

## **When image is everything, quality images count.**

by Neil Speers

If a picture is worth a thousand words, which thousand words do your pictures say?

The text, the quality of design and the photos or illustrations you use on your web site and marketing materials all speak volumes about you. You and your company project an image, and you need to be in control of what that image says about you.

Some adjectives describing this image might include: cool, bright, quality, value, craftsmanship, bargain, cheap, unusable. Of course there are thousands of other words which could describe your image. Some good; some not so good. The point is: you should be determining which of those words are being used by your staff, your marketing and your customers.

There have been many recent articles about why your text needs to emphasize “what’s in it for the customer”, and why bad design can sabotage good text. Adding photography is an effective aid to creating your image. Marketing research has shown that marketing pieces with photos of people get better response than photos of products, and photos of products get better response than drawings. And drawing get better response than plain text.

Something I often see people use on web pages are photos obviously taken with a “point and shoot” camera. Sometimes this is fine as these cameras can take an excellent picture when used in conditions they were meant for - outdoors on a sunny day.

However, have you ever noticed those portraits people often use where the background is in focus, but the subject isn’t? And don’t get me started on product shots that are flat and lifeless.

What you need are pictures taken by someone with talent and reasonably good equipment. This person might be your uncle, a staff member, or a hired professional photographer.

### **FOCUS**

The subject has to be in focus. If not, do not use the photo. If the subject is a person, the focus needs to be on the eyes.

### **LIGHT**

This is what pictures are made of, light reflecting off everything in front of the camera. Pictures shot with on-camera flash show the shape of the subject, but don't say anything positive about it. The main light should come from off to the side. This brings out the form and texture of the subject. Sidelighting makes the subject have depth and weight. It brings the subject out from the page or screen so that people want to touch it. When they want to touch it, they want to have it.

## COMPOSITION

Head and shoulder shots - and the bare minimum product shot - puts the subject dead center in the photo. However, you might want to create a small scene which tells a mini story about the subject.

A beer photo is often taken on what appears to be a bar, with bar like atmosphere behind it, little beads of condensing water to suggest the beer is cold, a glass full of beer with perfectly poured head. All these whet your thirst for that beer. A picture of the bottle on a plain background with the label obscured by the reflected flash does not whet the thirst. It says "we're a cheap company that doesn't care about you."

The same applies to you or your product. Try to tell a positive story about your subject.

One rule of thumb for composition is the "Rule of thirds". Place your subject one third of the way from either side, and one third of the way from the top or bottom. This creates a pleasing balance. You can create harmony and stillness by facing the subject towards the center, or movement and urgency by facing the subject away from the center. Try both and see which says what you need to say.

Everything else in the photo should add to the story, not detract from it. Everything should also somehow lead to the subject.

## EDIT

Make sure that everything in the photo relates to the subject in a way to tell the story you want to tell.

And when you get your film back, edit out the worst, then the not bad, then the so-so photos. Then you can choose from the best ones.

## DIGITAL

If you're going to use digital, remember that just being digital doesn't make it good. All the advice above still applies. And, you need to make sure there is enough resolution for what you want. Most digital cameras have more than enough resolution for the web.

However, if you're going to use them in print, make sure there is enough information in the file to be used. As well, digital cameras tend to apply sharpening. This is fine unless the image gets oversharpened. This creates bright jagged lines wherever there is an edge. Very unattractive.

## FINAL FRAME

Does this advice make you a professional level photographer? No, there's lots more to learn yet. But it does help you take and choose images that will help tell your story the way you want it told.

Remember, the most important part of a camera is the "six inches behind the lens". If you care enough to make your text perfect, and your web page shine, then don't let the photos drag your efforts into the trash can.

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