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Focus on Imaging
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Lost in CyberSpace by Jack and Sue Drafahl
Thumbnail database programs for aggressive file retrieval and storage. Archiving, database backup, DVDs and CDs, search engines and much more.

When we first started our digital lab more than 10 years ago, it only took a handful of CDs to archive all of our clients' data. The first time we had to retrieve a client's data, it became very apparent that even with these few CDs, a database was necessary to quickly locate files. We located a program called Image Pals by Ulead Systems, and busily created our first digital thumbnail database.

A small office labelmaker is used to create labels for the edges of the archived CD/DVDs.

TODAY, OUR LAB has more than a thousand CDs and DVDs that store more than a terabyte of information. Thanks to sophisticated thumbnail database software programs, we can locate and retrieve files in just minutes.

We realize that many labs are now expanding their services into the digital arena, so we decided to pass on some tips and techniques that have helped us.

Every lab differs in size and application, so these are only recommendations as a starting point for setting up your own database system. Hopefully these tips will keep your files from getting Lost in CyberSpace.

Thumbnail Database Software
The most important part of your archiving system is going to be the software you use to interface your stored data. When shopping, look for thumbnail database programs that can catalog all types of data files on any type of data storage device.

They should be flexible and have the ability to create various sized thumbnails for different monitor sizes. Each thumbnail should have a place to enter additional data records, and import the EXIF data from digital camera files. They should also have a very flexible search engine that will allow you to quickly search the database. The program should be able to print either thumbnail images or full scale prints for each selection. Stay tuned and at the end of this article we will provide a brief description of four thumbnail database programs that we have tested in our lab.

With new operating systems, file names

Longer File Names
Computer operating systems today allow from 30 to 256 characters in each file's name. This has helped reduce headaches like multiple files labeled "Image01" or "Scan12."

There is no longer a need for devising clever ways to explain a photo in 8 simple characters. Don't get carried away though, just because you have the ability to use longer file names. You can still use abbreviations, but be sure the file provides enough information to give a clear idea of the image, without actually looking at it.

Trees and Branches
One of the best ways to really keep you files

can be 30 to 256 characters in length to describe the file. If the longer file names and tree/branches in folders are used, there is no reason a file should get lost.

organized is to use the tree/branch system of file folders. It sometimes becomes really difficult to find a correctly named file when it is mixed in with 4000 other files in a single file folder. Instead, set up a folder with each client's name, then a subfolder with a product ID or job number.

You can then follow this with several more subfolders for the different media types like film scans, flatbed scans or digital camera files. This system will be especially valuable if you import files into your system that have very short file names that can't be renamed.

This is an example of how a tree and branches folder system would be set up for client database systems.

Archive the Data to CD or DVD

We still hear of people who believe they can store all of their data on a hard disk.
Sadly, computer date storage systems are temporary and your data can be lost at a moment's notice. The cost of DVD writers today is less than $300 and a DVD blank is under a buck, which makes permanent data storage very inexpensive.

CD disk program can create labels that will have the CD/DVD volume number.

If you have extremely critical data, we recommend that you archive two sets of data before you delete anything from your main system.

It is very important that you verify the archived data before deleting it from your hard disk. This is done by using the thumbnail database system to catalog each copy of your data. We have an extra computer whose sole responsibility is to check all CDs and DVDs before they go into storage.

When we archive data to CD or DVD, we use the default labeling system which uses the date and time as the volume number. Since time never stands still, each volume number will be unique and each disk will fall directly in numerical order on the shelf. We use an adhesive labeling machine to attach a tag to the edge of each jewel case that identifies its assigned number.
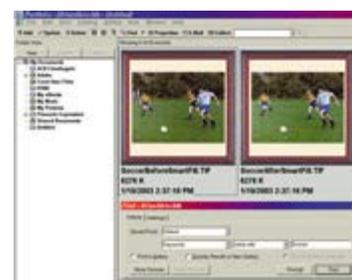
Backup Your Database

Since you would be blind without your database, you should back it up often. Keep copies of it on a CD or another computer within your network system. We have a second drive on our main system that mimics the data drive where client files and the thumbnail database are stored. We found that using a file synchronizer is the fastest and most accurate way to accomplish this task.

Search Engines

One of the benefits of the Internet is that everyone is learning how to use a search engine. Even so, make sure that you understand how it works, all the way down to its advanced techniques.

Some of the newer search engines even have the ability to search by color or shape in a photo. Keep in mind that the file finder that comes with your operating system can also do a search into your database from outside the program.

Don't assume that if the search engine doesn't find the file that it isn't there. Many times it is a case of the search engine being used improperly so it skipped over your file.
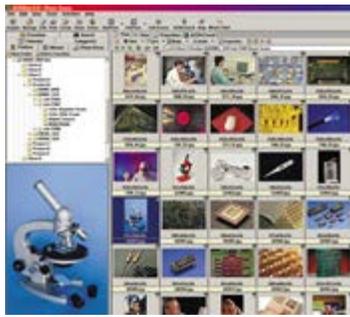

This is the search engine used in the Extensis Portfolio 6 thumbnail database program.

When you first start a search, try an exact spelling of the file. Keep widening your search using fewer characters until you get a hit. If you still cannot find the file, try looking for files created on or around the same date.

You can also look for similar file subjects that may eventually lead you to the correct one. Often it is a detective process where you go from one clue to the next until you find the solution. The game is afoot, Detective Holmes!

Thumbnail Database Programs

Now let's take a look at four programs we have tried in our lab and found to be excellent choices for a thumbnail database. Each features a slightly different approach to the extras in a thumbnail database, but they all include the basic concepts we discussed earlier.

ACD Systems (www.acdsystems.com)
ACD Systems has several programs that we found very useful for image management. ACDSee 5.0 looks and works like Windows Explorer, except that you have more control over the size and configuration of the displayed thumbnails. A toolbar at the top allows you to print, manipulate, and create slide shows as well as Web pages from your thumbnail database.

ACD mPower Tools is an incredible set of tools that work inside your file manager to expand your control over each image. When you right click on any file in the database, a small thumbnail of the image appears with tools for conversion, rotation, printing, sizing and a dozen other options. This speeds up the workflow considerably.

ACDSee 5.0 database program with thumbnails on right and tree/branch system of folders on left. Selected thumbnail is previewed below folder menu.

Cerious Software, Inc. (www.cerious.com)
Cerious Software makes Thumbs Plus, a database program based on the Windows Explorer format. It features thumbnails on the right, folder/files control on the left, and multiple icons in the top toolbar.

The program allows you to conveniently print, retrieve, catalog, sort, search, create slide shows, edit, and create thumbnail Web pages. The search engine even allows you to search the thumbnails by color or shape of the image. The program also has full control over fonts, both in the file/folder section as well as the thumbnail database section.

Cerious Software uses a very unusual type of search engine that can also look for images with similar color or shapes in addition to the standard search features.

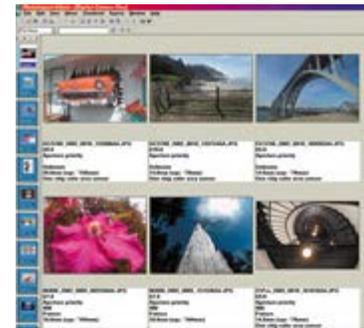**Extensis, Inc.** (www.extensis.com)
Extensis features Profolio 6.0 allows you to easily organize your images, find them quickly and distribute them via e-mail, CD or the Web. It installs itself as a stand-alone program and as part of your file manager.

Extentsis Portfolio 6.0 thumbnail program uses an Explorer-type folder menu on the left to collect album information. The cataloged images are then displayed on the right section of the screen.

This allows you to create a thumbnail database from inside Portfolio, or by right-clicking on a file or directory and telling it to insert the database into Portfolio. On the screen, you will see the thumbnail database displayed on the right and the file/folder database listings on the left.

You will find that all the functions you need to apply to your database, are easily located on a toolbar at the top. A new feature is FolderSync that allows you to synchronize the contents of any folder on your computer with your Portfolio catalogs.

Ulead Systems, Inc. (www.ulead.com)
Ulead's PhotoImpact 8 is actually two programs in one. The editor is a full-blown image editor, complete with all the functions normally found in high-end image editors. The editor also is a full interface for Web page design. Unlike the other database programs that resemble Windows Explorer, PhotoImpact Album 8 has its own unique design. The large portion in the center of the screen is reserved for the thumbnail images it collects from your image storage devices.

Ulead PhotoImpact Album can display EXIF digital camera information as well as other image information under each thumbnail display.

Once the images are collected, you can then drag selected image to image-editing program icons on the right side of the screen.

The selected program opens with your file on the screen. You can then edit as needed and it is then updated in the Ulead Album. Albums you have previously viewed are represented by icons on the left side of the screen, ready for reuse.

Ulead PhotoImpact 8 Album program includes a thumbnail data menu that includes EXIF digital camera information and additional information entered by the user.

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