

Buy & Sell

MICHAEL SCHAFFER
BY LOU JACOBS JR.



Commercial photographer Michael Schaffer shoots an impressive variety of products, places and people. In his stunning studio in Upland, CA (about 50 miles east of Los Angeles), he discusses the scope and challenges of his business.

Lou Jacobs Jr.: Tell us about your background.

Michael Schaffer: I took my first photography class at Mt. San Antonio College in Upland, CA, and knew that was a career I wanted. I also learned the basics of cinematography. I started working at a camera shop where I met a local photographer who needed an assistant. There I learned the basics of working with clients. After about a year, when his business slowed, I started my own studio. I had spent a valuable year assisting him and in my own studio. As an almost instant professional, I shot a lot of personal projects to build my portfolio.

LJ: What does commercial photography include?

MS: It's mainly about creating images to sell products and services. I shoot manufactured products, illustrations with models and business portraits, plus office interiors, buildings and factories. Many images are for advertising. The business requires versatility in business principles and lighting techniques, and a good sense of design is necessary. The emphasis is on how the subjects look to attract business interest. As in other photo disciplines, clients want expressive and creative images.

LJ: What kinds of assignments do you work on?

MS: I do lots of products, and people using products. I enjoy working on ad campaigns because they usually require the most creativity. I work with a broad



range of clients from hospitals to clothing companies. Pictures are used in brochures, catalogs, annual reports and various advertising campaigns.

LJ: Describe your studio.

MS: When I started six years ago, my studio was 1000 square feet in an artist's loft. Two years ago I bought my current 2000-square foot studio from the owner I had previously assisted. We have a reception area, a post-production office, and offices and a meeting room. There are hair and makeup areas, a full kitchen and a 40x30-foot cove with a permanent setup. A roll-up door to the shooting area opens to a gated back area. The large shooting studio can be divided into two smaller spaces where setups are created for each job. Many setups may be similar with minor lighting adjustments.

LJ: Do you have or need specialized equipment?

MS: We use lots of lighting flags and scrims. We custom-make many Fome-Cor flags and purchased a number of traditional ones. We've made snoots out of energy drink cans for our small Nikon and Sunpak flashes. Clients get a kick out of seeing us drinking from future snoots.

LJ: What kind of lighting equipment do you use?

MS: I use 2400W/S Profoto Acute powerpacks, lots of Nikon SB800s, SB28s, Vivitar 285s and Sunpak 622s, powered by Quantum Turbo 2x2s. Reflectors are Wescott and Fome-Cor. Softboxes are 72-, 48- and 24-inch Calumets. To arrange products we elevate them on apple crates. We also use lots of Matthews C stands.

LJ: What kind of sets do you build?

MS: I recently built a set for a Western wear company with an 8x8-wall and 4x8-attachments to make it look like the tack room of a barn. Attachments are easily rearranged to give the room a different look. This set had an aged wood floor and props such as wagon wheels, saddles, gas lamps, hay bales and barrels. We used this for product shots of boots, shirts and hats, alone and on models.

For basic product shots we have an old light table we cover with seamless paper. I can put a 4x8 sheet of wood on the table to expand it. I try to keep sets as simple as possible, and we vary props to shoot multiple items.

LJ: What cameras do you generally use?

MS: Principally, a Hasselblad with a





Phase One back tethered to a laptop. It also shoots to memory cards, but I prefer the large computer preview screen to check composition, and art directors love to view the shots immediately. I use Capture One software and on outdoor shoots I put a shade over the laptop.

LJ: What DSLR cameras do you use and what lenses?

MS: For quick autofocus and for jobs I know won't need the resolution of the digital back, I use the Nikon D2X with a 14mm, 35–70mm and 200mm lenses. The 35–70mm is my general-purpose lens but for softer backgrounds I use the 200mm. I also like the look it gives me for product shots in an environment.

LJ: When you photograph in offices or factories, what camera and lighting equipment are required?

MS: The Hasselblad with digital back is the choice for about 90 percent of our shoots. We usually bring the Profoto kits and smaller flashes and I often set up a few staging areas to shoot. One set may include a tabletop with a seamless.

At times we are challenged to light an entire warehouse or office with the focus

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on either a piece of equipment or a technician at work. Softboxes are a must, plus lots of small flashes and PocketWizards. Setups generally include four to six lights, though on-location the number is often determined by the amount of setup time we have. Our studio has two full-time assistants and I take at least one to on-location jobs.

LJ: In what circumstances do you expect the client to be on hand before or during the photography shoot?

MS: We like to have either the client or an art director on hand when we're working on a shoot that involves a concept. At the studio we have a lounge area for clients with handy computers they can use to go online. On locations there is usually a client or art director with us. Often we have to educate them about our operations, and shooting straight to a computer makes clear what we're producing.





exposure changes and do minor retouching. When we do photo illustration we usually have a sketched comp to show what the image should look like. We have an awesome photo illustrator working in-house developing client sketches and handling our primary Photoshop work. We make proofs for clients on our Canon printers.

LJ: Do you have a business plan?

MS: At the beginning I had a vague business plan, namely to bill enough money to eat. While I don't have a specific plan now, because our overhead is higher, we are more selective about clients. We only take on jobs of a certain size, and try to be sure new clients will not be difficult or unrealistic. Peace of mind aids creativity.

My accountant looks at our records quarterly to take care of taxes and avoid surprises. We have a budget to upgrade equipment as needed. I'm looking forward to expanding our photo illustration capabilities.

LJ: How do you promote your business?

MS: Most of our new business comes to us through referrals, though we have a brochure we mail out and our Web site is kept current.

LJ: Do you belong to any organizations like Kiwanis International? Are there any professional magazines you read?

MS: I belong to my local chamber of commerce, and Business Network, plus a local American Advertising Federation chapter. All of these have been beneficial in one way or another. I read *PDN* and

Clients love instant proofing. However, some photo illustration is better shot without the client around, especially when the elements to create the final piece don't look very exciting on their own. We often send clients low-res samples at different stages during the photography process.

LJ: How is your studio different than a typical portrait setup?

MS: Photo illustration is definitely different than doing portraits or children. Our photographs will be reproduced in print and must look authentic. But as with portraits, some subjects may look ordinary on their own, but in the final photographs they look great.

LJ: Do you handle post-production operations in your office?

MS: Yes. Assistants download the images and process them, make color corrections,



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Rangefinder when I can, and I really enjoy *Archive* magazine.

LJ: Do you feel that a photographer's personality has a significant influence on his or her business?

MS: Personality has a major influence on a photographer's business. If a client or art director doesn't like to be around you, they aren't going to hire you. It doesn't matter how talented you are. Part of my job as a photographer is to make the client's job easier. Our operations are all based on good communications.

View more of Michael's work at www.schafferphotography.com.



Lou Jacobs Jr. is the author of 30 how-to photography books, the latest of which is How to Start and Operate a Digital Portrait Photography Studio (Amherst Media). He has taught at UCLA and Brooks, is a former president of ASMP national and has also written and illustrated numerous books for children. He enjoys shooting stock during his travels in the United States and abroad.

