

PHOTOGRAPHING PEOPLE IN THE STUDIO

By Steve Myall *EFIAP*

Photographing people in a studio means the photographer is in complete control: able to direct the pose and light the model in a sympathetic or dramatic way. But is there a 'best' way? Of course not as we all see things differently...but there's always room for improvement, and in this article I'm going to point out a few hints and tips that could help make images of people taken in a studio that little bit more pleasing.

The Background

In my opinion this is just as important as the subject. Many photographers choose to use a material background and too often this is full of creases (made all the worse if side lighting has been used), this should have been ironed/pressed before use – or smoothed out in Photoshop later.

Another often seen problem is the over-lit background, particularly when trying to create a white background. Many photographers over light it, making it far brighter than the model – if the model is wearing white the clothing will appear dull, even greyish. If white, or pale colours, are being worn then the background needs to be lit at the same exposure, or slightly duller, than the model to ensure they seem crisp and bright. Over-lighting a background can also cause flare - light bouncing back and giving a dull flat look to the model.

Many photographers place their model too close to the background, resulting in shadows that don't enhance the image in anyway. Ideally you need at least a six-foot space between model and background. This way shadows go off to the side and don't appear in the final image. This kind of set-up also allows you to light the background independently to the model.

Lighting the Model

Very hard to cover this in depth without writing a book, or two, so I'll just cover a few basic points not covered in the other sections here.

Eyes. Does it matter if there is more than one catch-light in each eye? If it bothers you then suggest they are removed in Photoshop. Catch-lights can be a judges' best friend, helping you work out what type of lighting has been used and from what angle. Here's a couple of examples to give you an idea of what I mean: Square catch-light means a softbox. Umbrella shape means a shoot-through umbrella. Umbrella shape with a black dot in the middle indicates bounced light from a brolly (the black dot being the strobe).

Hair-lights/rim lighting is often used and if not done correctly this can result in very burnt out areas in the image. These days this can be checked easily on the camera screen and the lighting turned down until a good balance is achieved.

Balancing fill lighting to the main light. This is often done more or less at the same exposure which can result in flat lighting, and can produce awful cross shadows on

the face – particularly noticeable on either side of the nose. Again checking the light ratios on the camera screen can enable the photographer to alter the balance of the lights to create a pleasing result.

The Pose

This depends on the type of image being created, but like any composition there are a few basic points that can help make the subject look better.

A head a shoulder image is improved by having the head and shoulders at different angles. Taking this a step further if more of the body is included then a pleasing effect can be achieved by having the hips at another angle. An 'S' shaped pose often works well.

Generally it doesn't look right if cropping is done through a lower limb: if the elbow is included then have the hand in too, if the knee is in shot then the foot should be also.

If the head is at an angle then it looks better if the nose doesn't break the cheek-line. Fingers look more graceful when together.

Altering the pose or getting the model to stretch slightly can often eliminate creases in the skin – often seen in the neck – and rolls of fat. If all fails then get rid in Photoshop or cover with clothing, or in the case of the neck long hair can conceal these unwanted lines.

Many portraits can be improved by getting the model to sit up straight thus giving better poise by removing the 'round-shoulder' look.

Expression

Often seems forced and unnatural. This is often the result of the photographer not working quickly enough and not talking to the model. The mouth can smile but the glint goes from the eyes if not captured straight away. I also think a more natural smile can be achieved by making your model smile rather than asking them to do so. Again, not working fast enough can result in a bored expression.

Clothing

Unless the logo on the clothing is important to the final image then it's usually best to avoid them as they can distract from the rest of the image.

Mixing black and white clothing can result in problems with lighting, to get detail in both can be hard. If it seems the photographer has struggled in this area then suggest they don't mix the two.

Creases and labels showing through should be spotted before the image is taken but once more Photoshop can come to the rescue.

Make-Up and Jewellery

Make-Up needs to be checked carefully.

Lipstick on teeth is not desirable, nor is 'blobby' mascara. Shiny areas on the skin, usually evident on the face, should be toned down with foundation.

A heavily made-up face can look wrong if other flesh on show isn't made-up to a similar tone, most noticeable in a headshot when the shoulder is uncovered and included in the image.

Jewellery often produces distracting highlights, so it is wise to avoid it if it's not an important part of the image.

Photoshop

Friend or foe?

Both?

As I've mentioned above Photoshop can be used to correct certain areas of the image. There are obviously many other enhancements that can be done with it such as bringing out details, removing bags under eyes, cloning out spots, scars, clothing marks, and tattoos if not wanted. It can also be used to whiten teeth and brighten eyes – this latter area is something that in my mind many people go to far with, making the whites of the eyes too bright. Flyaway hairs can be removed. New backgrounds added. Colours can be changed. Skin can be softened: this is something that is often overdone, giving an almost plastic appearance to the flesh, making the model look like a mannequin. If softening skin tones can be overdone then so can over-sharpening, it's generally not a good idea to bring out every pore in a woman's face.

Final Comments

Hopefully the above tips have offered some insight into what can make a studio image of a person that little bit more pleasing to the eye, and will help you when next asked to give some constructive comments on this type of photography.

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