Welcome to the Digital Tech Tips Column by CSI Rentals

Attention Digital Techs, Photographers and Assistants you are all welcome
To share your capture and edit experience, tips, articles and comments.

_____

Published in Resource Magazine, April 2009

TECH, EQ & FLOW: Developing a Proper Digital Workflow
By Ryan Morris, CSI Rentals Digital Tech

When starting any Digital Tech job, the most important thing to know is the application of the desired image. Despite what you might think, the client you are working for does not necessarily want the highest resolution image you can produce, or even RAW files for that matter. Some jobs may require you to just drop a card into a desired folder for each shot, while other gigs will require you to use specialized applications and perform color correction, curve adjustments, cropping, sharpening, masking, minor retouching, and processing of desired file formats and sizes.

This article will give you a basic guideline to get you started on any potential job in an organized manner, and teach you how to preserve the original files and present the final product in a cohesive and straight-forward fashion.

Pre-Pro: Be Prepared
Before you even get on set you should make sure you have the proper tools. If possible, always test out all the equipment to make sure it's communicating and has all the latest updates. If testing is not possible due to rental or personal restrictions, bring your own gear. You never know what you might be walking into and what is or isn't available from the client or location. Always make sure you have the latest software, USB or FW cables, card readers, batteries, and cards. Chances are the photographer will not forget the camera, but everything else is fair game.

Step 1: Know the Product
The first step is always the hardest. Even though it's not your camera, take it away from the photographer. He is probably used to doing things his own way, but you have to make sure you know his way as well. You have plenty of time to set up while everyone else is working on the subject of the shoot.

Step 2: Camera
Make sure the camera is clean from dust on the lens and on the sensor. Set the desired format, whether it is S-M-L-RAW or a mix. Note the Program Mode: P-Av-Tv-M. Set the appropriate color temperature for the key light. Note the focusing settings, coverage, drive, and metering. Any custom functions can be reset unless specified by the image-maker. Keep in mind that some people can be annoyed by the image popping up on the LCD during shooting, and remember that clearing the settings will undo any parameters you have already set. Note the ambient conditions. Will the photographer be shooting into the light? De-saturation is usually caused by flair.

Step 3: Computer

A: To Card
Now it's time to set up the computer. If you're shooting to card, "Drag and Drop" will be your motto. This will prevent you from deleting any files before they are downloaded. It's important that you set up a workspace folder at this time as well as one to two back-ups for use while shooting.
B: To Computer
If you are working tethered, an automated system will get you started by selecting a destination folder in the preferences or tools drop-down in the programs menu. This will also be followed by a naming and numbering system to keep track of images as they come in.

Step 4: Capture
Once images have been taken from camera to computer, checks and balances begin. The shoot is progressing and changing as more images flood the system, but it is your job to look back and decide with your client when you have all your bases covered and are able to move on. Every image should be fixed and checked via Cc, exposure, focus, and process. Specifically:
Cc: After you have set-up a destination for your files as well as a space for backing up, you will need to take an exposure for the current lighting environment with a quick proof card. Color balance for your machine using the eye dropper in your curves/levels/CC menu and save the settings for future exposures.
Exposure: Next, check out the histogram and make sure you have full coverage from black with detail to white with detail. In some cases you may have to stretch the curve placing your black and white manually at the end of a visible gamut. The important part is that you have peaks and valleys, or "Mountains in the Middle," of the exposure data.

Focus: This is key if you're shooting with natural light, and focus is one of the most overlooked duties of a digital tech. I recommend when working with 35mm digital not to shoot slower than 1/60sec, and not slower than 1/125sec when using medium format. Blow the image up to 100% using eye and highlights to check the tact of the image. Most cameras have a tendency to back focus, especially on auto settings.

Process: While you are working, it's always good to process small jpegs to allow for quick editing at the end of the shoot. This will allow you to make contact sheets for print, compare images, and choose selects without slowing down your computer with large image formats.

Step 5: Who is your client?
Always remember that on a shoot, that the photographer you are working for is your first and only client. Any input you have is for his /her ears only. The stylists, creatives, producers, and models are not a priority. You should only cater to their needs when requested to do so by the photographer. It is digital dogma that the photographer gets the first look at images before they are presented to his client. Follow this—it will save you from having too many chefs in the kitchen!

Step 6: Back-Up
Back-up, back-up, back-up! I recommend three copies of everything you are working on so that no image gets misplaced or corrupted. The easiest way to check if a back-up is complete is to (Command + I) it, and make sure the files are of an equivalent size and number. Images often get corrupted when they are transferred while other tasks are being performed. The only way to overcome this is with more RAM and an organized back-up system through programs, external, and internal hard drives. If you have nothing to do you should be backing up. Trust me!

Step 7: Editing
A rough edit should always be done on set, preferably after every shot, to establish the direction that the creative process is heading and to identify any problems before it's too late to recreate a desired effect. If low-resolution jpegs have been batched, this job will be more efficient, allowing you to edit faster. Prints and proofs are the optimum way to edit because they free up computer space and give your client options and comparisons in an analog format. Create a folder to separate the selects so you can view the story as a whole when working on larger projects.

Step 8: Delivery
As a Digital Tech and the photographer's right-hand man, you are expected to be the first on set everyday as well as the last to leave. If a camera doesn't work it could cost the shoot. As the person responsible for the camera and the images it produces, your assistance is vital. For this reason you should expect to get paid well, but expect to work after the set has broken to package the final product. Keep it free from dust and make sure it's tack sharp, color corrected, and sized to

the clients standards. If you complete this goal and are able to communicate with a client outlining a time frame and negotiating delivery criteria, you will not only have a happy customer, but one who will come back to you again and again.

Please forward comments to ryan@csirentals.com