

How I prefer to work

This is my opinion, and I welcome the differing viewpoints of advertising professionals. Over the years I've benefited greatly from the advice of others and hope to in the future. Please contact me at bruce@bruceashleyphotography.com

What you're buying

You're buying my art judgement and experience in commercial photography. My first responsibility is to listen to what you tell me you want. You know your customers and have a gut feeling about how to sell them. My job is to put the desired visual spin on your communications. Why? Because even the simplest product shot creates subliminal impressions in the viewer. Not for the uninitiated, creative control of visual communications takes the intuitive eye of an experienced photographer. This extends to the postproduction work with the digital files and there is nobody better qualified to do this work than the photographer. I look at it as an extension of the original previsualization of the image into a finished file. There are not many commercial photographs that do not benefit from the tasteful use of some digital enhancement. I add and subtract color, shape highlights and shadows and remove imperfections to make things look better.

Film vs. digital

I've been testing and analyzing digital camera systems for over ten years and have consulted Kodak, Agfa, Apple and Adobe on their use. I shoot primarily digital originals. In most applications digital is superior to film. Adjusting and soft proofing images on screen in real time in the studio has proven to be a sure and effective workflow. Being able to control color balance and effective film speed "on the fly" has made location photojournalistic style shooting better and faster. There are now some very good tools for sorting and editing files on location.

We used to find that film was more versatile and easier to edit than digital. The quality and useability of the new generation of digital cameras has made the disadvantages disappear. I used to feel that a Polaroid preview was a superior way to evaluate a shot in progress, but as I gain experience with soft proofing on monitors in the studio and on locations I prefer them to the old methods. The color and detail are just plain better.



The ideal job

The perfect assignment starts with an inspired comp. It represents a visual framework of the advertising concept to which I can contribute a creative photographic execution. A whole idea that everyone who needs to has already approved. My goal is to exceed your and your client's expectations by amplifying your original idea. I pride myself on being versatile in technique and able to contribute to a group work. If I have a style it's one where the execution of the photograph is subordinate to the communication. Not that I don't use visual effects; I just try not to use them out of context.

Other jobs

Lacking a comp or even an art director, I can do my best if you clip ads or images that you like and we use those as a starting point for conceptualizing your job. Browse catalogs, brochures or magazines and pick examples you think are effective advertising. For product shoots, good planning and having the items in photo-ready condition keeps the estimate accurate and makes the day go smoothly. Test shots of locations and models go a long way toward getting the "feel" in the finished image that everyone involved agrees will do the task at hand. A successful print ad or product catalog doesn't happen without the application of planning and experience. It helps to think about how things should be sized and positioned in relationship to other things in the layout. It sounds like a no-brainer, but double check which cords need to be seen and what displays need to show, where switches need to be positioned and what lights need to be on. One of the strengths of photography, its ability to show all the details, is also a potential pitfall. This is less so with the advent of digital retouching, but it is easier to get things right on the set, than fix them later with Photoshop.

The RGB way

The old "craftsman" path to print went directly from film to CMYK. Color correction, sizing, sharpening and retouching was all done at the separator. The old system worked well, but wasn't very efficient. Now an RGB workflow makes more sense. Whether digital or film the image is digitized as RGB through Red, Green and Blue filters. In the RGB workflow you make your color corrections and do your retouching in RGB. Once a "master" file is built in RGB a multitude of different converted, sized and sharpened, "output" files can be run.

The advantages of the RGB workflow are numerous. You only correct color and retouch the master and can make uniform outputs in RGB for web media and presentations or CMYK for a specific print output. Your company's integrity in the buyer's eye goes up because of your visual consistency. Think about the brands you respect most and the way they present themselves through photography. Apple Computer's clean and consistent "white look" comes to my mind as a good example. Because the retouching and color are in layers on the master file, it's easy to make changes and republish them to multiple users. You get more customized output, which gives you better quality reproduction via properly optimized parameters. I'm successful in setting clients up with Photoshop "actions" that perform a combination of sharpening, add noise or similar optimizations for specific outputs. It's the new "instant Photoshop expert" plan. And it's useful because it's hard for you to anticipate every request you may get for file sizes and types. With the "actions" and my master file you can turn out perfect output files on a moment's notice.

Of course I do jobs where I provide a number of file formats and sizes for customers, rather than just an RGB master. This is not totally efficient and economical but produces good consistency and high quality. I keep an archival backup of all my work and have a keyword database with previews of those images. I can locate your file quickly. I deliver most work on CDR or DVD disks. Jobs are often proofed via jpegs delivered as attachments to email. It's a good way for you to check the details of a shot I'm working on for you. I also give you a web address and password to a secure area on my site for downloading larger, finished files. This is really the "modern" delivery. Free of sales tax under certain conditions.

Color management

I think the marketing and communications industry will benefit from the widespread characterization of input, display and output devices with ICC profiles. I know this is a tough sell and there are lots of accumulated negative experiences. But, it does work and is certain to make our results better in the future. I like to work in a calibrated and defined environment and tag the files I deliver with profiles that define that environment. The art director, client and printer can all use that information in their defined environments. The file looks similar on different devices. Vendors who also support color control protocols and have defined their devices provide us with their profiles and we can preview the output. Unfortunately, it sounds like rocket science. And it almost is. The weak link right now is that not all output vendors are interested in defining their systems. One can't blame them; their value has been tied to their ability to control their machinery to deliver whatever undefined color customers bring them.

I use color management systems in my workflow and have customers who successfully dovetail their work with mine through color management. What they see on their screen is very similar to what I see so we can communicate better. I'm happy to make recommendations for implementing this process with customers. It makes my job easier because I don't have to make as many educated guesses about what is needed. The place to start is with a profiled monitor in a controlled lighting environment for accurate soft proofing. This is not as difficult to achieve as you might think. Rods and Cones is an excellent consultant and value added reseller of color management systems, <http://www.rodsandcones.com/>.

CMYK

When you ask me to make a color separation for you the ideal thing is for me to have a profile of the press and the paper you will use. Lacking that, I will use one of four color separation profiles available in the current Adobe programs. They make a distinction between total ink of sheetfed or web printing and also make the distinction between dot gain of coated or uncoated sheets. These new Adobe specifications, which were introduced with Photoshop 6, are working well and produce separations compatible with ones made in other current Adobe programs. I like them better than Photoshop 5 and earlier separations because they have more uniform black generation and better color purity.

An important control for me is soft proofing the plates on screen. I want to know how the ink balance and artifacts of separation look register by register. I also check the numbers of important colors in swatch books. Then I make a pre-proof on a calibrated inkjet printer to double check color saturation and contrast, which can

be difficult to evaluate on the monitor. The result is a file I can feel confident you will be able to print successfully under normal conditions. But there are some things to watch out for. It isn't a good idea to make sweeping color corrections to an image once it has been separated. The calculation of total ink and undercolor removal made at the time of separation is easily upset by color correction after the separation. Mixing images from different separation sources may make it very difficult to get a good balance on press. The sharpening of an image is size dependent; so is the noise added to gradations and shadow fills. You don't really want to make large changes in size or resolution to finished CMYK files.

You still need to make a halftoned "contract" proof with your printer on your whole document before you go to press. There are variations in inks, papers and presses that, lacking a press profile, I am unable to anticipate. I am happy to make corrections and changes to my photographs based on the results of those proofs. I seldom find myself doing this, but it is a very successful way to fine-tune your color.

Closing

This is how and why I like to work the way I do. Some things have changed a lot over the years; some things haven't changed much at all. I expect this to continue and will try to keep this document up to date. My goal doesn't change, which is to be the best, most efficient, all around commercial photographer you can find.