TECHNOLOGY

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Bits & BYTES

Wayne Palmer

Digital photography revolution happened faster than expected

(Editor's Note: This column marks the Bits & Bytes debut of Wayne Palmer, owner of Palmer Multimedia Imaging. He will cover digital photography and digital imaging in this and future articles.)

If you have been following the developments in photography the last few years, you probably have realized that digital photography is not a fad.

The use of film is diminishing faster than the use of horses when the automobile became available to the masses. Recent headlines report that the only film camera Kodak produces is a single-use camera; Nikon has dropped all but two film cameras; Konica-Minolta has been bought by Sony and dropped out of the camera business entirely; Fuji and Kodak have both closed multiple labs and Kodak doesn't even process its own trademark Kodachrome film any more.

Who would have thought that in a few short years digital imaging would replace film as the way we record our memories? It is amazing how fast the digital revolution has taken place.

Twelve years ago, I had the opportunity to use an early Kodak digital camera at the Rochester Institute of Technology. This camera recorded a whopping 1-megapixel image (1 MP) and cost about $30,000.

Five years later, I had my first digital camera; coincidentally it was a 1 MP Kodak but cost a mere $1,000. Now 6 MP cameras are selling for less than $200 and there are already disposable digitals.

Even though camera specifications are changing as fast as computer specs, your older camera is not automatically obsolete. It will still do the same job it did when you got it.

The MP specification may be the deciding factor for many purchasers, but keep in mind that this should be only one of the specs to consider. A higher MP camera with a cheap lens will not produce as good an image as a camera with a smaller MP and good lens.

What does the MP rating mean? Digital images are made up of tiny little squares called pixels, comparable to grain in film. The more pixels, the more potential detail the image can have. This means sharper enlargements and the ability to make detailed cropped images. But if the final print size is only a 4-inch by six-inch, all those additional pixels may be irrelevant, as they won't be seen. If an 8-inch by 10-inch is the largest print you ever plan to make, a 3 MP camera will suffice.

In future columns, I will be addressing different facets of digital imaging and editing. If you have a topic you would like to read about, feel free to drop me an e-mail at the address at the end of this article.

For those of you still using film, take heart. It still is a great way of recording images and can be a preferred method in some situations. Also for you bargain hunters, the market is flooded with high-end film cameras that can be picked up for a song.

Film cameras, just like horses, will be with us for a long time. I own horses. My daughter waves at them as we drive by them every day.

Palmer may be reached at wayne@palmermultimedia.com.

Techbits

Bar code plus phone equals blog reviews

TOKYO (AP) — Checking out the Internet buzz about a DVD, book or candy while on the go is soon to become as easy as taking a snapshot of the bar code on the product.

Toshiba Corp., a Japanese electronics company that makes DVD players, laptops and nuclear power plants, has developed mobile-phone technology that searches for product reviews on up to 100 Web journals, or blogs, in 10 seconds.

Just use the phone's digital camera to snap a photo of the bar code of a product you're thinking about buying.

The technology can tell if the blog chatter is positive or negative and tallies the count to show if a product is getting rave reviews or being trashed by consumers. That's useful if you're in a store about to buy an item.

The bar-code information is sent wirelessly to a Toshiba server, which gathers data on blogs from the Internet and analyzes them, and then sends a reply back to the cell phone.

Toshiba expects to have information on thousands of products covering just about anything you might buy at a store in Japan — from toys to electronic gadgets to food.

MySpace on the rise

It's popular, but some warn of online danger

By ANICK JESDANUN
AP Internet Writer

NEW YORK — The Internet has a rising star whose name isn't Google.

Just over 2 years old, MySpace now has 2 1/2 times the traffic of Google Inc., and it quickly eclipsed Friendster as the top social-networking site where users build larger and larger circles of friends.

Credit luck and acumen: MySpace learned from predecessors and figured out the right tools to package. And when its founders noticed heavy usage among musicians and fans, MySpace embraced that community with custom features.

"It's like being at a giant music conference 24 hours a day every day," said Greg McIntosh, 27, guitarist for Ann Arbor, Mich.-based Great Lakes Myth Society.

College students, meanwhile, can rate their professors and find classmates or alumni. Others play games, view classified ads, send online party invitations or rate the brave on how "hot" they are.

Sure, none of these features is unique, but what's the point of going elsewhere if your friends are already on MySpace?

"I noticed a lot of my friends talking about it, so I went on it and signed up," said Magda Olszanowski, 24, a University of Toronto senior. "And I've really pressured my friends who don't have it to get it."

Instead of using e-mail and instant messaging, Olszanowski keeps in touch with many friends simply by posting bulletins on her personal MySpace page, known as a profile. There, friends can send her a private message or post a public comment; they can see her photo album or read her Web journal, called a blog.

The free, ad-supported site has gotten so popular among teens — a quarter of its users are registered as minors — that parents, schools and law enforcement officials have taken notice, warning of sexual predators and other dangers.

Big media noticed, too. Last year, News Corp., the media conglomerate controlled by Australian native Rupert Murdoch, bought MySpace's owner for $580 million in cash.

The U.S.-heavy site now wants to expand internationally and on wireless devices, and it is adding such features as video-sharing to become more like a Web portal.

"We want people to stay on MySpace," said Tom Anderson, its president. "We'll give them whatever they might want to do."

The development comes as the leading portal, Yahoo Inc., becomes more like MySpace, starting a social-networking service called 360 and buying content-sharing sites such as Flickr and Del.icio.us.

MySpace was by no means first. In early 2003, Friendster Inc. introduced a system that connects people for networking and dating through existing circles of friends, rather than randomly or by keyword matches alone.

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"MySpace gives you more freedom to express yourself," said Zlatan Stankovic, 21, a sophomore at Hudson Valley Community College in Troy, N.Y. "You can leave different kinds of comments, pictures, movies, stuff like that."

But just a half-year after MySpace launched, it surpassed Friendster in monthly visitors and now ranks 13th among all sites, according to Nielsen/NetRatings. ComScore Media Metrix places it fourth by total page views, two notches above Google.

Compared with rivals', MySpace profiles are more customizable — hence the "my" in MySpace. Users can obtain Web programming code elsewhere to create their own layouts, change background colors or incorporate photos and video stored at other sites. (Friendster, already trailing MySpace in usage, added a similar feature last fall.)

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Brad Greenspan, an early MySpace investor no longer affiliated with the site, said that after observing Friendster, "we just realized that to allow people more personalization and control would give people more attachment to their Web pages."

MySpace profiles are also more accessible. A challenger named Facebook requires an affiliation with a high school or college, while LinkedIn focuses on professionals. Friendster, meanwhile, requires registration before viewing full profiles.

MySpace not only promotes openness, it also adds Anderson as your first friend, immediately connecting you with everyone else.

But ultimately music is what made MySpace special.

McIntosh's band can update fans on new gigs, when sending too many e-mail messages might otherwise appear to be spamming. People who happen to catch a performance can look up the band's MySpace profile and "friend it" when they get home.

Users can easily discover emerging and independent artists and instantly hear their tunes through a built-in music player.

"All you have to do is press 'play,'" said Rob Theakston, 28, Detroit-based music editor for the site AllMusic and a co-worker of McIntosh's.

Other sites, he said, require you to download a file and open up a separate player.

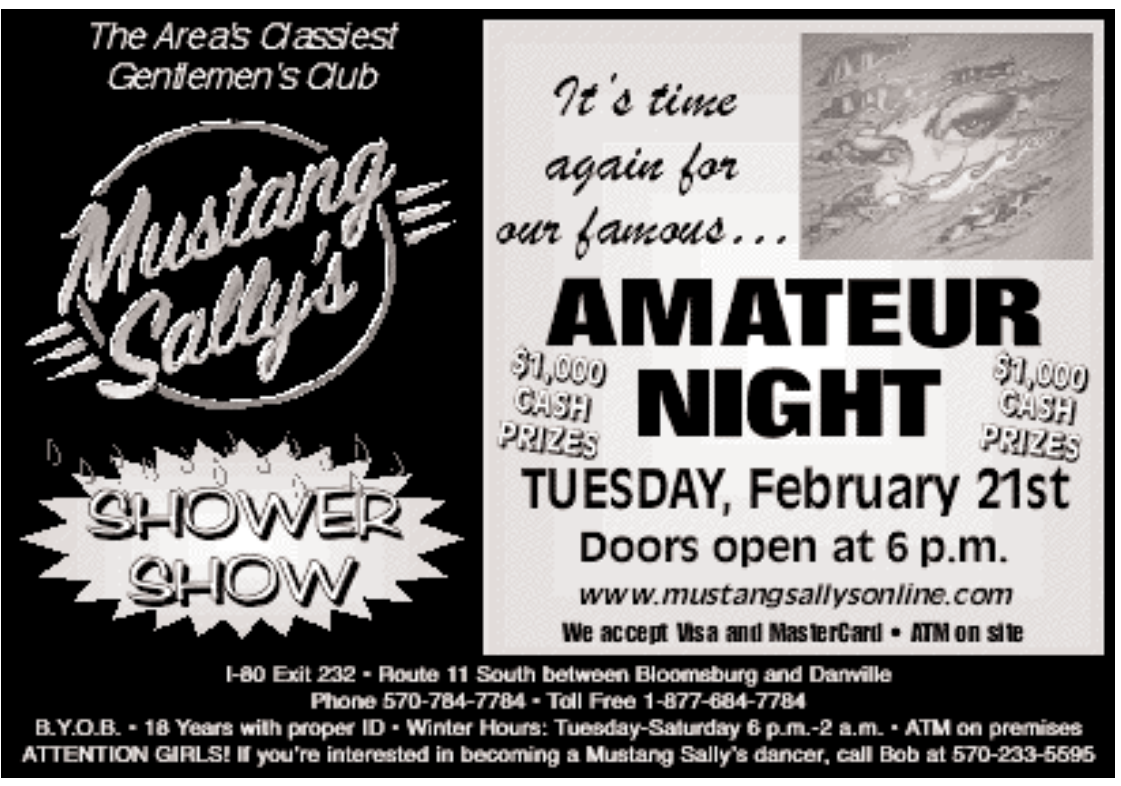
Given the success, MySpace has even started its own recording label, and it is now hoping to bring that magic to filmmakers, and later to comedians and fashion designers, said Chris DeWolfe, MySpace's chief executive.

But success also draws a spotlight on MySpace's darker side.

In Middletown, Conn., police suspect that as many as seven teenage girls recently were fondled or had consensual sex with men they met on MySpace who turned out to be older than they claimed.

In schools across the country, students have been suspended for threatening classmates on MySpace, and in a case outside Pittsburgh attracting the attention of the American Civil Liberties Union, for creating a phony profile under the principal's name and photo.

Parry Aftab, who runs the Internet safety group WiredSafety, said most MySpace teens behave, but a good number are creating online alter egos with which they brag about nonexistent drinking and sexual conquests in a bid to appear cool.

And as parents discover their kids' profiles, Aftab said, they start to worry and tell other parents, who in turn spread the alarm. Parents, in some cases, try to ban their children from MySpace or the Internet completely.

"Just about every parent is aware of it and every kid is on it," Anderson said. "Some kind of reaction (is expected) as MySpace becomes part of the mainstream."