

*pivc*TIPS

*PRODUCT PHOTOGRAPHY*

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The photographer's late; the designer is booked out; your loyal customers are eagerly waiting for the release of new products. The products are here, but there are no product images. Sound familiar? Don't stress! Breathe! Believe it or not, it's possible to have professional looking product photos without taking out a second mortgage. Just do it yourself! Here are our top tips on how to take your own product images.



## 1) EMBRACE THE **SUN** AS YOUR LIGHT SOURCE

That's a pretty professional-looking product image, don't you think? Believe it or not, it wasn't taken in a studio with multiple flashes and strobes, but in a well-lit room on a nice day. Don't believe me? Have a look at the photo of our super professional studio on the next page.



See? The light is actually coming from two windows that face each other (and yes that is a white bed sheet draped over an old CD rack). No fancy flashes and strobes here.

The key is to use the sunlight as an indirect light source, so that you brighten the whole photo as opposed to shining a direct light on the product. This is why photos using natural lighting actually turn out best when you photograph your product near a window or in a shady outdoor area. If the light is still too bright near your window, you can always diffuse it by covering the window with sheets or curtains like we did (don't diffuse the light with anything but white, as using coloured material will naturally impact the colour of light that streams through).

Using existing light means that you can essentially shoot anywhere, presuming there's sunlight. You don't need to spend money on equipment, or waste your time and energy setting it up. This makes it the perfect light source for all the busy eCommerce store owners out there.

If you're taking multiple photos of one product, make sure you take them at roughly the same time of day for consistency. The amount of light and even the colour of the lighting changes depending on the time of day. In general, morning light is bright and has fewer colours, whereas afternoon/evening light often has a warm undertone and brings out greater contrast in your images. You can always neutralise the image and make it cooler during post-production if want a cool, dark image.

Natural lighting complements homeware products really well; there's a certain homely feel about natural lighting that is really difficult to recreate with artificial light sources, and you're able to transport your viewer into a home (which is only complete with your product in it, wink wink nudge nudge!) rather than into a studio.



Tip: Take note of where your shadows fall, as some shadows may hide some details of your product. Using a window with grills or blinds might result in unwanted shadows.



Tip: Take your photo at the brightest time of day (usually between late morning and early afternoon) because at these hours, sunlight is at its brightest and illuminates sufficient lighting near windows or in the shade.

## 2) USE **MULTIPLE LIGHT SOURCES**

For a professional-looking photo, you need to light up both your product and the entire photograph. This can only be done using multiple light sources, but you don't need top-of-the-range strobes and flashes. Reading or desk lamps are a great source of artificial lighting, particularly if they're adjustable because you can aim them wherever you want. Shine one light onto your product, and one onto the ceiling to light up the entire photo. If you have a room that's lit with sufficient natural lighting you only need the light that shines onto the product, and in a well-lit environment the flash on your camera is probably good enough.

Try photographing your product with different light source combinations and from various angles to see what works best for your product - this is likely to change depending on the product so it might take some fiddling. However, try not to mix warm and cool light sources because you'll confuse your camera's white balance calibration (we'll explain what this means in a bit).



Tip: Avoid ceiling lights because they often create harsh shadows.



### 3) **STABILISE** YOUR CAMERA

If you don't know much about photography, tripods are used primarily to avoid camera shake. Even the steadiest hands aren't able to produce track-sharp images, particularly when lighting is average or you're shooting a close-up.

No tripod? No problem! You don't need an expensive, fancy tripod to stabilise your camera. Use any kind of a hard, even, and stable surface. Small tables and hard floors are perfect, or even get creative and make a tower out of books. If you do take product photos on a regular basis, a tripod is a good investment, even if it's a really simple and cheap one (remember: product images, not crazy action shots in the great outdoors). Though we usually take our product photos using a tripod, I set up a DIY box tripod to show you that it's possible. I even covered it with an oh-so fancy box tripod cloth to make it look extra professional.





Tip: Once you're happy with your exposure and your frame, set the camera onto a two second timer mode because it will give the camera enough time to stop wobbling when you press down the shutter button.



Tip: If you're taking photos of similar products or multiple photos of the same product, mark a spot for your camera, a spot for your subject and, if you're using any artificial light sources, a spot for each light source. This will give you consistent images. I find clear tape works pretty well.

#### 4) TAKE YOUR PHOTO ON A **WHITE BACKDROP**

You're probably wondering why we wasted our time setting up a white backdrop even though we remove the background anyway. Firstly, removing the background is much easier if you shoot on white in the first place. Secondly, if you want, you can get a natural shadow which might bring some life to your product.



Tip: I'd recommend using fabric over cardboard for your backdrop to create a smooth transition from the wall

Thirdly, white reflects white light back up onto your product, whereas darker colours absorb it. You might come across this issue when you photograph jewellery on a black display bust. They usually come in black, because in real life it does make the product stand out and does make the piece look more elegant. For this same reason, a lot of people place their jewellery on a black background for their website's product images. But black display busts should be left to the real world; if you want black on your website product images, shoot your photo on a white backdrop and change the background to black on the computer. If you look at the photos below, the product taken on white looks much better both before and after editing.



Tip: If you only have a black bust, just cover it with a white cloth.

And lastly, you want your camera's white balance calibration to be as accurate as possible. Have you ever taken a product photo and the colour has turned out funny? Light sources are rarely pure white; they often have a slight 'colour temperature' that affects the photo and may result in a funny tint that doesn't accurately resemble the real colour of the product. For example, if you take a photo of a piece of paper by a candle, the warm candle light will make the paper appear slightly yellow. The sun produces a slightly blue light, so taking a photo of the same piece of paper in natural light will make it appear bluer.

Colour temperature is measured in 'Kelvin', and our brains are able to adjust to different light naturally and process these colours for us. Going back to our piece of paper, whether we're indoors or by candle light, we can see that the piece of paper is white. However, a digital camera can only guess. If you set your camera to 'Auto White Balance', it will guess the Kelvin number based on a white element in the photo that it uses as a reference point. You can manually adjust your white balance settings in order to make the colours be more realistic. If you adjust them properly, the piece of paper should appear white regardless of the sunlight or candlelight.

You should always ask yourself whether the colours in the photograph are the same as those in real life. If you're not a camera expert or you're using a simple smartphone camera as opposed to a DSLR, you can always edit the temperature of the photo later in Photoshop or any other kind of photo-editing software. Even something simple like iPhoto has a pretty good temperature adjustment tool for product photography.



There are 8 different white balance options on a DSLR; auto white balance, cloudy, daylight, flash, fluorescent, tungsten and custom. The photo below compares all 8, and the custom balance (which accurately represents the product's true colour) was pretty similar to the auto white balance setting. This is because we only used natural lighting sources and a white backdrop, which made the white balance calibration pretty accurate. and the white backdrop made the white balance calibration pretty accurate.



Flash



Cloudy



Daylight



Tungsten



Fluorescent



Shade



Auto



Custom [background removed]

## 5) AVOID USING AUTO MODE ON A DSLR: HAVE A BASIC UNDERSTANDING OF **APERTURE, ISO AND SHUTTER SPEED**

Have a basic understanding of aperture, ISO and shutter speed. If you're not camera-savvy, here are the basics:

The aperture determines the amount of light that travels into the camera and is measured in f-stops; the smaller the f-stop number, the larger the aperture. Your aperture is directly linked to your depth of field, which determines the area of the photo that's in focus. Photographers often play around with aperture to isolate their foreground from their background; a larger aperture (smaller f-stop number) does exactly that, by making your foreground sharp and your background blurry.



f/1.8



f/16

With product photography, you should manipulate your depth of field not to artistically separate the foreground and background, but to make sure the entire product is in focus. Anywhere between f/6 and f/8 is usually good enough to capture a sharp image of the entire product. Your results will depend on your lighting set-up, though - if you have poor lighting and your product is too dark, try shooting with a larger aperture (a lower f-stop number), though you may find that not all of the product is in focus so you might have to play around with some other settings or the positioning of your product, lights and camera. Don't worry if the background comes out blurry - this is likely to happen when you shoot with a large aperture. Remember that the focus is on your product and you can always remove the background in post-editing.

Next, the ISO determines how sensitive your camera is to light; the higher the ISO, the more sensitive your camera. The ISO values follow a geometric sequence - each value doubles on from the previous value (i.e. 100, 200, 400, 800, 1600, 3200, 6400 etc.). This means that the sensitivity also doubles each time you go up a number.



ISO 200



ISO 3200



You should always aim to use a low ISO for a better quality image - try not to exceed 400. As you keep going up, the photo will start to look grainy. However with a lower ISO you need to make sure your product is well lit, whether you use natural or artificial light sources (or a combination of both).

And finally, the shutter speed is the length of time the camera shutter stays open, exposing light to the camera sensor. Faster shutter speeds tend to produce sharper images and are usually paired with higher ISOs. And because you want a low ISO, this is where your tripod becomes really important - with a stabilised camera you can shoot with a slower shutter speed and you won't get a blurry photo. I usually go for around 1/50th of a second or faster.

You've probably zoned out by now because blah blah blah, technical words, acronyms etc. It's hard to give exact values for the ideal settings because so much depends on your lighting set-up, but if you've done your best to light up the product and the photo space, use a shutter speed above 1/50th of a second to keep the image sharp, an ISO between 100 and 400 to keep image noise to a minimum, and an aperture of anywhere between f/4 and f/8 to ensure your entire product is perfectly in focus.



Tip: If your set-up is lit well enough and you're getting dark photos, you should increase your aperture (lower your f-number) before changing the ISO and shutter speed.

## 6) DO NOT OVER-EDIT

Put yourself in your customer's shoes - imagine buying something online and receiving something that looks pretty different. Disappointing, right? You would probably send it back, rage on social media, cry, promise yourself to never shop in that store again, or do a combination of all four. To avoid falsely representing your product, don't kill your product image with editing.

You can use photo-editing apps to make minor image adjustments, such as tweaking the exposure, contrast, sharpness and brightness, but don't go crazy. Less is definitely more in this context. Use only the bare minimum because the more you edit, the more you decrease the quality of the photo. Don't use tacky filters or excessively contrast the photo, and don't decorate your photo with silly borders and coloured text. The image below is an example of what NOT to do, and it was heartbreaking to create and even more so to upload.



Not only does the text on that image look terrible, but the contrast and brightness levels have been tweaked way too much. Many people take their photo on a white backdrop and attempt to remove the background by altering the brightness and contrast levels until they match the white you see on a computer screen. This will make your products look terrible, and it's also really hard to get an exact colour match. If it really bothers you, just completely remove the background. I promise that your product image will look much more professional.



## 7) KEEP YOUR BACKGROUND **SIMPLE**

The rule of product image backgrounds is that the background should not conflict with or distract the viewer from the product. The background can influence the whole atmosphere of the product image. For example, imagine an advertisement for a smartphone, where the product is lying on a cluttered desk. Amongst a mess of pens, crumpled up paper and used coffee mugs, you wouldn't associate the smartphone with an organised lifestyle, despite the product's capabilities.

Let your product do the talking and go for solid coloured backgrounds, whether you shoot them on a simple backdrop or add the background in the editing stage. A white background will match any eCommerce platform or website design, and it will also match any product. This is important because while a blue background might look great with one of your products, it may clash with another; then you have to choose between inconsistent images or aesthetically unappealing photos.



## 8) TAKE **MULTIPLE PHOTOS**

While there are so many advantages to online shopping, you don't have the experience of physically touching and seeing the product in real life. Obviously you can't replicate reality online, but you should aim to represent your products as authentically as possible so that customers know exactly what they're buying. Take multiple photos!

First up, make sure you take photos from different angles. Take them from the front, the back, above and even below. This will help your customer visualise the product in their head, and not only will they be confident in the product they're buying but it also shows that YOU are confident in the product that you're selling.





Secondly, take a couple of close-ups to show the texture of your product, any special features or certain design details.







If you're selling clothing, photographing the product on a human or a mannequin is a great idea because it makes it easier for the customer to visualise what the item of clothing looks like when worn, compared to using flat lays.

Keep in mind that the 'hero image' (the image that represents the product, whether it's the only photo available or the first of a series) should be a simple photo of the product on its own, with no distractions. You want visitors to your website to know exactly what you are selling. Ask yourself, does this photo directly relate to the product I'm selling? Does it highlight the main features of the product? It's true how they say that a picture is worth a thousand words - but only if it's the right picture.



Let Pixc take care of your product images so you focus on running your online store. Just take a photo of your product, send it to us, and we'll give it a professional look with a white background and a touch-up.

You will have retail-ready photos in just 24 hours, so that you can start selling as soon as possible.

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