How to correct pictures for photo gifts automatically

PERFECTLY CLEAR PHOTOS

by Helen Wilson-Cremer

No matter which photo gift producer we talk to there is one thing they all agree on: the key to a great looking photo gift is simply a great looking photo. What is more, we repeatedly hear that customers expect their photo products to look as good as the images they remember in their memories. That's why image correction has become imperative for anyone in the photo business. The ideal automatic image correction solution also needs to run well on different printer models and produce a consistent quality no matter what the substrate as well as offering the flexibility to be turned off if necessary. The Canadian based company Athentech Imaging offers all of this with its patented Perfectly Clear image correction technology. We interviewed two European photo gift companies using this technology to find out how it has helped them overcome their challenges.

Roy Wijmans is CTO of MyPhotoFun based in Almere, the Netherlands. The company serves eight European countries with a complete variety of picture products, including canvas prints, business cards and posters which they print using Xerox iGen 4 high-speed digital presses. Not only do they serve the memory-making mom, but also professional photographers with a critical eye for high quality.

To ensure that their customers receive the highest quality image, MyPhotoFun needed an image correction solution that would enable them to accurately and repeatedly reproduce the real color that customers remembered from the original scene, and do so quickly. "The default setting on our system is to have Perfectly Clear on since our customers like the results," Wijmans told us. "We have been using Perfectly Clear on our Xerox iGen 4 printers for two years and find it extremely reliable."

"We originally used the Xerox image correction technology that was integrated into the printer," added Wijmans. "However, this correction was always on, whether we wanted it or not. We were looking for a technology that could be integrated into the workflow instead of the printer to give us more flexibility. Perfectly Clear provided us with the flexibility we needed."

Obviously the flexibility of the solution and the quality of the final print was important to Wijmans, but not the sole factor influencing his decision to choose Perfectly Clear. "We tried and tested a variety of image enhancing software solutions before making our decision. After all, it was the speed of the correction that impressed me," Wijmans commented. "When you have high volumes of photos to correct you need a solution that gets the job done instantly – on average Perfectly Clear takes a mere 4 seconds to correct the photo."

Uniformity on all printers

Our next interview was with Stef De Corte, CEO of ExtraFilm based in Wetteren, Belgium. The company produces photo gifts for online customers in 13 European countries. ExtraFilm uses Hewlett-Packard Indigo digital presses, Imaging Solutions' Fastprint photo printers and Canon large format printers. Extrafilm's primary customer is the 35 year old mom with children under 12 who has neither a fancy camera nor the time for photo editing but who wants her memories preserved to a high standard every time. Consequently, ExtraFilm's top priority is to produce top quality images. "We were looking for a robust automatic correction that would give us uniformity with all of our different printers," De Corte commented. "We also wanted to achieve automatically the same high level of image quality on all of our products. A paper product like a photo book or a calendar absorbs and reflects the ink differently than a mug or a mouse pad, so we required software that would allow us to set up the varying parameters that each different product required. Our customers expect the same quality of their image whether they order it on a T-shirt or on a canvas print. Perfectly Clear achieves this," Stef De Corte told us.

No time consuming manual checks

For ExtraFilm, eliminating time consuming manual checks was a huge advantage. "With our high volume production, it is impossible to manually check and correct every photo. Our default setting uses Perfectly Clear to correct all photos before they are sent to the lab for production, which speeds up the process. Once it is running there is no need for us to change anything and it is very reliable so we no longer have to do any manual checks, which is a great bonus. Perfectly Clear saves us time which in effect saves us money."

Easy integration

MyPhotoFun uses the Microsoft .NET framework and the very small, 200 KB, Perfectly Clear library (.dll) can be integrated very easily into practically any workflow. Wijmans noted: "We set it up ourselves with a little telephone support from Athentech. Later, they arrived in our facility to do some fine tuning to the system. They like to bring out new versions and get feedback from us. Once it is set up, Perfectly Clear is very efficient and we haven't had any problems with it."

Extra Film's canvas production department

Original image and the result after processing with Athentech's patented Perfectly Clear image correction technology.

ExtraFilm needed a solution that would be easy to integrate into all of their varying platforms and architecture. Stef De Corte explained "Perfectly Clear is not a 'black box' that you take or leave, it can be finely tuned. Integration was easy, but fine tuning was time consuming. Each of our products was tested and underwent quality control screening. After this, the parameters and settings were tweaked until we were satisfied. Athentech President, Brad Malcolm, flew in from Canada and worked closely with the whole team to achieve the high standards we wanted and showed us all of the possibilities. The service and training provided by Athentech was very professional and the results were extremely pleasing. We have a special team devoted to the quality of the images. Not only do they have a sharp eye for color, they also take into account customer preferences. Surveys and tests are carried out with selected customers to ensure that we are producing exactly what they want. Customers noticed straight away that their photos were much better on the products than before."

ExtraFilm initially used Perfectly Clear only with their photobooks, calendars and cards, but now use it for the production of all products to ensure consistent image quality throughout the whole range. De Corte noted that "Recently, a Belgian magazine rated ExtraFilm best in quality for photo products, which confirms that our decision to use Perfectly Clear on all products was the right decision."

Solving special problems

"We were noticing that photos printed on our HP Indigos were coming out over-saturated, especially the skin tones in the faces," De Corte continued. "The faces were very red, and we were getting customer complaints and returns, costing us money. The same photo printed on silver halide did not show the same problems. We spoke to Athentech about the problem and were delighted when they created a specific and unique Perfectly Clear preset for our printers. The result is a brighter photo with color vibrancy, but most important, with faces that are not too red. We are very happy with the results. It has reduced our returns, and cost."

MyPhotoFun reported similar issues: "As much as we love the iGen, there are two challenges,"

said Roy Wijmans. "First, skin tones are printed much too saturated, creating undesirable red faces. Second, blue skies print with a lot of noise. We were very excited to test a new version of Perfectly Clear tweaked to overcome this over saturation in the faces. And it works – faces are of much more desirable color now, satisfying both our high image quality standards and our customers. Athentech also showed us some new ideas they have for removing the noise in the sky created by the iGen. We are currently testing this and are excited to work with them on this project."

Fair licensing and value for money

As every CEO, ExtraFilm's Stef De Corte was also looking for good value for money. "The price of the license depends on how much output you have and what corrections you would like," he told us. "We found the pricing very fair and feel we get good value for money."

MyPhotoFun's Roy Wijmans agreed: "In this business, image enhancement is vital because not everyone is a master photographer, but almost everyone wants her or his photo products to be as brilliant as the pictures in their memories. If they remember the ocean on holiday as being a beautiful, clear, and blue they expect to

see this in their photo products. One thing is for sure: with Perfectly Clear we can achieve the results our customers expect."

Perfectly Clear applies 12 patented and patent pending processes in a very precise and rigorous way, replicating how the human eye gathers light and thus overcoming the 15 ways the camera distorts photos. A great photo is defined by color accuracy, perfect exposure and the preservation of color nuances and details. However, no matter whether a camera is expensive or not, it still has its limitations which need to be overcome, such as single aperture. The Perfectly Clear auto correction process applies a comprehensive suite of 12 corrections, yet it is 'smart' enough to only apply the corrections that a particular photo needs.

Both ExtraFilm and MyPhotoFun see the photobook sector growing and sales increasing. Using Perfectly Clear has enabled them achieve the great results their customers expect and they would both definitely recommend Perfectly Clear to any company considering the investment.

The Perfectly Clear patented automatic correction technology from Athentech Imaging is used in over 30 countries, in over 85,000 kiosks, thousands of minilabs, amateur and professional central labs and websites.

Extra Film's CEO Stef De Corte (left) with Production Manager, Peter Heynderycx.