

Sculpting with light

An introduction to tabletop product photography

Tabletop product photography—photographing small objects—is usually used in an advertising context.

The subject might be a product such as food or a can of motor oil, or some kind of widget. While Robert Penn's richly conceived and immaculately executed still life photographs were works of art, most tabletop photography falls into the category of "make it look good, but do it quickly."

As with all advertising photography, the key to success (i.e., making the subject look desirable) is lighting and styling. At its simplest, this kind of work requires minimal styling, such as simply placing a single object against a white background. The subject itself needs to be in near perfect condition and the background needs to be clean. There are tricks of the trade to enhance the sheen of the object or soften it to a sweet, even glow. There are Photoshop techniques and plugins for knocking out the background, but I like to start with a sweep of white background because it serves as a built-in reflector.

Still life photography is essentially sculpting with light. One common mistake is thinking you automatically need multiple light sources and lots of wattage to create adequate lighting. A single light, placed in the right position, can bring out the texture and dimensionality of the product. The goal here is to give the intended audience an appealing visual sense of the product.

Compare the images in **Figures 1** and **2**. In **Figure 1**, I placed a single light in a 30x40-inch soft box directly over the product. The center of the light is actually a little behind the center of the telephone. It took maybe 10 minutes total to place the light, meter it, position the phone at the desired angle, and tilt the camera to make a couple of exposures. The phone looks okay; you get a sense of what it looks like.

Figure 2 is done with the same light, but this time I moved down the light to camera left. To create strategically placed highlights, I placed four silver bounce cards of various sizes around and above the telephone. These helped reveal the curved surfaces and edges of the phone. In this light, the retro art deco design of the phone is clearer, and

the modern push buttons where one would expect a dial mechanism are highlighted. Overall, this shot took about 20 minutes, excluding cleaning the telephone, hanging the seamless, and setting up the stands and light. Using reflectors rather than additional lights spared me the hassle of rigging new lights, re-metering with each one, and dealing with multiple shadows.

If you learn to create a maximum visual effect with a minimum of gear and preparation, you'll be ahead of the game. Remember that like fashion trends, lighting styles change over time, but if you learn to trust your eye, you'll find that the ultimate rule of lighting is constant: If it looks good, shoot it! □

Tools

Lighting: Balcar A2400 pack and single Balcar U head; Plume Wafer 100 soft box; LumiQuest Table Top Reflector System; Sekonic L-558 Dual Master meter; LPA Design PocketWizard MultiMAX

Camera: Contax 645AF camera with Zeiss 80mm f/2 Planar lens; Kodak Professional 645C DCS Pro Back

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Figure 1



Figure 2