skin tones, while Kodak's metallic paper, which they also offer, is recommended for landscapes and edgier images.

It only takes a modest budget and a little time to be sure that a new product and its provider will complement the rest of your offerings and be an asset to your studio. Take a look at the field and make your pick. ■

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