



Picture Perfect

Build your brand with photography

Close your eyes and think of a Pottery Barn catalog. Or Lands' End. Or J. Jill. Can you picture them? Chances are, you have a clear and distinct image in mind. You know what the photography looks like because all of these brands have established a certain style and "look" that is unique to them. They've achieved this over time through consistent execution of their defined styles.

Pottery Barn, for instance, always shows a warm and inviting room consisting of the various pieces of furniture and accessories sold in the photo spread. It allows you to picture yourself in that perfect environment. Lands' End, on the other hand, focuses on the details of its garments. Quality is key, so by showing unique fabrics or the stitching on a button up close, the cataloger can emphasize the attention to detail given to all its products. J. Jill shows off its clothing on models, typically outside in a natural setting, portraying a casual and comfortable lifestyle. All of these creative decisions are made with each catalog's specific brand in mind. The fact that they maintain consistency over time is the secret to their success.

Branding is a hot topic in business today. In a competitive and saturated environment, it's essential that you set yourself apart from the competition by creating a memorable and relevant brand. One step to achieving this goal is by using photography as a differentiator.

Give Your Products a Face

Branding is much more than good photography. But a distinctive, recog-



By showing a warmly lit room full of furniture and accessories sold in its catalog, Pottery Barn invites consumers to picture themselves in that environment and thereby creates desire for its products.

nizable photographic style can go a long way to helping you establish a strong brand. Brands should be "experiential"—meaning customers should be able to experience your brand on many different levels using all of their senses. Consumers have an advantage when they're shopping at a retail location because they can put all their senses to use and experience products. But when shopping through the direct channel, consumers have to rely far more on sight. So as direct marketers, you're challenged to visually communicate everything about your brand. You need to harness the power of photography to help you stand out from the crowd.

Ask yourself this—if you were to cover up your name or logo on the pages

of your catalog, Web site or direct mail piece, would your audience still know it was you who sent it? To further your brand, your photography should accomplish the following five goals:

1. Create desire. You want people to buy your products, so you must show them off in the most desirable way. The right lighting and props can create the right mood and make your products appear more attractive. Just don't

overdo it. Lighting that is too dramatic or props that are distracting will take focus away from what you're selling.

2. Be consistent. You will get tired of your photography long before your customers do. That's a fact. Resist the urge to experiment with different styles or looks. Consistency is

the key to building a brand, and photography is no exception. Just imagine if Pottery Barn decided to alter its photographic style on a whim every now and then. It might keep its art directors creatively challenged, but it would only create confusion among its loyal customers. Find a style that is uniquely yours and stick with it.

3. Be distinctive. So many companies want to imitate the market leader. They assume that if it works for the leader then it should work for them. All that does is help the leader by reinforcing its brand. If you want to help yourself, take this advice—when the market leader zigs, you should zag.

4. Reflect the personality of the

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brand. This allows you to put a face on what is otherwise an inanimate object, increasing the likelihood that the audience will identify and connect with the product on a personal and emotional level. If your brand is fun and playful, your photography should be fun and playful. If your company's image is upscale and refined, your photography should reflect that. Think of it in terms of a real person. When you think of James Bond, you picture him wearing a tuxedo. Who or what does your brand look like?

5. Show your products clearly and accurately. Make sure the product always is the hero of your photography, not the props or the styling. Even though you want to build a desirable brand and communicate it through photography, the ultimate goal is to sell more products. Since the customer can't pick it up and touch it, smell it, or taste it, the important aspects of the product always must be in focus and easy to see.

Attaining these goals will help you achieve the ultimate objective, which is an increase in sales.

Before You Snap the Shutter ...

To get the desired results from your photography, you have to do some prep work. Here are some pointers to consider when preparing for a photo shoot:

Always hire a professional photographer, even though it might be tempting to save some money and shoot the photos yourself. The fact that you own a car doesn't qualify you to be a NASCAR driver. Likewise, owning a digital camera doesn't make you a good photographer.

Have a plan and stick with it. Clearly understand what makes your brand different, and decide in advance how you will communicate this concept with your photography. Meet with your photographer, art director and stylist first to agree on how to execute each photo. If everyone is on the same page before the photo

shoot starts, everything will run more smoothly on set.

Work from an existing layout. Whenever possible, have the layout of your catalog or direct mail piece finished before you begin your photo shoot. This will help you decide which images are heroes, which direction the product needs to face and how multiple photos work together on a spread. You may consider having sketches of each photo on hand to indicate angle and props.

Dramatic, distinctive photography can go a long way in setting your brand apart in a sea of sameness. It can add stopping power to the cover of a catalog; instantly welcome customers to the homepage of a Web site; and add a sense of familiarity to a direct mail piece. And above all, it can help you increase sales. Picture that. ■

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