Four Tips for Taking Great Footwear Product Shots

Peter Alessandria

As a photographer, I love shooting shoes. I'm a big fan of the passion, ingenuity and creativity footwear designers bring to their products. Here are four easy ways to make shoes look great on a website, or in an ad, a catalog or other publication.

1. Prepare the product. Great product shots start with great products. Product samples should be in the best possible condition. That means obvious things like being clean, but also choosing samples with good construction (e.g., stitching and seams), color and shape. For products that have lost some shape, 24 hours in a shoe tree usually makes them as good as new. For really stubborn misshapen parts, gently heat the material with a hair dryer and then coax it back to its natural shape.

2. Hard or soft light? A primary decision for any type of photography is whether to use hard or soft lighting. What's the difference and how can you tell? The easiest way is to look at the shadows. Think of a bright sunny day: The sun casts a very well-defined shadow. The sharp edges of the shadow indicate what is called "hard" light. Compare that to an overcast day,

The passion and creativity footwear designers bring makes shooting shoes fun.

The top photo is shot with soft light, the bottom with hard light. Notice the well-defined shadows, both on the background and on the shoes, with hard light.

when the light may be so diffused that shadows are barely noticeable. A light or non-existent shadow indicates "soft" lighting.

Why care about hard versus soft lighting? Generally speaking, the harder the light, the more dramatic the photo. Conversely, the softer the light, the less dramatic. We'll explore "drama" -- what it is and why we want it -- below, but for now, just note that the amount of drama is important in the overall presentation of the product.

How is hardness or softness of light controlled? Although often misunderstood, even by experienced photographers, the answer is simple: the larger the light source relative to the subject, the softer the light. Conversely, the smaller the light source, the harder the light.

Back to the sunlight example, on a sunny day the sun is relatively small compared to objects on Earth. This means it casts sharp, well-defined shadows. (It also creates what photographers know as "specular highlights," high-intensity, sometimes mirror-like reflections. These reflections, or lack of them, may also influence the decision to use hard or soft lighting.)

Contrast that sunny day with a cloudy, overcast one: The entire sky becomes one huge, diffused light source which, at its extreme, casts no shadows at all. The reason there are no shadows is because, in effect, the light is hitting objects from multiple angles. Thus, the light is actually filling any shadows that would have otherwise been created. On a sunny day, light hits a subject mainly from one angle, casting a shadow below or behind the subject.

One additional point worth noting: The closer the light source, the softer the light will be. The further away the light source is, the harder the light will be. Thus.the relative hardness or softness of light can be adjusted by changing the distance between the subject and the light source. Again, think of the sun. Even though it is

Notice the well-defined shadow under the shoes, which comes from using a small light source far from the shoes.

huge compared to the earth itself (in fact, the sun is 1,287,000 times larger – Google

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it), it appears "small" because it is so far away (9 million miles or so).

Now is a good time to look at what drama is and when to use it. In short, "drama = emotion" and "emotion = interest." To sell anything, it's essential to arouse interest in potential customers. Sexy, interesting, exciting photos are a great way to generate interest and increase sales.

Drama may not always be necessary or

appropriate. I usually tell my clients to reserve the more extreme shots for their website home page or for magazine ads or billboards. For a basic product photo – one taken for a catalog or the product page of a website -- lots of drama may not be appropriate. Basic product photos generally serve a different purpose: They are intended more to provide information than to arouse interest. This is why basic product photos tend to be shot on a plain white background with soft lighting at a neutral camera angle.

3. Choose your angle carefully. Since we're talking about drama, another important way to create -- or limit -- it is by carefully selecting the camera angle and lens. I personally prefer to shoot footwear (and many other products) from slightly below. This makes them look a little larger than life. (Hollywood lore has it that Orson Welles convinced the studio to allow him to dig a trench in the sound stage used to film "Citizen Kane" so he could get his cameras below floor level, to make his characters look more intimidating.) Likewise, a high angle shot can be equally effective in generating emotion and interest.

A photo can be worth a thousand words when conveying information to a potential customer.

which can be distracting). The quality of the reflection depends on the camera angle and how the product is lighted. But without much effort, it's possible to get really nice reflections by using Plexiglas® under the product. For advanced photographers, I suggest using a polarizing filter when shooting on Plexiglas®. A polarizer is placed in front of the camera lens and is similar to the anti-glare coating found on sunglasses. Due to the way it filters light, a polarizer helps to control reflections, both under the shoes and on the surface of the product itself. However, keep in mind that a polarizer can affect the way the digital camera sees colors, so it is important to perform a custom white balance first. (White-balancing a camera is a way to ensure accurate color is captured by the camera's sensor. The owner's manual of most digital cameras describes how to set a custom white balance.) A polarizing filter can also affect the appearance of highlights on the product's surface. By rotating the filter on the front of the lense, it is easy to achieve the best combination of reflections and highlights.

Three additional techniques that help make shoe photos more interesting are to (1) group multiple shoes together in unique ways, (2) add props that compliment or contrast the message or function of the footwear, and (3) shoot footwear in unique or compelling environments (e.g., at the beach or on a city street). Remember this simple point: The more interesting the photos, the more interested customers will be.

Finally, it is often important to use close-ups to capture detail (zippers, buckles, stitching, straps, soles) that highlights craftsmanship and makes the item more appealing. A macro lens can magnify the image, allowing small details to become visible. A macro lens can be added to the front of the camera, or sometimes a special close-up setting is available in the camera menu. Either way, a macros lens creates a more detailed image that

Finally, lens choice can also influence the product's appearance. A wide angle lens, especially when used close up, can create a more formidable looking shoe than the same shot taken with a longer lens from a normal shooting distance.

4. Use reflections, props, and group shots. One way to make a photo more interesting is to create reflections under the product. I prefer to do this in-camera rather than in Photoshop. An easy way to create a reflection under a product is to use a piece of acrylic sheeting such as Plexiglas® (mirrors or glass create double reflections,
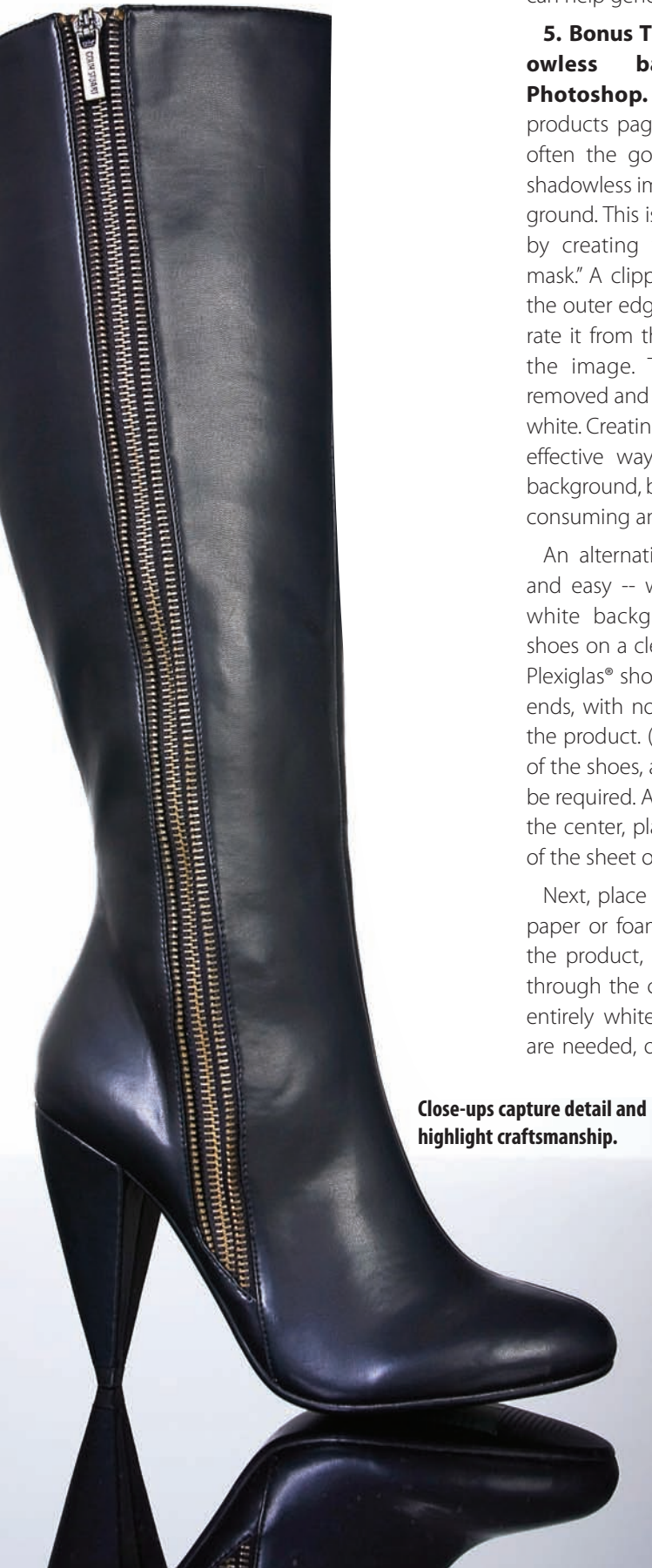

A lower angle helps make a product look larger than life, but a high-angle shot also generates interest.

can help generate customer interest.

5. Bonus Tip: Getting white, shadowless backgrounds without Photoshop. When shooting for the products page of a website or catalog, often the goal is to produce a clean, shadowless image on a pure white background. This is often done in Photoshop by creating what's called a "clipping mask." A clipping mask involves tracing the outer edges of the product to separate it from the existing background of the image. The background is then removed and replaced by a layer of pure white. Creating clipping masks can be an effective way to create a pure white background, but it can also be very time-consuming and expensive.

An alternative -- and relatively quick and easy -- way to create shadowless, white background shots is to place shoes on a clear sheet of Plexiglas®. The Plexiglas® should be supported on both ends, with nothing directly underneath the product. (Depending on the weight of the shoes, a relatively thick sheet may be required. Also, to help fight any sag in the center, place weights on either end of the sheet of plastic itself.)

Next, place a piece of white seamless paper or foam core below and behind the product, so that when it is viewed through the camera, the background is entirely white. Then at least two lights are needed, one for the shoes and one for the background. (To make this work, the product and background need to be lighted separately.). The trick is to make sure there is enough light on the background to slightly overexpose it. (Lighting the shoes separately allows them to be properly exposed regardless of how the background is lighted) Since the shoes are not resting directly on the background, there will be no shadow below or behind the product. And since the background is overexposed, it shows as pure white in the final image. The shoes in the photo will stand out against the pure white background, creating a clean, shadowless image without using Photoshop. In addition, the white background in the photo will match the white of most website or catalog pages, resulting in a seamless transition between the photo and the surrounding page.

With a little planning and practice, taking great footwear photos that help sell more product can be fun and easy.■

Peter Alessandria is a commercial and fine art photographer based in New Jersey. He enjoys sunsets, long walks on the beach and the incessant click of a camera shutter. For more information, visit his website or photography blog, at www.great productshots.com or greatproduct shots.blogspot.com, respectively.

Close-ups capture detail and highlight craftsmanship.