

Creative Point of View

Photoshop from the creative to the practical

■ BY KATRIN EISMANN

Building a Digital Disaster Kit

After Hurricane Katrina, it was the photographs that people looked for and clung to amid the mud and destruction. Just as essential as packing batteries, water, and nonperishable foods, creating a digital preparedness kit can save you and your family immeasurable aggravation and trouble.

A few years ago, I watched a TV news report about floods that devastated a neighborhood near Los Angeles and as the camera crew neared a family, the interviewer asked, “Did you have a chance to save anything?” The woman sobbed, “The family photos are gone—the wedding pictures, the kids, the photos of the grandkids—all gone.” Then later, I watched a news report on the fires that swept through Los Alamos, New Mexico, and the news team interviewed a couple who had lived in the same home for 30 years. When asked whether they had been able to save anything, they replied, “All we took were the photographs.”

In all of these situations, the first item people mentioned or sought was their photographs: objects without any great financial value, but with tremendous personal value.

Being prepared

My husband, John, and I lived in Los Angeles for three years with the constant threat of “the big one.” And as have many others, we witnessed the attack on the World Trade Center towers in 2001, the blackout last summer, and more recently, we were riveted to the TV news as the devastation of Hurricane Katrina worsened with each foot of rising water. The harsh reality of these events motivated us to update our personal disaster plans and survival kits, which include food, water, clothing, cash, medical supplies, batteries, and a crank-powered AM/FM radio. Additionally, I made photocopies of our important papers: passports, car and home titles, insurance and bank accounts, and birth and wedding certificates.

While we were working on this, I suggested that if we needed to evacuate, I’d grab my PowerBook. John greeted that idea with a skeptical look, “If we have to evacuate, we’ll be leaving quickly and have to travel light.” This comment got me thinking about a digital preparedness kit, which I’ve broken down into five categories, as follows:

Current computer backup—It’s not the computer that’s valuable; it’s the data on it that you’ll miss in the event of a

disaster, so I recommend that you develop a backup routine and stick to it. Three options for performing a backup of your hard disk include:

- A USB or FireWire storage device: This can be as straightforward as copying the contents of your hard drive to an external drive—do this once a week. Grabbing a small hard drive is much easier than carrying a heavy laptop.
- A network backup server or storage device for which the backup can be automated with software such as Dantz Retrospect (www.dantz.com).
- An Internet-based backup service, such as BackJack (www.backjack.com) for Macintosh or iStorage from Iomega (www.iomega.com) for Windows-based computers, both of which are monthly fee services that compress, encrypt, transfer, and synchronize files to a remote server.

Of course, if you don’t have a computer or power, you won’t be able to access the data, but just knowing your personal and business documents are safe is reassuring.

Digital copies of essential paperwork, bank accounts, software serial numbers, and identification papers—As I was photocopying our documents, I wondered how well the copies would weather flooding or fire—obviously not very well. So, I photographed our records and burned two CDs: One is in our disaster kit and the second is with my computer-savvy sister-in-law who lives more than 700 miles away. In the event we need the data, she could easily open the JPEG files and print them or tell me the required information. *Note:* A copy of a passport or driver’s license is no substitute for the real thing, but it can help when you need to replace the documents or verify accounts.

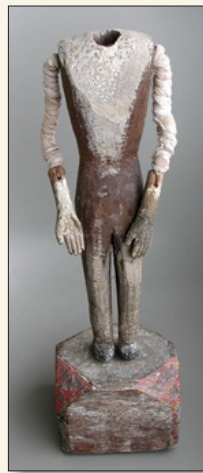
Photographs of valuable and sentimental belongings—If you need to evacuate, you’ll probably only be able to take the few things you can carry or fit into a car. In our case, it would mean leaving behind a lot of valuable artwork and jewelry, and like most folks, we also have items of great sentimental value—



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from childhood toys to our collection of vintage signs and artifacts. We've started photographing both the valuable and the sentimental items in RAW format. Check with your insurance company for information on replacement of valuables.

It's also important to photograph your family members—especially children—at least once a year. If you're separated, having a recent photo is essential.

Backup of photographs—Scan or digitally photograph your most important photos because paper and film are vulnerable to water, mold, and fire. Contemporary digital images also need to be backed up.

When a friend's laptop was stolen, he had more than 1,500 pictures of family and friends on it. Fortunately, over the course of a few years, he had uploaded many of them to Shutterfly.com to have prints made and—you guessed it—he was able to download the photos to his new laptop.

Power, communication, and cameras—In case of an emergency, you may or may not have access to power, phone service, or the Internet, and the need for power is the foundation of maintaining communication. Power alternatives include extra batteries, conversion battery kits, power cords that hook up to a cigarette lighter, solar packs, and manual power generators.

Many of us will rely on cell phones and cell phone networks; however, you might also consider the potential value of "smart phones," such as a BlackBerry, Palm Treo, or Danger Sidekick, that provide email, web browsing, and text messaging via cell phone networks. After a disaster, these services are often up and running faster than phone lines or WiFi networks.

Finally, if you're going to pack a camera, try a smaller (perhaps older) one that's powered with standard AA batteries. Charging dedicated batteries when power is scarce isn't a viable solution. As an inexpensive alternative, consider tossing a disposable film camera into your emergency kit.

In the event of a catastrophe, take care of your family, friends, property, and community. Knowing that you're prepared will let you do just that.

PERSONAL EMERGENCY KIT CHECKLIST

- Food (nonperishable)
- Water
- Clothing
- Cash
- Medical supplies and prescriptions
- Batteries
- Crank- or solar-powered AM/FM radio
- Important papers (as addressed in the article) ■

Katrin Eismann, author of Photoshop Restoration & Retouching and Photoshop Masking & Compositing, and an internationally recognized artist, author, and educator, was recently inducted into the Photoshop Hall of Fame. Check out her website at www.katrineismann.com.