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Digital Photograph Album Software Review

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Abstract

Digital photography's relatively low cost and easy use encourages educators to build Extension image collections, but image retrieval can become difficult as collections grow. Picasa 2, Adobe Photoshop Album 2.0, Corel Photo Album 6, and ACDSee 8 Photo Manager are four popular photo cataloging software products that function to import, view, sort, assign keywords to, and search for image files. This review synthesizes their functionality and efficiency. ACDSee seems to offer more tools than the other products, although Picasa 2 may be sufficient for smaller image collections.

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Images Are Educational Tools

Educators use digital photographs to illustrate concepts and teach effectively. Collecting digital images requires equipment, opportunity, and practice. With today's relative ease and low cost of digital photography, educators may build large image collections. Photo file management is an important task so that pertinent images can be retrieved when needed. This review of ACDSee 8 Photo Manager (ACDSee), Adobe PhotoShop Album 2.0 (Adobe), Corel Photo Album 6 (Corel), and Picasa 2 (Picasa) highlights these products' functions and relative efficiency so readers can better choose one to serve their needs.

Comparing Catalog Software

Photo catalogs or albums are specialized databases that allow for easier organization of photo files. The normal procedure when cataloging photo files is to:

1. Bring photo files into the catalog program with metadata,
2. View and possibly sort photos according to desired purposes,
3. Assign keywords or other text to the photo file
4. Export the database and/or image collections between memory devices, and
5. Search the album for desired photos.

Metadata is information about the image file that is carried with the file automatically. EXIF (Exchangeable Image File Format) metadata includes information gathered and attached in the capture device (e.g., camera). It includes data about the camera and settings during image capture. IPTC (International Press Telecommunications Council) metadata includes keywords, copyright, credit, notes, and more information about the photographer and the image itself. IPTC metadata is input by the photographer or catalog manager.

Over several months I have used each of the reviewed catalog software to create similar albums. The following synopses indicate these products' strengths and weaknesses. I intend neither commercial endorsement nor promotion of any included product.

Picasa 2 Is Free

Picasa 2 is free software intended for the casual photographer. Picasa connects your computer to other computers via the Internet. Because these "peer-to-peer" connections are not necessarily secure, download and installation of Picasa may be blocked by some firewalls or network administrators. After you download and install the program, Picasa scans your entire computer for image files and catalogs their locations. Image thumbnails may be grouped by folder, "tag," or timeline, but true folder structure is not displayed.

Picasa works well for a small collection of photographs, allowing a quick visual scan to find desired photos. Keywords must be assigned to each image individually, making this task more tedious. EXIF metadata and IPTC information of each file may be viewed but not edited. For the price (free), Picasa 2 is a reasonably valuable tool to help organize and find images in a fairly small collection.

Adobe Photoshop Album 2.0 a Surprising Disappointment

Adobe Photoshop Album 2.0 shuns keywords altogether. Instead, Adobe creates a system of user-authored tags, categories, and sub-categories. As your tag list grows, you must scroll up and down to find and assign the appropriate tag, category, or sub-category. Like Picasa, Adobe fails to display true folder structure where images are stored.

Finding a certain folder of photos within Adobe is awkward and inefficient. EXIF information is supported, as is IPTC information, but Adobe doesn't allow any editing of metadata. Exporting selected images is easy, but the database catalog is inseparable from the image itself. The search function is limited to tags, categories, and sub-categories. When images are imported with existing IPTC keywords, they must be assigned as tags so that the image can be retrieved according to those keywords. Overall, Adobe PS Album is an awkward, inefficient program, a disappointment from this otherwise outstanding software producer.

Corel Fails to Sustain Jasc's Efficiency

Corel Photo Album 6 is a slightly changed version of Jasc Paint Shop Photo Album, a very user-friendly program no longer available. Some of Corel's changes are handy, such as the click-and-drag thumbnail resizing tool (also available in the other software reviewed here). Keyword assignment, however, is now less efficient. Adding new keywords in Jasc was a 3-click process; Corel makes it 5-clicks.

The major advantage of Corel over Picasa 2 and Adobe is the display of images' true folder structure. Click on a folder to view thumbnails of images therein. Thumbnails can be sorted and moved by clicking and dragging, allowing adjacent images to be assigned the same keywords in one step. Keywords themselves are organized in a hierarchical, collapsible structure, saving space and scroll time.

You can search for files using keywords, file names, created dates, etc. Images on external media are searchable once cataloged; select the desired image's thumbnail and a popup message prompts you to insert that image's storage media. The entire database may be exported to external memory with or without images; portions of the database cannot be exported separately. EXIF and IPTC information is supported but cannot be edited.

ACDSee Delivers More Useful Tools

ACDSee 8 Photo Manager combines most of the good qualities of Picasa, Adobe, and Corel, plus more. Like Jasc and Corel, ACDSee displays images' true folder storage structure. Thumbnail size is adjustable, and thumbnails may be clicked-and-dragged into different order. Various functions are visible in window panes, and the layout may be customized.

Unlike the other three albums reviewed, ACDSee allows users to assign IPTC keywords and other IPTC information. Even some EXIF information fields are editable. Metadata editing is important should an educator wish to publish photos or share with colleagues. ACDSee databases or selected folders may be exported to a read-only, compressed version or to a text file. External media is easily cataloged. A "Synch Wizard" helps you synchronize folders on your computer with another computer or external memory device. ACDSee supports 50 or more file formats, including RAW image files. For a price similar to Adobe and Corel, ACDSee delivers more high-end functions that educators often use.

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