



Visual **SKUs**

The

10

**BIGGEST
MISTAKES**

**BUSINESSES MAKE WITH THEIR
PRODUCT PHOTOGRAPHY**

and how to avoid them!

The 10 Biggest Mistakes Businesses Make With Their Product Photography

(and how to avoid them!)

Thanks in advance for reading this report.
I hope you find the content illuminating and well worth 30 minutes of your time.

If your business sells products of any kind through B2B and/or B2C channels, product images play a critical role in the sales process.

If you are not doing any product photography, it is time to start!

If you are doing product photography and not doing a very good job at it, consider the statement below:

“ Poorly planned and managed product photography will cost your business time and money, and will result in the production of low quality images. ”

Let's look at the 3 key points in this statement:

1. Poorly planned and managed product photography will cost your business time...

If your product photography program is not managed properly, whether in-house with your photographers and equipment or outsourced to a service provider, it will take longer than it should to produce the images.

The more time it takes to produce product images the longer it will take to get these images on to your web site and/or to your customers so they can post them on their website. Because product images are so important to selling online, during this 'time-to-market' period you will be losing sales. Conversely, the faster you get your images to market the more products you will sell.

Bottom line is this – by improving your product photography processes you will shorten the time-to-market and generate more sales for your business.

2. Poorly planned and managed product photography will cost your business money...

Product photography done wrong is almost always characterized by slow production. Slower production equals higher costs. Production problems are typically caused by a combination of inefficient workflows, manual processes, disorganized studio workspaces, and poorly selected photography and imaging resources.

And of course slow production goes back to the first point, time-to-market. If your production is slow your product images are flowing into the sales process slowly resulting in lost sales.

3. Poorly planned and managed product photography will produce low quality images...

A bi-product of a poor performing product photography is low quality images.

Why is image quality important? Because there is a direct relationship between image quality and sales.

When buyers see images that are unclear, have messy backgrounds, and are taken from angles that do not represent the product effectively, they are left with the impression that the product itself is low quality.

If your competitors have better quality images on a side-by-side comparison (common in the ecommerce sales process) they will likely win the sale, you will not.

Quality matter, don't kid yourself for a second that it doesn't.

10 Product Photography Mistakes and How to Avoid Them

Ok, now that you are aware of the implications of poorly planned and managed product photography, let's look at the 10 most common mistakes businesses make with their product photography and how you can avoid them.

This is not a priority list with #1 being the most important and #10 being the least. They are all important and should be considered equally.

Mistake #1: Thinking it is easier than it is.

Mistake #2: Hiring / using the wrong people.

Mistake #3: Winging it.

Mistake #4: Not thinking about cost.

Mistake #5: Not getting buy-in.

Mistake #6: Not prioritizing product imaging.

Mistake #7: Producing low quality images.

Mistake #8: Not using software to automate repetitive tasks.

Mistake #9: Not capturing multiple images for all your products.

Mistake #10: Not considering all available options.



Mistake #1: **Thinking it is easier than it is.**

“It can't be that hard, get some studio and camera equipment, hire Jim's cousin who is a camera buff, pull some product from inventory, and start snapping away. Simple!”

Unfortunately, this is not an uncommon approach, but it is a big mistake.

Most businesses that think product photography is simple end up changing their tune before long. They get frustrated with slow production, low quality images, blown budgets, and losing sales to their competitors. They realize product photography requires proper planning, the right equipment, the right people, and tools for production, efficiency, and image quality.



HOW TO AVOID THE 'PRODUCT PHOTOGRAPHY IS SIMPLE' MINDSET?

The best approach is to learn all you can either before you start your product photography program or when you are experiencing low production, low quality, and high costs.

Key areas of knowledge include:

- **How to set up a product imaging budget:**

Costs associated with product photography and image production.

- **How to set up a studio:**

Camera gear, lights, tables, stands, softboxes, computer equipment, and studio space organization.

- **How to hire and train resources:**

Product photographers, image editors, QA personnel, and project managers.

- **How to set up photography workflows:**

Delivering products to and from the studio, preparing products for photography, photographing products, cataloging images as they are captured, and managing projects.

- **How to produce high quality images:**

Image editing techniques, training and standards implementation, image QA, and image formatting.



Mistake #2: Hiring / using the wrong people.

Hiring or using the wrong people can be extremely costly and have a negative impact on production and quality.

Let's look at a common scenario:

- Jim from accounting has a son, Jim Jr., who is a bit of a shutter-bug and needs work so you hire him to be the lead photographer on the project.
- Janet's cousin is a wiz at Photoshop so you hire her to be your image editor and QA person.
- Pete in the warehouse has a bit of bandwidth so you tap him as the project manager.

Here's what reality looks like:

- Jim Jr. has experience as a photographer but not a product photographer (which is a specialty). He is not experienced in product lighting techniques or product photography workflows. Image production is slow and image quality is not acceptable.
- Janet's cousin is not an expert in the image editing techniques required for productive product image editing. She, like Jim, is slow and the image quality is poor.
- Pete finds that managing the project takes more time than he has and, because he does not have a vested interest in product images, the project becomes a low priority. The result is that budgets are not met, production is slow, costs are high, and sales are lost.



HOW TO AVOID THE HIRING PITFALLS?

Here are 3 hiring practices that you should follow:

1. Hire an experienced product photographer:

The key here is 'experienced' – this means the photographer has a proven track-record with product photography in a production environment. They know how to light a product quickly and effectively. They know how to orient and prop products so the required angles can be quickly achieved. They know how to move quickly from product to product and to implement efficient workflows. Basically, they just know what they are doing. The photographer will have the biggest impact on both quality and production. And lastly, don't hire Jim Jr., you will regret it.

2. Hire a true imaging expert:

Today so many people call themselves experts at Photoshop and image editing. It is amazing how many 'experts' can't edit product images quickly with quality results. The only way to find the true experts is to test them. Get 25 un-edited product images straight from the camera. Choose images with plenty of shadows, dull patches, glares, dirty backgrounds, and props. Ask the editors to create clipping paths, place the images on a white background, clean up imperfections on the products in the image, adjust tones and levels, align the product in the image, and crop the images to a specific tolerance. Time them and review each image for quality. I guarantee the real experts will emerge.

3. Use a project manager that has the time and a vested interest in the project:

In our scenario, Pete from the warehouse had no interest in product imaging, he had nothing at stake and hence it is a low priority in his world. Look for someone in your business who is motivated to see the project succeed. For example, find someone in marketing, they need the product images for ecommerce sites, campaigns, marketing materials and many other initiatives. This means they will be motivated to make the project a success. In addition, make sure that person has a reasonable amount of time available to apply to the project if and when required.



WHAT'S
YOUR
PLAN?

Mistake #3: **Winging it.**

The mistake of not planning your product photography project is related to mistake #1 – you think it is easy than it really is.

Like any project you start, the planning stage is the most important. Unfortunately it is the stage that businesses either skip entirely (100% winging it) or they do not budget enough time to do it right.

Planning is important because:

- It forces you to consider all steps in the process from studio setup to software implementation to product sourcing and delivery to photography to image editing and QA. This provides clarity on what you know (and are therefore able to design processes around) and what you don't know (and need to research and learn the processes involved).
- It forces you to research all areas where you lack knowledge.
- With the knowledge you have acquired you will be able to anticipate things that could go wrong and to implement contingencies to deal with these issues as they arise.
- You are able to accurately budget the project.
- You will know which resources are required and how to recruit them.



HOW TO AVOID WINGING IT?

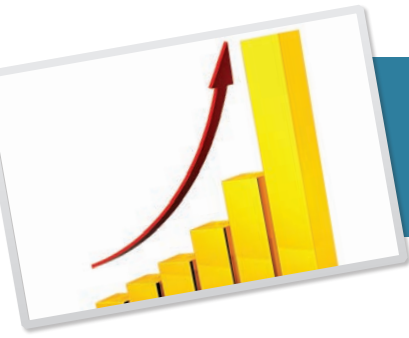
Start with the basics – educating yourself in all aspects of the product photography process. You can do this by reading blogs published by service providers like Visual SKUs – read our blog posts at:

<http://visualskus.com/imaging-services-blog>

Once you understand all the steps in the process you can design your program to meet the unique needs of your business, create a realistic budget, and allocate the right resources.

Below are the steps when planning your product photography program:

- Do thorough research.
- Think about the resources you need – photographer, inventory people for parts delivery, image editors, someone to QA and format images, and someone to manage the project overall.
- Set your quality and production goals.
- Prepare a detailed budget.
- Prepare a detailed studio setup plan including the studio equipment to source, where to set up the studio, and how to configure the studio space. Consider the space you need to: stage products; prepare products for photography; and photograph products using the studio.
- Identify software tools required.
- Design the necessary workflows – product delivery and pick up, product preparation, product photography, image editing, image QA, image formatting, image management, and project management.



Mistake #4: **Not thinking about cost.**

It is a big mistake not to track the costs of each area in the product photography process on a per image or per product basis. If you don't track these costs how will you know which areas of the process are the bottleneck, which areas are performing well, and which areas need refinements?

For example, proper cost tracking will tell you how much it costs to photograph each product or how much it costs to edit and QA each image.



HOW TO AVOID NOT KNOWING YOUR COSTS?

The following software tools will help you accurately track the cost per image:

- **Time Tracking:**

It is important to track the time spent by all resources on each product photography project. This is best achieved with time tracking software like Harvest or Replicon.

- **Image Production Management:**

This software is specifically built to track all the images photographed, edited, and QAed on each project. You can generate reports on total images produced per project, per activity (photography, editing, QA), and per resource.

- **Microsoft Excel:**

Now that you have your total time and cost for each project (from your Time Tracking software) and your total images produced per project (from your Image Production Management software) you can accurately report on the cost per image produced for each project and each project activity.



Mistake #5: Not getting buy-in.

It is a mistake to not get the proper buy-in from all parties in your business that have an interest in product images. These parties could include:

- **Marketing** – they have an interest in product images for marketing material, web sites, and a plethora of other marketing activities.
- **Cataloging** – they need images for the production of print and electronic catalogs.
- **Ecommerce** – they require product images for online selling.
- **Finance** – they need to review and approve project budgets.
- **Upper Management / Owners** – they own the profitability of the company as a whole and therefore care about the impact product images have on both costs and sales.

If these parties do not buy into the project you may experience inconsistent support, inadequate funding, poor resource allocation, and possibly project cancelation.



HOW TO AVOID THE 'BUY-IN' SYNDROME?

Below are the steps involved in ensuring that specific parties in your business buy into the program:

- List the departments and key people in them that care about product images.
- Educate these parties on the importance of product images (reinforce brands, increase sales, and reduce returns).
- Speak to all parties that require product images and document their image specifications (size, format, resolution etc.) and what they will be using the images for (brochures, catalogs, ecommerce, distributing to customers, marketing etc.).
- Produce and distribute regular reports on the: number of products photographed; number of images produced; costs per image; and the products and images to be produced in the next month, quarter, and year.
- Regularly ask for feedback regarding image quality and new or changing requirements.



Mistake #6: **Not prioritizing product imaging.**

If you are a manufacturer, distributor, or retailer, you are likely selling and/or marketing your products through B2B or B2C ecommerce channels.

If you do not have product images for all your products you are not maximizing your sales opportunities in your ecommerce sales channels.

Because product images are critical for ecommerce success, any business not prioritizing product image production is making a big mistake.



HOW TO AVOID MAKING IMAGES A LOW PRIORITY.

The single biggest factor in making product images a higher priority is to build the case for high-quality product images and to spread the word to all areas in your business that could benefit from images.

In this lobbying process you need to emphasize the benefits product images provide your business and ask for support and buy-in.

The key benefits to product images that you need to evangelize include:

1. Reinforcing your brands:

High-quality product images reinforce your brands.

2. Increasing online sales:

Product images help increase ecommerce sales.

3. Reducing product returns:

Products with multiple images displaying the product from various angles help ensure that the consumer is buying the product they need and want. This can significantly reduce product returns.



Mistake #7: **Producing low quality images.**

Businesses that defend low quality images do so because they believe:

- **Low quality images are faster to produce and therefore cost less, and**
- **Image quality does not really matter.**

To address the first point, sure, if you only consider actual production costs, banging out low quality images as fast as possible can be cheaper than producing high quality images. But when you factor in lost sales and increased product returns that result from low quality images, there costs are actually much higher.

To the second point, does image quality matter – yes, and here's why:

1. Buyer psychology works in favor of high quality images:

Online buyers make a connection between the quality of the images and the quality of the actual product. Low quality images give the impression that the quality of the product is low, and this hurts sales.

2. Your products do not look good in side-by-side comparisons:

If you sell products through resellers and you provide these resellers with product images these images will likely end up on ecommerce sites and therefore displayed side-by-side with your competitors' products. If your competitors have high quality images and you do not your products will look inferior and you will lose sales.

3. You will experience higher product returns:

The return rate in many industries is 25% or more. This represents a huge cost. If you have low quality images the buyer may not be able to determine if they are buying the right product or not. If they discover after-the-fact that the product they bought is not what they expected or wanted they will return it. High quality product images and images of the product from multiple angles will help the buyer determine if the product is what they want. This will reduce product returns.



HOW TO AVOID PRODUCING LOW QUALITY IMAGES.

Producing low quality images is partly mindset and partly process. The key is to change the mindset and then change the process.

Changing the mindset:

The best way to change the mind of decision makers is to demonstrate that low quality images actually cost more when you factor in lost sales and increased returns.

I recommend you create a simple spreadsheet illustrating the impact on the bottom line of a 5% increase in online sales (very conservative) and a 5% decrease in product returns (also very conservative). Now factor in the additional cost of producing high quality images as opposed to low quality images. You should see that with conservative increases in sales and reductions in returns that there is a significant return on investment (ROI). This means that producing high quality images pays for itself (many times over would be my guess). Present this case to all the people in your company that care about project images.

Changing the process:

You can increase production rates without sacrificing quality simply by changing the way you create images. Here's how:

1. Stop winging it and start planning:

Planning makes the product imaging process much more efficient and productive. For example, by determining which products need images in advance of photography you can group products by like characteristics – weight, size, product category, etc. - and arrange for their delivery to the studio in these groups. Doing this one simple planning exercise can increase your production rates more than 20%.

2. Hire the right people:

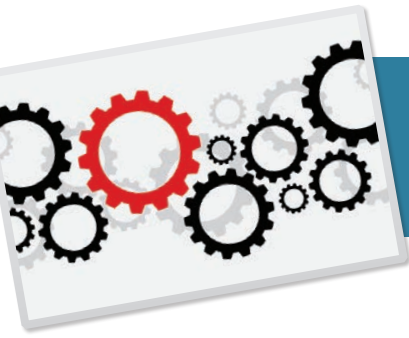
Having a good, experienced product photographer can increase production 20% or more.

3. Implement efficient workflows:

Workflows are straight forward to implement but can have a significant effect on production rates. By workflows I am referring to things like how products are prepared for photography, how they are grouped by like products, how lights are setup, how studio space is structured, etc.

4. Deploy software to automate repetitive tasks:

See mistake #8 on the next page.



Mistake #8: **Not using software to automate repetitive tasks.**

Most businesses use a combination of spreadsheets and folders to organize their product photography processes.

This approach is a mistake and will lead to manual, time-consuming, and costly tasks including:

- Renaming images by product number and image view (e.g. top, bottom, left, right) after they have been captured by the photographer.
- Moving images captured into folders for image editing.
- Moving images edited into folders for image QA.
- Moving images that do not pass QA back to the editing folders.
- Moving images that require reshooting to photography folders.
- Formatting images that passed QA.
- Creating Excel spreadsheets or Access databases to answer questions like: which products have been photographed and which have not; for the products that have been photographed, which are missing image views.



HOW TO AVOID REPETITIVE TASKS.

The best way to eliminate repetitive tasks from your product photography process is to implement web-based Image Production Management software.

Image Production Management software is accessible anywhere, anytime. It helps you manage 6 main areas of the product photography process:

1. Project Setup:

When you setup a product photography project you will upload all your product information into the system including product numbers, UPCs, product categories, and image views required for each category. You will assign users to the project and define their role - photographer, QA, image editing etc.

2. Product Photography:

Once your product is setup on the system you will synchronize it with the Photography Workflow Management software running at the photography studio. Now the photographer will know exactly what images are needed for each product. When the images are captured they are associated to the product number and image views. This eliminates the need for renaming files and manually uploading or copying them to folders. The photographer focuses on photography not repetitive, manual tasks.

3. Image Editing:

The image editors, who are often remote to the photography studio, use software to download images from the system, edit them in Photoshop, and upload them to the web based system automatically. There is no copying and pasting between folders. All images are associated to the editor that edited them and editing times are recorded for production reporting.

4. Image QA:

When editors upload their images to the system they become available for QA. If they pass QA they will be available for formatting. If they do not pass QA they will either go back to the photography software for reshooting on the next synchronization or they will go back to the editor for further editing. There is no copying and pasting between folders. The status of the images (not photographed, photographed, edited, QAed, reshoot etc.) is recorded in the system and can be viewed in real-time reports.

5. Image Formatting:

Images that pass QA will be formatted according to the specifications required by the various areas in your business. These images can be uploaded to FTP servers or internal systems. This process eliminates the need for running files through Photoshop actions and manually copying files into multiple folders.

6. Image Management and Reporting:

Images can be managed on the web based system by anyone who has been granted permission. Users can view and manage images as well as manage the image data (product numbers, image views, image status, etc.). Reports can be generated on image editing production, photography production, and project progress. With this system there is no time wasted creating manual reports on production, missing images, and images in various stages of the production cycle. Reports are easily generated and downloaded for further analysis.

Image Production Management software will increase your production rates, reduce the cost per image, and allow you to scale your product photography program.



Mistake #9: **Not capturing multiple images for all your products.**

There are two key reasons why it is a mistake to not capture all the required image views for your products when they are delivered to the photography studio.

1. Pulling product from inventory more than once is very costly:

One of the biggest costs in the product photography process is pulling the product from inventory, delivering it to the studio or external service provider, and returning it to inventory after photography. If you have gone through all this expense and the product is on the photographer's table, you might as well capture all the image views you think you need today and may need in the future. The cost of pulling the product from inventory again, delivering it to the studio, and returning it is MUCH higher than the cost of capturing additional images the first time.

2. Fewer images per product hurts sales and increases product returns:

In most cases it is beneficial to have multiple image views for each product. You can take images of all sides of the product and close-up images of specific areas of the product that you feel would be important for the consumer to see. As I have already mentioned, higher quality images and more views per product will help you sell more and reduce returns.



HOW TO AVOID THE ISSUES RELATED TO INADEQUATE IMAGE VIEWS.

The process for creating all the images views you need for each product category includes:

- Creating groups or categories for all your products.
- Thinking about how a buyer would want to view your products in these groups or categories.
- Listing all the image views and angles a buyer might want to see when making their purchase decision. When you go through this exercise think about buyer needs and behavior today and in the future (again, you want to photograph the product fully once, not partially more than once).
- Add these image views to your project.



Mistake #10: **Not considering all available options.**

It is a mistake jumping into product photography without understanding all the options available to you. You have several options to consider, learn how they work, and think about how they would fit into your business.

The 4 product photography options available to you are:

1. Outsourced product photography at the service provider's studio:

With this option you find a service provider that operates a photography studio that can accommodate your project. This is most suitable to businesses that: do not want to bother with product imaging in-house; want a service provider to handle all aspects of the process; have products that can be shipped to an external studio; and the quantity of product is suitable when considering shipping to a local or remote studio.

2. Outsourced product photography at your place of business:

With this option you find a service provider that will bring their photography studio operation to your place of business (distribution center, warehouse, or office). They set up the studio, you deliver the product to the location in your facility where the studio is setup, they photograph your products, and edit, QA, format, and deliver the images. This option is suitable for businesses that; do not want to image products themselves; have products that are not easily shipped; and have a large quantity of products where the cost of shipping would be prohibitive.

3. In-house product photography at your place of business:

With this option you set up your own photography studio in your business and handle all aspects of the process with your internal resources. This option is suitable for businesses that: want to control the entire process themselves; have enough products that need imaging to warrant the time, effort, and cost associated with setting up a photography studio in-house; and feel that they have the necessary knowledge and access to resources to implement a productive studio.

4. In-house / outsourced hybrid:

With this option you would look for a service provider that can help you setup and operate a product photography studio. An example of how this would work is the service provider supplies consulting services on the studio for workflow setup, and implements Image Production Management software to manage the entire process. This option suits businesses that: understand the importance of product imaging; want to setup processes that are productive and produce high quality images; know that they need help setting up the systems correctly; and want to work with a service provider that has Image Production Management software.



HOW TO AVOID THE WRONG OPTION.

Making the wrong decision when implementing a product photography process can be costly. You might find your business in the situation where production rates are low, image quality does not meet standards, and costs are high.

The best way to avoid this is to educate yourself on the options available. As I mentioned before, industry and service provider blogs and websites will provide you all the information you need to make the best decision for your business.



CONCLUSION

In this report I outlined 10 mistakes that businesses make when they are doing product photography. My hope is that by reading this report you can minimize the mistakes you are currently making and avoid making new ones.

Please feel free to contact Visual SKUs if you would like to discuss your product photography plans and challenges. We have years of experience helping businesses improve their product photography processes and have produced well over a million product images in our studios and onsite at our customer's place of business.

Check out our blog for articles that will help your business produce product images that help you sell more and reduce returns.



<http://visualskus.com/imaging-services-blog>



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