

SHOW US YOUR TRUE



COLORS

Achieve accurate online color

Customers will expect to see perfect color online by the year 2002, according to analysts at Forrester Research. Catalogers who are finally feeling comfortable with computer-to-plate and digital proofs, are now facing the daunting task of color perfection on the Internet.

The excitement of having the ability to buy something online has evidently worn off and online shoppers are demanding more from their online shopping experience, including color accuracy.

Why is Online Color Accuracy Important?

A PricewaterhouseCoopers and Media Metrix study shows that 83% of online shoppers distrust the colors on their monitors. 80% stated that accurate color was "very important" when buying clothing, cosmetics, home furnishings and art online. Most importantly, 50% of online shoppers would not buy again from a merchant who delivered an item in a color that was different from what they expected.

Fashion sales have lagged behind other online sales in part because of

this perception. The value of a happy customer, if not the cost of returns, is reason enough to provide accurate color online.

Color Reality Check

Before we discuss available solutions for Web color accuracy, let's do a little color reality check — just how many colors are there anyway?

For the average human eye, there are billions of colors. If you're a computer monitor, you can "see" about 16 million



A side by side comparison shows color variables.

colors — a much better figure than photographic film which is limited to only 10 to 15 thousand colors. The poor printing press pales in comparison with a limited representation of only about 5 to 6 thousand colors. The human visual color space is RGB, also the color space of the Internet, so the *opportunity* for

accurate color is greater online than on print.

For years, catalogers have painstakingly labored to represent products as accurately as technology and the printing press allowed. The task of bringing the same level of perfection to their Web sites presents a formidable challenge to most.

What Affects Color on the Internet?

The most critical variable affecting an online image is the shopper's computer monitor. Monitor displays vary not only from model to model, but also from unit to unit. The age of a monitor, display settings and other variables (such as lighting, ambience, etc.) can affect the displayed image. The features of a computer's video (graphics) card can also greatly influence the quality of the color displayed on a monitor.

Finally, there's the operating system. Macs have a significantly brighter display than PC Windows systems. If you've visited a Web site that seems uncomfortably dark, you can fairly assume that an operator, unaware of the difference, created it on a Mac. 95% of online shoppers will view catalogers' products on a Windows PC.

What Can a Cataloger Do?

Prepare to capture images digitally — and *specifically* for non-print use. The days of re-purposing print images for other media are over. As the Internet continues to mature, images on the Web will present unique opportunities such as virtual reality, 3D renderings, multi-color options and detail zooming. Good digital captures provide more color information than analog photographs. Start with as much color information as possible.

Your photography, monitors, output devices all should be closely calibrated to lessen variables during the production process. Conversion from a Mac environment (traditionally used by creatives and prepress) to the Web must take brightness differences into account.

Finally, you should consider investing in a Web image color correction solution to lessen or eliminate color variables. Two established options are Imation's Verifi Accurate Web Color and E-Color's True Internet Color.

Let's explore the investment — monetary and psychological — that need to be made with these color improvement options.

The Shopper's Perspective

When a shopper first enters a site using one of these color solution, the shopper is asked to go through a simple and fast four-to-seven step process to capture important display information such as brightness, contrast, gamma levels and white point of their monitor. This information is used to create a unique user monitor profile that is then saved as a cookie and stored in the shopper's computer. When that shopper visits other Web sites using the same color solution, the unique profile is recognized and the color mages are adjusted, displaying them in the most accurate manner possible for that monitor.

The Verifi technology also alerts shoppers when their monitor characteristics

have changed over time. Cleverly using their logo, this icon can change from a bright color (current) to pastel (needs to be refreshed) to gray (not working) reminding shoppers to "refresh" their color profiles.



A simple step-by-step process can help viewers control color differences in computer monitors.

There is no cost to the online shopper for using the Verifi or E-Color solutions other than the investment of time.

The Cataloger's Perspective

Although both solutions are similar there are some significant differences. Verifi uses a scalable enterprise, server-based Web application housed at the cataloger's location of choice. Images are dynamically color corrected and, based on company estimates, there are approximately 1.4 million possible color output combinations. Currently, E-Color's True Internet Color solution is based on an ASP model with the images housed and corrected at a remote E-Color server. The company recently announced a new product called Enterprise Imager, available in the fall, which will offer their traditional correction software within a scalable enterprise application.

The cost to implement these solutions can vary significantly but they start at around \$2000 a month with overall costs based on the number of images going through the correction process.

Are We There Yet?

Many catalogers, business-to-business companies and online storefronts, such as Boomingdales.com, Dermablend.com (a division of L'Oreal), LorealParisUSA.com (Haircare section), PointCloud.com (3D, zooming technology), Home Depot's NationalBlindsandWallpaper.com, Visualize.com, Workbook.com (Portfolios section), Bluebolt.com, DesignerOutlet.com and VenusEdge.com are already using either the Verifi or E-Color solution while many others are evaluating what solution is best for their specific need.

There is no question that accurate color on the Internet is both desirable and achievable.

For More Info

The following companies can help catalogers improve their Web sites' color quality:

- **Verifi:** www.verifi.net
- **E-Color:** www.ecolor.com
- **Imation:** www.imation.com
- **Pantone:**
www.therightcolor.com or
www.pantone.com
- **International Color Consortium:** www.color.org
- **Apple:** www.colorsync.com or
www.apple.com
- **www.vischeck.com:** to check how your site looks to a color-blind person.

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