

Why film matters

Harman Technology's **Steven Brierley** discusses why he thinks film is experiencing such a rebirth and reveals the surprising results of his film-users survey

One thing that always seems to surprise people is when they learn that educational facilities still utilise film cameras and darkroom skills. The reason: photography courses understand that the process of making prints, having 36 exposures and not being able to review your images on an LCD screen is a great way to learn the fundamentals of photography. More than anything it makes the student slow down, think and take care of what they're doing. Once an image has been taken, they can't then look at the back and see how it looks. They have to wait until they have gone through the hands-on process of developing the film.

Many of the photographers who have been professionally trained in the past few years will tell you they have some darkroom experience. Darkroom skills are vitally important for a very good reason, and that reason is Photoshop. When you use Photoshop and you have darkroom skills, you intuitively understand what it is you're trying to do. When you're dodging and burning, it makes real sense. Darkroom skills install an instinct. There's another side to it, though. Whole swathes of people are becoming less and less interested in anything digital. They are seeking what they regard as an artisan or 'real' experience. I suppose it can be described in a multitude of ways.

People are seeking an experience that isn't completely dependent upon technology. When someone shoots a film, develops a film and then prints a picture, they feel they've physically created something themselves. However, it can often be the case that when you're shooting digital, it almost feels like the technology is driving the process. A good example perhaps is that most prevalent of devices, the smartphone. We all now have our phones on us wherever we go and many of these devices have a more-than-decent camera that can produce top-notch images. If we want to grab an image, we can. But this is very easy and sits at the opposite end of the scale to film photography.

The fact is, film photography is a challenge. When you set out to shoot film, you don't do it because it's a walk in the park – you do it because it's a challenge.

The survey
Last year at Harman Technology we began to see something unusual in film sales. We'd had some increases in the sale of 120 roll film, which we think was driven by Holga and Lomography. That's not necessarily surprising, as you can now buy these incredibly beautiful cameras for very little money. We also saw an increase in sales of sheet film, which was a bit more surprising. Our

WHAT FIRST ATTRACTED YOU TO USING FILM?

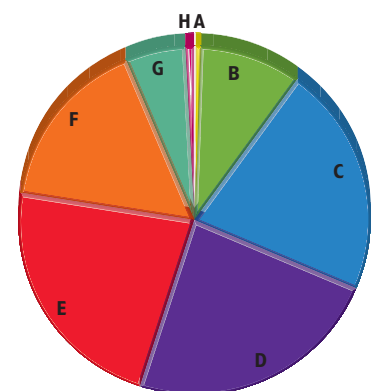
These were the most frequently used words in the answers of the survey's target groups

darkroom depth camera curiosity
aspect **film** self-developing fact
 aesthetic quality **medium format**
beauty natural grain look fun
think before shooting
 image nostalgia *pictures*
 black & white **perfection** analogue
physical style photography
school *process*

How old are you?

Answer options	Response per cent	Response count
A Under 18	0.8	15
B 18-24	9.2	176
C 25-34	21.4	408
D 35-44	23.6	450
E 45-54	22.6	432
F 55-64	16.1	308
G 65-74	5.7	108
H 75 or over	0.6	12

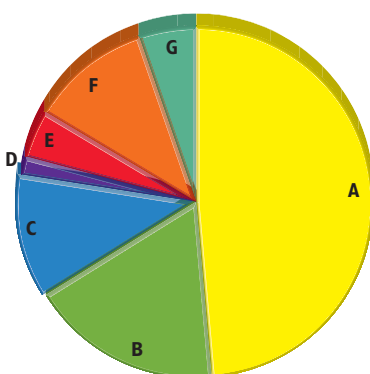
Answered question: 1,909



How do you process your film?

Answer options	Response per cent	Response count
A Process and print myself	48.8	968
B Process myself, scan for upload	17.4	345
C Process myself, scan and print	11.4	226
D Process myself, send to lab	1.7	34
E Lab process and print	4.5	89
F Lab process and scan	11.1	221
G Lab process, print and scan	5.1	102

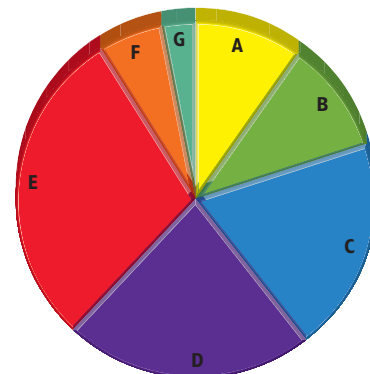
Answered question: 1,985



Where did you learn how to use film?*

Answer options	Response per cent	Response count
A Full-time photography course	16.8	338
B Other photography course	17.5	351
C From a parent or friend	33.6	675
D Self taught, mainly internet	38.4	771
E Self taught, mainly books	50	1004
F Photography club	9.8	197
G Other, please specify		240

Answered question: 2,010
 (*Respondents could choose all options that applied)



35mm film was bumping along as usual – it went up a bit and then it went down a bit. However, around a year ago we saw all formats steadily increasing in sales. Why were these figures increasing? If you're in the industry as I am – and for as long as I have been – you can make all sorts of assumptions, because you think you know all the answers. But then I realised that perhaps this wasn't the best approach. With that in mind, we decided to go right to the source, the customers, and ask them through a survey.

I devised a survey consisting of a series of questions. Usually with these things you have a lot of multiple-choice answers, but I wanted to try something a little different. With some of the answers we left a blank box and asked respondents to write what they felt. We then looked for repeated words and phrases. What that gave us was an emotional response from film users, rather than a bunch of

collated facts. We invited them to describe what it is about film they like (see the word cloud, above).

The survey was conducted in November 2014. We sent it out through Facebook, Twitter, the Analog Photography Users' Group (APUG), UK photo education, Lomo and Holga camera user groups, and we had an Ilford Photo Twitter. In all, we had 2,151 responses. That's a pretty strong response considering it was just a questionnaire. The response-ratio broke down into 713 from the Ilford Facebook, 598 from APUG, 63 from the educational environment, 238 from Lomo, 75 from Holga and 464 from Ilford Twitter.

This survey gave us a great deal of insight into who these film users are, how passionate they are about it and how they're working with it. The most important thing we found was that film is bringing a whole group of new people into the world of photography. In fact,



Steven Brierley is the director of sales and marketing at Harman Technology/Ilford Photo. Harman Technology is an imaging specialist based in Cheshire. The company, which was born from the Ilford company formed by Alfred Harman in 1879, now includes three separate and well-known brands: Ilford Photo, Harman Photo and Kentmere Photographic

they've come in during the past five years (642 of those surveyed – what we refer to as the 'target group' as they represent the increase in film sales), and this was during a period when digital was dominant. These people have chosen film photography.

Most importantly, we're not talking about people who did film years ago, went over to digital and then returned to film for a bit of fun. These are people who have never touched film before. The age groups of these new users were vastly different to what we predicted – they were younger than we'd anticipated. A huge chunk were in their 20s and 30s. So this large group of people who have come into film over the past five years are relatively young. And if these people have been using film for the past three to five years, this is not a fad. They're in it for the long haul. I cannot even begin to tell you how encouraging that is.