

Using a Light Box for Improved Product Promotion

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(Note to photographers: The information in this handout can also be applied to shooting images for stock photography submissions.)

When you have a product to sell, unfortunately, it is not enough to just make the product and hope that people buy it. You have to promote the art pieces you make to sell. Promoting your product can take many forms: websites, blogs, social networking sites, photo albums, flyers, newspaper ads, brochures, business cards – all sorts of electronic and print media. To promote your art pieces in these various kinds of media requires outstanding pictures of your products.

What makes a picture “outstanding” for promotional purposes?

1. **SHARPNESS** – There are a number of things you can do to increase the sharpness of your images:
 - Choose center weighted focus, or the portrait setting in your digital camera’s menu.
 - Choose the lowest ISO setting your camera has to offer. In most point and shoot digital cameras, this will either be 80 or 100. The lower the ISO setting, the less “noise” you’ll get in your picture. (Visual “noise” in a photo is similar to static on the old analog television screens. “Noise” in a photo appears as unwanted dots that you can see on your image.)
 - Make SURE your camera doesn’t move when you take a picture. Set your camera on a tripod if possible. If that’s not possible, then set your camera on some other stationary object such as a chair, table or countertop.
 - Use the shutter priority mode on your camera (usually denoted by an “S” on the camera’s dial) and choose a shutter speed that’s 1/250th of a second or higher if lighting conditions permit, then let your camera determine the proper aperture setting.
 - Use the highest quality setting your camera has to offer. This will appear in your camera’s menu as either a larger file size, or you may have the option of whether to shoot in JPG or TIFF mode. If you have this option, choose the TIFF setting. As we learned in a previous session from Bernie, JPG files are compressed, and each time you manipulate them in your computer and then save them, they re-compress which then causes the photo to degrade a little more each time. TIFF files are larger than JPG files because they are not compressed, and since they are not compressed, they will not degrade over multiple uses and modifications.
2. **COLOR** – Always use color photographs to promote your art. A potential customer’s first impression is everything, and if they’re not seeing your product in color, they’re not getting the proper first impression. To make sure your photos

have realistic color, it's important to choose the proper white balance setting on your camera. We'll discuss how to properly set the white balance for a lightbox later.

3. **LIGHT** – your product must be well lit. A dimly lit photo will make your product appear dingy and uninspiring. A light box, when used with the proper settings on your camera, will help your product be well lit from all angles, and will minimize harsh shadows, thus giving the photo of your product a more professional look.

This brings us to the light box. A light box is like a little mini studio used for shooting (relatively) small objects such as jewelry or pottery, or fabric products such as hats or gloves. The bigger the product you have to photograph, the bigger the light box you will need. The purpose of the light box is to apply diffused light to your product, thus minimizing the harsh shadows caused by a camera's flash.

This is what a basic light box looks like:



You can spend \$40 or more for a ready-made light box or you can make one yourself for next to nothing, using things you probably already have around the house. Here's how to make your own:

Things you'll need:

- A cardboard box that's at least twice as big as your product
- White tissue paper (the kind used for wrapping a shirt in a shirt gift box)
- Large poster board (white or black is common, but any color may be used)
- Sharp scissors or a box cutter
- Scotch tape
- Pencil
- Ruler

Directions for Assembly:

1. Lay your box on a table with the open side facing you. Cut off all four flaps so they don't get in your way later.
2. Use your pencil and ruler to draw a square on the top of your box. This square should leave one inch between the edges of your square and the edges of the box.
3. Draw a similar square on the right side and on the left side of this box.
4. Use your scissors or box cutter to cut out all three squares you just drew.
5. Cover each open square completely with tissue paper, using the scotch tape to tape the edges of the tissue paper to the box.
6. Insert the posterboard inside the box so that it covers the bottom of the box, then curves up the back, to the top of the box, as shown in the picture above. If the posterboard won't stay in place on its own, you can use scotch tape to tape it down

Setting up the light sources

We must now supply light to our light box. The light box needs three light sources – one on either side, and one from above.

The light sources can come in many forms. You could use three lamps with the shades removed (use clear bulbs, not “soft light” white blubs), or you could buy some inexpensive clamp lights. Most artists already have the clamp lights which they use in their booths. The wattage on the bulbs should be at least 60 watts, and again, the bulbs should be clear. You may also choose to use clamp spot lights. Choose the whitest or purest light possible when choosing bulbs.

If the light box is placed on a table, then you can back up a chair to the left side and another chair to the right side of the box, and then clamp your lights to the chair backs. If you have a clamp light with a long arm and an “elbow” (similar to the one pictured below), then you can back up a third chair to the back side of the box and extend the light so that it is directly over the top of the box. An incandescent light bulb in the ceiling will not work for this, as it is too far from the box.

Photo of a lamp with a long arm and an “elbow”:



Placing the product in the box

Place the product in the center of the box. Make sure that several inches of posterboard is showing on the floor of your box, in front of your product.

At this point, we have two objectives:

1. to put enough light on your product so that you do not need to use the flash on your camera (make sure the flash is turned OFF in your menu settings)
2. to arrange the lights and the product in such a way as to minimize shadows on or under the product

Move your lights and your product around until you see the least amount of shadow you can possibly achieve.

Taking the pictures

The settings on your camera will, in part, depend on the color of the posterboard you choose as the background for your product.

Start with setting your camera to the “P” setting. This is known as “Program” mode or “Fully Automatic” mode. Choosing this setting on the dial will cause the camera to choose the proper combination of shutter speed and aperture settings for the lighting conditions.

If your posterboard is not white: set your white balance setting to “Sunny” or to bright light.

If your posterboard IS white: Cameras don’t see things exactly as the naked eye does, and for this reason, sometimes cameras will automatically interpret the amount of light in a photo differently than the way we see it with our eyes. In the case with our light box using a white posterboard, this may make the amount of light so bright that the camera

thinks the normal settings will cause the subject to be over exposed (too bright, washed out), so it automatically uses a setting that lets in less light, which results in your white posterboard looking gray in the picture. (The same is true when you're photographing snow, btw). Therefore, you need to force the camera to let more light into the picture. You can do this in one of two ways:

Option One:

Find your camera's exposure compensation button. Each press of this button to the right (in the positive direction) mimics increasing your camera's aperture by 1/3 of an f-stop. In plain English, this means that it will add more light to your picture in very small increments, thus making the picture brighter, and the posterboard whiter. Press this button enough times, and you may be able to "wash out" the gray that you were previously getting.

Option Two:

Aim your camera at the product and, with the dial set to "P," depress your shutter button half way, and note which shutter speed the camera selected. Then release the shutter button, and turn the dial to "S." Decrease your shutter speed one notch (so that the shutter stays open longer, thus letting in more light). Take another picture. Is the image bright enough? Is the white posterboard white enough? If not, decrease your shutter speed another notch, and another notch until the brightness is where it needs to be. (*Caution: Any time your shutter speed is 1/30th of a second or slower, you must use a tripod or other stationary object to brace your camera against, in order to avoid blur in your picture.*)

You may also have to customize your white balance, if your camera has this function. With your dial set to P, S, or A, (not playback mode) go into your camera's menu and choose white balance. See if there's an option there for "custom." If there is, then consult your camera's manual for instructions how to use this feature. In general, with the custom white balance feature, you will aim your camera at the white posterboard and depress your shutter button, which will then tell your camera that the item at which you just aimed is the true white in the photo. This will cause your camera to make the proper adjustments so that the white comes out white in future pictures using the light box and this custom white balance setting. Don't forget to change your white balance back to its normal settings after you finish taking light box pictures!

Getting the whiteness and the brightness just right may take some trial and error with your camera settings, but in the end, you will have product photos that are professional looking, and will make a fantastic first impression on your customers!