

fotosf software

Built using FileMaker Pro, the Mac/PC database solution which makes Access feel inaccessible, FotoSF is a rock-solid ready made management system for photographers who shoot people and sell prints. And more.

THESE have been many dedicated studio management and accounts programs in the past, including at least one written with FileMaker as its runtime engine, but only one appears to have been written after the introduction of internet communications.

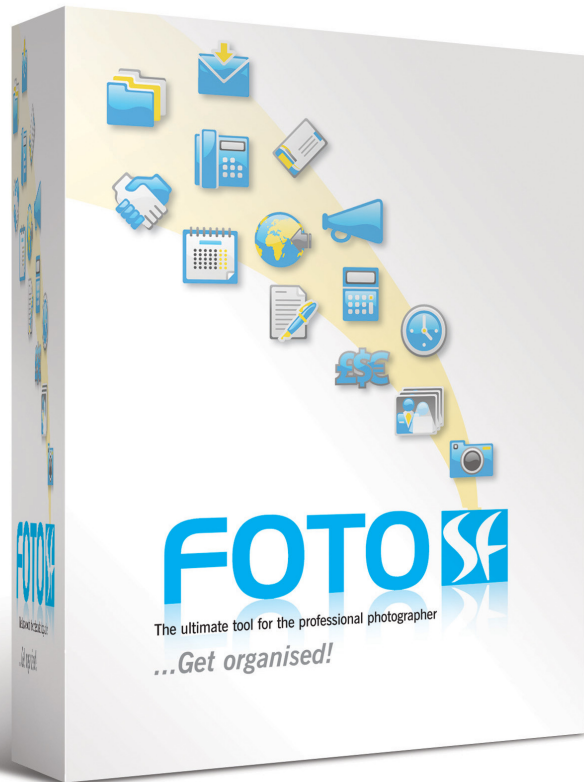
That is SFDigital's FotoSF, which makes full use of the e-mail to keep in touch with the photographer's client base. FileMaker Pro is an application greatly disliked by those who earn their living maintaining PC installations, as it migrates instantly over to the Mac platform (even the installer CD is dual) which generally means losing a troubleshooting contract as the trouble no longer happens. On top of that, FileMaker is extremely easy for the user to customize and manage, again requiring none of regular visits which add to the cost of using the alternatives most IT consultants suggest.

But FileMaker has depths. You can use it very simply, as we at Icon have done for the last twenty years to run our magazine subscription databases. A new database for these takes about two hours to create and thereafter runs for all time. In two decades of using FileMaker, we have never once lost data and we've upgraded all the way from the very first version to the latest OSX Tiger compatible v9.

Somewhere in the middle we bought a 10-user licence at a reasonable price, and actually had six active workstations all sharing a database over the network. Upgrade prices started to get unattractive and we no longer needed that level of input, and we're down to a single user licence now having never paid to keep up the networked version.

The networkable option still exists and means you can have two or three workstations in your studio all able to access the data, check the calendar for bookings, view customer status and orders, and make changes from more than one connected computer.

The 'depths' of FileMaker involve



scripting and setup which is more the province of the expert, and when something as sophisticated as FotoSF is created, it becomes an application in its own right. Admin privileges are set so that it can not be destroyed by the user making changes to a complex set of relational databases.

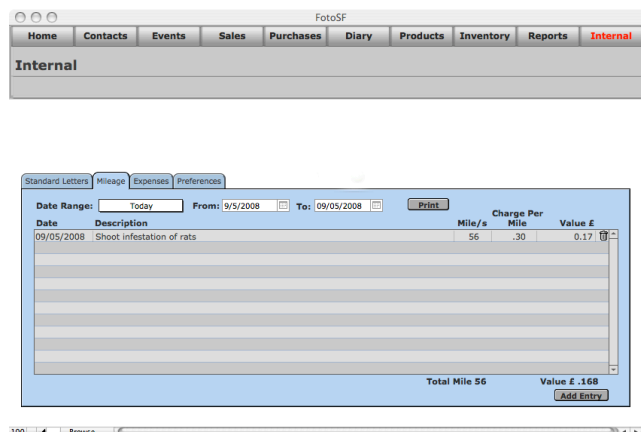
For anyone thinking well, I can buy FileMaker Pro for so much, and write my own management system – sure, you can, but how much is a year or two of your time worth? SFDigital now offers the program with a FileMaker Pro licence meaning you can have a full version of FMP and explore its other potential as you wish.

The downloadable trial is a 'runtime' version, which means FMP is embedded in the file. There is an on-line routine for registration and activation with e-mail responses, necessary to protect FotoSF from hacking or copying. As with all such programs, running a trial is barely practical. You do not know how well FotoSF will perform until you have a data file of substantial size with hundreds of customers, thousands of transactions, months of history. All I can tell you is that FileMaker Pro has proved able to handle tens of thousands of customers and find any one in less time than it takes to blink.

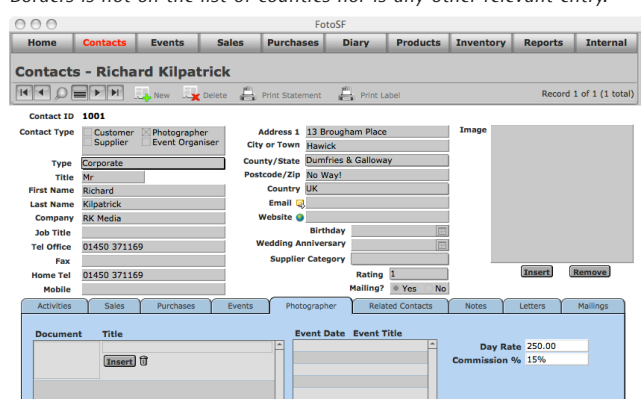
FMP was the first database with the ability to store image files, and to print reports using WYSIWYG layouts – proper typographic design with fonts. Of course any database is expected to do that now, but both the on-screen and print-out layouts of FMP (and FotoSF) belong firmly in the present and are not altered versions of a legacy system.

Consequently, the screens you enter your data on are very clear and comfortable to use. This is important, because you will have to enter all your customers and products systematically just to get started.

You can also do some unusual things like having photo operators and salespeople entered with their day or hourly rates, commission and similar info. This is because SFDigital designed FotoSF



FotoSF is not entirely bug-free – setting up mileage rates is at charge per km, but displays as charge per mile (the same figure); setting up a photographer, using Richard Kilpatrick's info, I found that Scottish Borders is not on the list of counties nor is any other relevant entry.



for large scale events photography where several operators might be working on any day. It is ideal for big studios with a busy calendar, for cruise ship franchise operators, banqueting, sports events – and weddings.

Included in the system is a 'pure magic' method for managing weddings. You can enter the names of as many contacts as you want for any wedding. Best man? Delegated group organiser to help the photographer? Entire bride's family by name? No problem! You can link these to a list of required photos, add contacts for the church and reception, caterers, anything you need. When it's all in the system, FotoSF produces print-outs to take to the wedding which almost run the shoot for you.

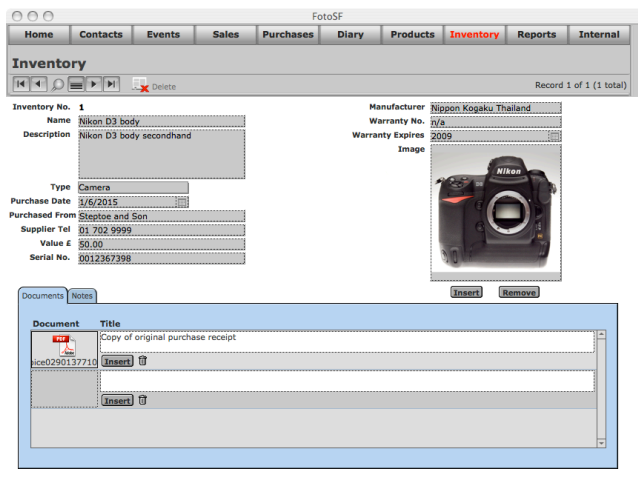
While FotoSF is not an accounting system (not auditable, no nominal ledger or stock control, not fully compliant with HMIRC for VAT returns with EU transactions, etc) it is a good sales and purchase ledger with VAT printouts you can rely on for monthly, quarterly or annual returns. It is intended to log purchases and expenses, and issue sales invoices, statements, reminders and bad debt chasers.

All that's missing is the stuff which very few photographers need unless they are also running a retail shop or have many staff on PAYE. You may be able to use FotoSF for all your self-employed, solo photography book-keeping and just pass the copies of the paperwork to your accountant at the year end. A better solution is to use it with a monthly visit from a book-keeper.

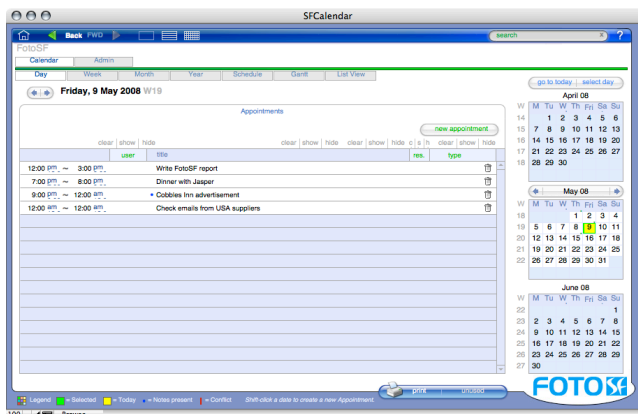
You may have to design a special version of your own logo to fit the space with FotoSF allocates to this. Once you have, your reports and e-mails will be customized every time using your logo. New e-mail templates are being designed by WPS Media (Darron Hartas) at a reasonable cost, for any users needing them.

The e-mail automation is important now and will be even more so in future. FotoSF allows bulk e-mailing without the problems associated (such as rejection of e-mails because of the number of listed recipients). You could run zero cost news or marketing mailshots to your customer base as long as you start giving them the choice to opt in or out of your list.

You may also need to register with the Data Protection Office – not necessary for keeping account records only, but required if you keep any personal details like birthdays or anniversaries, which FotoSF can make good use of.



Images can be stored with database records – in the Inventory database, this includes records of your equipment and copies of invoices.



SFCalendar is a separate window with plenty of room for jobs.



Products and prices can be added and changed very rapidly.

Individual e-mails and letters can be produced when calendar dates related to clients or regular annual jobs appear.

The SFCalendar module, a second screen which appears alongside the main FotoSF window, is very clear and has loads of space for entries (unlike diaries which never have enough lines for each working day). It's much larger than desktop calendars such as Apple iCal and clearer as a result.

The calendar integrates with the main database, and this is really a set of related databases though it appears to be a single screen.

These are Contacts, Events, Sales, Purchases, Products (e.g. 10 x 8 gloss in folder), and Inventory (e.g. Nikon D2X body). All appear as tabs on the main window, and so to Reports, Home, Internal (company set-up etc), and Diary which just activates the SFCalendar window.

The Inventory database, for

listing all your kit, keeps details of purchase price, serial number, warranty expiry, insurer and much more. I realised when studying this that I don't have such a file myself – maybe time to create one using FMP!

I can not test FotoSF personally, as I don't do the jobs it is intended to manage. Early adopters of the program are enthusiastic. They include Keith Trainor, Maria Murray, Steve Walton and Julie Oswin. Vendors (other than the MPA, who offer a member deal) include Warehouse Express, Jigsaw, Maxon and Digital Depot. Uzair Kharawala's program, originally written to manage his own studio, looks like becoming an industry standard.

FotoSF is available through MPA for £345+VAT – call 01325 356555 to obtain your copy.

– David Kilpatrick

See: www.fotosf.com