

Must-Know Tips For Successfully Choosing A Commercial Photographer

This is an educational service provided by Rich Quindry,
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Four costly misconceptions about hiring a commercial photographer.

1. Any photographer with a good camera will get similar results.

It's true that professional photographers use very costly equipment, but the equipment is only part of it. The camera doesn't make great photos, any more than a Steinway piano makes great music. Great instruments only enhance the work of an already competent performer.

Photographers' abilities vary widely; in most states anybody with a camera and a business card can call themselves a photographer. Make sure you hire a photographer who has a lot of experience and a good track record of producing high quality results for other commercial clients.

2. Photographers who are good with nature, pets or weddings will do a great job with my products. Or Chairman.

Different types of photography demand different skill sets. A photographer who may take great candid shots may be at a loss when confronted with having to figure out how to light a subject for maximum impact or handle highly reflective subjects or florescent lighting. Experienced commercial photographers who have confronted a wide variety of subjects and conditions can often quickly solve problems that will confound those who have not had to solve them before.

Even among commercial photographers, some are set up for particular specialties - food, architecture, fashion, cars, or photography that requires large set construction.

3. Once I get my photos, I can do what I want with them.

You'd think so, but no; under U.S. copyright law, copyright is retained by the photographer. Some commercial photographers charge royalties (additional fees) based on where you intend to use the photographs (brochure, web, trade show, magazine ads), how long you want to use them, and even charge by what size they will appear in ads and the circulation of the publications.

Some photographers do not charge royalties. They will grant you the right to use your photos (royalty-free) as long as you want and wherever you want.

Ask up front whether they charge royalties or not. If so, find out what the charges are likely to be, and what the variables are. Do you have to pay more for web or trade show display use? In some cases, royalties will depend on the size of your print run, the circulation of a publication you want to place them in, or even the size of the image in your ads.

4. At least my competitors won't be able to use photos from my shoot.

Unless you're careful about the rights you're buying, there is the risk that your photographs will end up on a stock photo site. The photos can then end up anywhere - even in one of your competitor's ads or brochures. Be aware also that photographers who resell their work to stock agencies may be tempted to make your shots more generic by removing identifying logos or other elements in the photo. This might be good for their future stock sales, but it's not in your best interest.

Be sure to find out up front if the photographer sells stock images, and negotiate to make sure yours are not among them, if so.

Why you want custom, digitally enhanced, royalty-free photos for your marketing.

1. Quality custom photos attract attention and communicate your message.

Great, custom photos tell your unique story. They have a "look" that telegraphs your brand. Their high quality communicates your standards. They have stopping power.

Of course, you can also find stock images that have stopping power. You can find high-quality stock. You may even find just the right image for a single ad concept. But you won't find a second image in that same style to support your next concept. So, over time, you'll have to compromise your brand's visual identity to make stock work with the messages you want to send.

If you invest in a library of royalty-free custom photos, you'll have powerful, branded, unique images that support your messages for years to come.

2. Photos are more believable than illustrations or descriptions.

Would you book a vacation at a resort that only had flowery descriptions of what the pool looked like? Would you trust a drawing of the beach? Seeing is believing and believing leads to buying.

3. Photos can communicate quality, increase desire and inspire trust.

Customers believe photos. Catalog sales would be almost nonexistent without them. High quality photographs of your products, facilities, personnel, and happy clients communicate your message of what makes you different from your competitors and how you can help your customers get what they want.

To be effective though, the photos must be planned and designed so that they don't look like stock photos (they don't "ring true"). They should contain subjects that are clearly identifiable as being uniquely yours. You must express some point of difference, some piece of evidence that at least suggests "We are different from our

competitors. Take a look at us.” Choose images that show that you are different and convey quality and the benefits of your product or service.

4. Great photos give you a competitive edge.

Your potential clients are comparing your marketing materials with your competitors. Unless you are solely competing on price, you’d better have images that are at least as good as your competitors... and preferably much better. People are busy, and many will just thumb through a brochure quickly - forming opinions through the images. We know images speak volumes. Many studies have shown that people remember images far better than they remember words.

5. Photos are a small cost of marketing and, if done well, can provide a very high return on investment.

Brochures, advertising space, web sites, sales sheets, and trade shows are an expensive but necessary part of business. Without a sale, the business stops. The brochures, the postage, the ad space, and the trade show you exhibit at, all cost the same whether they’re effective or not. It’s up to you to make the most of your investment and not cripple your marketing efforts with weak or ineffective photos. Savvy marketers understand this.

If you plan your photography well and purchase photography from a royalty-free commercial photographer, you’ll be able to build your own library of images. You’ll get years out of a look that will be uniquely yours.

6. Digital photos give the most bang for the buck.

Professional digital cameras now outperform most traditional film-based cameras. In the hands of an experienced photographer who is adept at Photoshop, they are capable of truly amazing quality. You’ll also save on scanning costs, and have quicker turnaround.

Some photographers make available web sites for reviewing proofs, and even downloading finished hi-res files, making possible instant delivery anywhere in the world. Make sure that the photographer uses the latest breed of cameras that are able to create wide angle images and are capable of shooting rapidly when required. It’s one of photography’s dirty little secrets that many of the best photos are digitally enhanced and often retouched, so make sure the photographer is highly skilled at Photoshop and able to do whatever is needed to make your subjects look their best. Usually, you’ll want the retouching work to be undetectable.

The best Photoshop artists are capable of “stealth retouching” - retouching that’s so good even people whose own portraits have been retouched may not be able to tell; they just think “Wow, that’s a great shot of me.” Products, people, and facilities are never perfect - and they can always use some improvement. Usually, the goal is not perfection, just looking great!

What you need to find out before hiring a commercial photographer.

1. Are their photos sold royalty-free?

Be aware that if you choose a photographer who charges royalties, you'll have to pay more money each time you use your images. This can add up over the course of a campaign, or over years. You may also pay more based on the circulation of the publications you use them in and even depending on the size they appear.

2. Do they provide a satisfaction guarantee?

Photographers who are confident in their ability to consistently deliver high quality photography should be willing to stand behind their work.

3. Do they shoot digitally?

For 99% of uses, digital is now the way to go. Make sure the photographer uses a professional digital camera that is capable of taking wide angle images (many can't - thus limiting the approach taken by the photographer) and can be used either tethered to a computer (for examining the images on a large screen while shooting) or free standing (for rapid shooting and getting unusual angles). The top of the line professional digital cameras are now capable of delivering excellent results for trade show displays and billboards.

4. How skilled are they at Photoshop?

It's a well-known secret in the industry that many of the best photographs are digitally enhanced and/or retouched. Some of your photos are likely to benefit by this and you need to know whether the photographer will do it, how well they'll do it, and what it's likely to cost. When done properly, Photoshop work is virtually undetectable.

5. How much experience do they have?

How long have they been in business? The more experience a photographer has, the more likely he or she has already come across and solved similar problems to those posed by your subjects. It's also important that the experience gained is relevant to your commercial photography needs. Wedding photographers may have a lot of experience doing weddings but that doesn't mean they have the experience to do commercial work.

6. Do they sell stock photos?

If they do, be careful. It's very tempting for them to set up your shots to look generic so they'll have resale value as stock photos, making them less compelling for your use. Many photographers use photos from assignments to sell as stock

photos. If the shots are generic enough, they can be used this way. You could even possibly see your photos used by a competitor at some point.

7. Is the style of their work appropriate for your needs?

While an experienced, competent photographer will know how to produce a range of “looks”, there may be times when one particular photographers’ style may be better suited to your audience. If you are marketing skateboards to teens in an urban environment you’ll want an edgier look than if you’re selling investment services to baby boomers.

8. Who are their clients?

You can tell a lot by how extensive a photographer’s client list is and the quality of the companies on their client list. When photographers start out, they do work for small businesses, and as they gain in experience, larger and larger corporations find that they can be counted on to deliver the goods.

9. Do they have client testimonials?

What do their clients say about working with them? Are they easy to work with? Good problem solvers? Dependable? Able to meet tight deadlines?

10. Do they respond quickly to your e-mails or phone messages?

While a photographer may not always be available or able to take your call, you should feel that they are responsive to any requests you have, and that you and the success of your projects are important to them. If they’re not responsive when they want to get your business, don’t be surprised if they’re not responsive when you’re in a crunch and need something from them in a hurry.

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