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The Power of Photography

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Secrets of the Catalog Masters that few understand in the Digital Era

The Future is Most Often Found in the Past

I just purchased a new camera. After consultation with my professional photographer friend, Jim Alexander of Alexander's Photography in Des Moines, Iowa, I bought a Nikon SLR. It is not a professional photographer's camera; rather, it is good camera designed for an amateur photographer with an appreciation for the potential of photography.

Most significantly, it is *not* a digital camera. It is a film camera. That's right: rolls of film, both color and black and white. Old-fashioned.

For me, photography it is not about the technology; it is all about the subtle technique of creating moods. In other words, it is about creating atmospheres. And nothing can do that like film. The control resides with me, not with the algorithms.

Digital photography (which I have been using for catalog work for over twenty years) is too often concerned with capturing the image. Film photography (in the right hands) is more concerned with capturing light. And that is the difference.

Our catalog photographs have lost the subtle mastery of the application of light in our rush to digitize everything. Most of the photographs used in today's catalog are flat,

emotionless images. In their technical perfection and homogeneity, they all look alike and, therefore, achieve little other than the repetition of a boring sameness from one catalog to another.

Photos are either “squared up” (in a frame with a background and foreground) or “cut out” (the product alone in silhouette or “cut out” of the background and foreground). Square up shots require attention to background color and product application features; cut out shots are concerned only with the product itself and its features or elements.

With only those two choices—square up or cut-out—we can proceed with a discussion of the photographic strategy, objectives, style and approaches. As always, the past serves as a guide to the future.

Communication of the Story

We learn about the world from visual phenomena. As children, we learn from picture books and we associate the “thingness” of an object with its visual shape and form from a drawing or photo. Balls or cats or trees are visual understandings.

Having learned a visual vocabulary, we then learn the “fillers” that turn the visuals into a language. Fillers are the words such as “the,” “and” and ‘but’ and all other such words that have no visual basis in reality. Try to picture in your mind a “the.” Now, try to picture in your mind a “cat.” There it is: the power of the object.

Physical products are objects. Services are concepts. Products are best sold—first—with photos; services are best sold—first—with words. Another difference in how we sell.

All selling, however, is accomplished through the communication of a story. Sometimes the story is visual; sometime the story is verbal. Almost always, it is a combination of both. With physical products, though, it is usually a safe bet that the visual sale is quicker and more effective than the verbal sale. The old adage, “A picture is worth a thousand words,” is remarkably true.

A product having features and benefits is really a small, self-contained story to be communicated to a potential user and buyer. By definition, all stories are either fiction or non-fiction. A photograph can sell you a fiction or it can sell you a non-fiction. Business-to-business photography is mostly non-fiction work; consumer photography is often fiction. Another difference.

The Master, however, understands how to use photos and words to illustrate objects, concepts, fiction and non-fiction to create the objective: a purchase. Of these, the Master’s most reliable tool is the photograph.

An Example

We have a catalog and website named Chiseled In Stone, selling tools and supplies to sculptors. The universe of sculptors and stone masons worldwide is about 360,000 people and our business has an active house file of 120,000 names, so we have about 33 percent market share. The average customer spends \$240 annually for tools and supplies, and the business is about \$25 million in annual sales. About 70 percent of sales are catalog and phone and 30 percent are online. The customers are business-to-business customers who sell their sculptures to galleries, museums, private collectors, and public and governmental institutions, as well as monument and cemetery masons.

The Chiseled In Stone catalog has been designed by the owner, Wendy, who is a sculptor. She is also a skillful and professionally-trained photographer and does all of the catalog and website photography herself. Over the years, Wendy has developed a line of stone carving tools that have become the industry-leading tools noted for their uniqueness, specialized uses and superior performance. The tools are made exclusively for Chiseled In Stone by a small forge in southern Ohio operated by an extended Amish family. The formula for the steel alloy is a closely-guarded trade secret and sculptors worldwide prefer Wendy's sculpting tools to any others in the market.

Wendy does a step-by-step original sculpture for each edition of the catalog. She shows the tools in a pagination sequence that follows the actual sculpture from beginning to end. The first pages of the catalog show those tools used to rough out a block of marble or granite. The final pages of the catalog show the tools she uses to smooth the completed sculpture and render the finish. She photographs every step of the process as she creates the sculpture, carrying the reader/buyer through the artistic process and the logical application and usage of the tools. Her styling of the photos come from the sensibilities of the sculptor and show proper technique, thereby maximizing the effectiveness of application photography techniques. Additionally, she creates a resonance between her photos and the artists who are looking at her work in the photos. In short, she tells a unique and specific story in each catalog.

Wendy sells a lot of chisels used for marble and granite. These are made from the "secret formula" steel alloy forged by the Amish families in Ohio. She offers over 40 different type of chisels, most in at least three lengths and six blade widths, a total of nearly 725 SKUs for chisels alone.

When she photographs a chisel in use, she does at least three individual shots from different angles demonstrating not only the application for the specific piece of sculpture in the catalog that month, but also the proper angle to hold the tool and the result of the blade style and width chosen. In other words, each photo shows the tool *and* the result on the stone. A wave-line chisel results in a wavy cut, and that is pictured. A dash-line results in a line like a series of dashes, and that is clearly photographed. Wendy takes a great deal of trouble to show the tool and the effect it produces on the stone in each of her photos. She continues to tell the story.

The three photos for each chisel being described are not the only photos, however. In many instances, Wendy does a macro shot (extreme close up) and shows the detail of the chisel blade—whether it is sharp, rounded, toothed, thin or thick, beveled or half-round. Each page also has other macro photos showing the striking head of the chisel and whether these are wide and flattened or narrow and rounded. The result is that every chisel is fully pictured for complete physical and conceptual understanding.

Wendy also takes a matrix approach to each of her photos. She takes each photo from three different directions. First, she shoots a right-page angle with the chisel pointing to the center of the catalog and light coming from the right side. Then she shoots a left page photo of the chisel with light coming from the left and the point reversed into the center of the catalog. Finally, she takes a head-on shot with no angling and front-lit. A single chisel will have three application shots, up to three associated macro shots, and three angle shots, for a total of nine shots each or an inventory of twenty-seven images for each chisel. From that selection, Wendy can choose the proper photos for a product to be displayed on a right or left page, or without directional bias as a head-on photo.

The photos are lit at the same light intensity and the same level of warmth. All shots of a single tool are identical relative to light. All photos of all tools are also identical to all others relative to light levels. The photos in any catalog edition are completely consistent and equal. The only light variable is the direction the light comes from—left, right, or front. All photos are shot at the same distance to the focal-plane.

Taken all together, this array of photos describes a fully furnished photo archive. With the consistency of lighting, directional choices, applications, and macro close-ups, nearly every conceivable element of the story can be told visually. When planned and executed well, the only words necessary are specifications—lengths, widths, weights, product names, product numbers, and prices. Any of the photos can be used in a catalog or on a website. Some of the photos can be used for cut-outs in silhouette.

Photograph the Product or the Application?

If you will photograph the product doing whatever it is the product does, you will sell more product. A can opener opens cans; therefore, show it opening a can. A pen writes; therefore photograph it writing. A tote bag carries; therefore show it carrying things. Active product photography is always better than passive product photography. The same is true for words. Active words are always better than passive words. “Sell your home now!” is always better than “Selling your home is easy.”

If you photograph a product application that also solves a problem most people have, you will sell even more product. Applying metal putty to a hole in a water pipe to instantly stop a gushing leak will sell metal putty. Showing a passive tube of metal putty and saying, “Stops leaks” doesn’t do anywhere near as good of a job selling metal putty.

If you sell equipment to crush grapes, your photos will need grapes to crush. The vital visual element of grape crushing equipment sales is not the equipment or the grapes.

It is juice. The essential problem is how to obtain juice. The end product of grape crushing is juice and juice is what has to be photographed as the “clincher” part of the story. “See . . . you get tons of juice when you buy the Ajax Krusher!”

Sure, there needs to be a close up macro photo of the Ajax Krusher TorqueHead with the SqueezeTeeth shown flattening a bunch of grapes, but there has to also be a torrent of juice running out of the bottom. That’s storytelling! That’s selling! That’s show-biz!

So, Why Film?

I like control over my photography. Film gives me more control, I believe. I can better manipulate light and warmth; better manipulate exposure and depth-of-field. Maybe it is the artist struggling to get out.

Granted, production photography for a catalog is difficult using film. Digital gets you fifty shots a day at the lowest day rate. Film cuts into productivity and increases cost. But . . . how is that measured? If I have better photos for my story using film, is there an economic trade-off that is measurable in return on investment. Will better photography result in higher profits? Where is the break-point?

Unfortunately, film is only economical in photography as a personal interest; it is not economical for photography as a necessity of business. Digital is far superior economically, if not relative to technique and quality. It’s faster and less expensive. Digital allows you to color correct the images and store the archive of photos immediately on the fly.

But, if you were to apply the concepts of film to the technology of digital photography, would you have better photography? Absolutely. There is no justification for abdicating the art of photography for the expediency of technology. When you blend the two appropriately, you have a better outcome and, I believe, more sales.

We have, unfortunately, forgotten how to take good photos of products in ways that sell more product. We simply email the photos to Thailand where a digital “cut-out” house silhouettes all our products for \$2.67 a shot and emails them back. We have found technological methods to assure our photographic sterility and dullness. Our primary concerns are technology, speed and cost. But, with a little knowledge and care, we can have photographs for our catalogs and our websites that are magnitudes better, that tell much more interesting and convincing stories, and that take the reader/buyer on a journey of persuasion resulting in more sales and higher profits.

Is Photography Really Important Today?

I don’t know. Maybe. Maybe not. Is anything important in the Digital Era? Many things are being sidelined as being less important than they once were. Circulation planning has been abdicated to the 22 year-olds with no experience in circulation

planning or handed off wholesale to other 22 year olds in Abacus-like Black Box operations. Are circulation experience, strategy and intimacy important anymore? I think so.

Is product selection important? Do we spend the needed energy and experience intensity to assure that, out of our next ten new products, six are winners out of the box? Or, do we just throw stuff against the wall and see what sticks? Is merchandising important anymore? I think so.

Is customer service important? Do we get rid of call center people because business is down 30 percent, or do we add high-quality call center pros to outbound call customers and encourage purchases and clean our lists? Is our customer list a valued asset that has never needed so much tending as it does now? I think so.

So, to me photography is equally important as these other components of the business. It is my main story teller. Photography is my first and strongest impression on the customer. I know that in 85 percent of the photos throughout all of direct marketing the execution is mediocre. I believe I can improve sales significantly by improving this industry's photography standards. The investment is relatively minor and may be a far better return than some of the inane things we are doing in PPC, affiliate marketing, social networking, and other B.S.-laden hotspots of unproductive online spending. Is photography important? I think so.

But, the real question is Do you?

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Thoughts Looking From My Window

Okay . . . I lied last issue. It's not Monterey or Carmel.

My new windows are in Bodega Bay, in Sonoma County, California, in the heart of Wine Country.

I'm writing from my new view here in Bodega Bay. That's the fishing village about 65 miles north of San Francisco where Alfred Hitchcock filmed "The Birds." I'm on my deck, looking out over Bodega Head where the whale watching is thought to be the best in the U.S. The redwoods are just a few miles away to the north and Santa Rosa (pop. 150,000) is only about twenty-five minutes to the east. Did I mention the 473 wineries and the 600 plus great restaurants here in Sonoma County? And, how about those four-pound Dungeness crabs the fishermen sell off their boats at the harbor for about \$6 each . . . Truly, life is a carbernet!

I'm thinking about changes. Contrarian changes. Not too many people are moving *into* California these days. Most seem to be leaving for other parts. Something about the economy and the taxes and the *in extremis* California state budget. These are the people who are scared and running away. I, on the other hand, see nothing but opportunity.

My exposure many years ago while in school to a contrarian economist caused me to spend my later life looking at everything from alternative points of view. When everyone rushes to leave, go to that place; when everyone sells, buy; when everyone is negative, be positive; when everyone orders steak, order fish; when everyone is wearing blue, wear red.

Contrarian philosophy usually puts you ahead of the crowd. If you have staying power, it always puts you in the lead, especially since all things come full circle at some point.

Moving to California is a contrarian statement. It says there's hope here, new beginnings, another exciting adventure. It also says the winters are warm, unlike those in Iowa. Maybe it's the ocean over there a hundred yards to the right, or the incredible setting sun every evening, or the fog in the morning clearing to sunny days washed by salt breezes.

In the end, I think it's just constantly forcing yourself to experience new things, new places, new ideas, new ways of doing things. You have to sweep out the closets of your life now and then, and shed old skins, and wear new hats. Otherwise you shrink.

Our businesses are like that. We need new adventures, new ideas, new ways of doing things. We need to sweep away, prune, and reinvent ourselves every few years just to make sure we don't start to shrink and become brittle. So many companies are shut away in the dark, safe places where they have been for far too long. When it gets tough, they hunker down and rarely let in the sunlight or the fresh air of new and bold ideas. One day, they emerge back into the light and find that they are the same as they were ten years ago and nobody notices anymore.

Me, I'm taking the rest of the day off and going down to the harbor and talk to the fishermen . . . maybe look for a place for the hot dog cart by the town docks.

Merchandising

Details

Over the last four years, I have come to know a very talented merchandiser quite well. I can say that this person is, without reservation of any kind, the best merchandiser I have ever encountered in my many years of business experience. Decisive, bold, tough, fair, demanding, compassionate, and with an unerring sense of products and offers, this

individual steers some forty staff through the entwining domestic and international layers of product sourcing, catalog and website production, planning, analytics, evaluation and financial models with absolute control, grace and accuracy. The end product is excess profitability and personal success, whatever that means.

What is the one thing that creates so much skill, talent and success?

Details.

Merchandisers come in two flavors: 1) Product Geniuses (includes buyers) and 2) Merchandising Managers. There is a huge difference. The product people are only concerned with finding and capturing new products at great margins. They are the Big Game hunters of the merchandising world. Their whole life is measured in “scores” and margin. They love nothing more than to dominate a manufacturer or a distributor and beat them up for another point. They sleep well because they are constantly rewarded by dreams of twenty new products hiding under their pillows.

But the managers and the Directors . . . these people are different. They are consumed by details, processes and schedules. And they are good at it.

Merchandising management is a game of inches . . . inching along in the unending repetitive cycles of getting a catalog or a season to market. Every step of the way can be measured by precise timing and prescribed processes. There are lists, pricing comparisons, margin calculations, supplier term sheets, range rationalizations, product reviews, preliminary product selections, final product selections, sample schedules and shipping, copy, photography, layouts, revisions, failed deliveries from manufacturers, landing costs and credit insurance and container schedules, all six to twelve months in advance, and on and on and on . . . until it is time to analyze the results in a gazillion layers of analytics and metrics, and then start the whole process over for next year.

Someone recently asked me what they could do to become a Director of Merchandising for a large catalog and online company. I replied that they should become obsessed with details to the point of madness . . . to descend into the depths of unending detail until they were so immersed that they found joy, happiness and completeness in the mastery of the rivers of information, detail and process steps. Then, they would spend ten years perfecting their ability to manage detail with the discriminating talent to know which details were important and which were not, and making them come out on time and without error. At that point, another ten years developing people skills so they could talk to catalog creative and web types and other strange people while not diminishing their analytic and classification skills would be a plus. They should also learn the ability to work 18 hours a day, eat little, drink less, and not fall victim to recreational drugs, relationships or families, and strive hard to have no life outside the business. Then they would be ready to be a Director of Merchandising at a big company.

Pretty enticing, huh?



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