

January 23, 2009

Get Organized: Focus your photo collection

Whether digital or print, start with a good filing system

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SPECIAL TO THE P-I

Everyone treasures photos. They remind us of happy times with family and friends. They are one of those items that people often mention they would grab if they had to evacuate their homes quickly and had only a few minutes to gather their most prized possessions.

After all, we can replace the "stuff," right? Photos and memorabilia often are irreplaceable either because you don't have the negatives or the pictures are not in digital format. My question is: If your photos are so precious, why don't you make the time to organize them in a way that you could access them quickly, should there be a reason for you to leave your home with little notice?

It's easy and not as time consuming as you would think: If you have a good system in place, you can maintain it as you add new photos, whether print or digital.

Regardless of how you choose to organize your printed photos, there are three things you should do with each one:

- 1. Make a decision:** Do you really need to keep eight slightly different versions of the same picture?
- 2. Label it:** If it's important enough to keep, it deserves a label and a date, even if it's a photo someone gave you, instead of one you took. A few seconds to label now will save a lot of time later when you're trying to remember when the photo was taken or who was in the photo.
- 3. Store it:** If you're not going to put a photo directly into a photo album or scrapbook, store it temporarily in a photo organizing box. Ensure that the box is acid-free and, if possible, lignin-free. This will keep your photos from turning yellow or discoloring if left in the box for a number of years.



zoom

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With digital photos, there are four steps you need to take *before* you determine how you will organize them on your computer:

1. Download: Don't leave your photos stored on the camera or a memory card. What happens when the camera breaks or you lose the memory card? Get in the habit of downloading often, not just when the memory is full.

2. Make a decision: Just because they are digital and not taking up physical space doesn't mean you need to keep every picture. After you've downloaded them, take a few minutes to look through them and eliminate those that are blurry or those you wouldn't want to share with your best friend.

3. Label it: When you download photos, most utilities will give you the option of downloading all of the photos to one location or selecting specific pictures. You can download and label your pictures at the same time. Select those photos from a specific event or of a person and label the folder you create to download them to with the name of the event and date, or person's name and date. Now each picture should contain the label that you designated for the folder with an incremental numbering system applied to each. By not downloading them all to the same folder without a label, you are saving yourself a lot of time from having to separate the photos later and move them to organize them into folders that are more descriptive.

4. Back it up: Don't take risks by not backing up your computer. Storing photos on a memory card also is not a great backup system if you misplace or lose the card. I recommend you back up your computer to a location outside of your home, rather than to DVDs or memory sticks. Important files and photos saved to one of these two locations doesn't do a lot of good if there is a fire and the backup medium is in your house with the computer. There are two solutions I prefer: Carbonite or Mozy. Carbonite's Web site states that "43% of computer users lose irreplaceable files, including photos." Don't be one of their statistics. \$49.95 a year for unlimited space at Carbonite will buy you peace of mind. Mozy offers a monthly plan for \$4.95 for unlimited space. (carbonite.com or mozy.com)

Now that you've completed your up-front prep work, you're already half-way there. See how easy that was? Just by completing these few simple things on an ongoing basis, you've begun the creation of your photo-organizing systems.

Let's touch on a couple of ways to organize your printed photos:

1. Albums or scrapbooks: Be sure they are acid free to protect photos long-term. You can organize in chronological order or make an album per family member.

2. Photo boxes: Look for those that come with dividers so you can divide your pictures by event, person or category. Some also come with envelopes to store them in, inside the box.

Having completed the first few steps and with the appropriate supplies on hand, it's a nice project for one of those wintery days when you lose power and are stuck at home.

There are many ways to organize your photos on the computer. Here are a few steps to assist you:

1. Dedicate a computer folder to pictures.



The screen shot you see is from my computer and, yes, this is how I organize my photos. There probably are four folders that are not obvious: "6430" and "21322" are photos of our house and previous home, "For Sale" is used for temporarily storing photos for items sold on Craigslist or eBay, and "NAPO" is an association I belong to.

2. Determine if the photos are of a person, place, thing or event.
3. Create a folder for each main category.
4. Create a subfolder for photos within a category, such as one folder for each vacation you take.

I've expanded my "vacations" folder by year, then by month, place and the people I traveled with. Using these consistent naming conventions, I keep my photos grouped in chronological order by year.

5. Use consistent naming conventions when naming folders and photos.

There is no right or wrong method to organize your print or digital photos; what is important is that you have a system that works for you that you can easily maintain and add to on a regular basis.

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