Why photography is an important skill for designers

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28 May 2019

The creative industry is a competitive one, and designers are increasingly asked to go above and beyond to fulfil their clients' needs. One of the most crucial weapons in their arsenal? Photography.

Being good behind the camera doesn't simply benefit the client. Photography skills help simplify the design process for you and grow your design prowess.

As CreativePro's Roberto Blake points out, the two skills could become two sides of the same coin.

"Design and photography are very similar in what they require from creatives," he writes.

"Learning both of these doesn't make one a 'Jack/Jill of All Trades,' it simply is reinforcing your core skills as a creative professional. The more diverse your application of your creativity is, the stronger it becomes and the more freedom you will find in creating compelling images and stories."

We take a closer look at why cultivating your photography skills can give you a leg-up in the design world.

Photo composition and design go hand-in-hand

Proper image composition is one of the most important skills in a photographer's handbook - and the same could be said of designers.

For graphic designers, layout and balance are critical, and your understanding of visual balance will improve in leaps and bounds when viewed from behind a camera lens.

"Shooting photography will give you a better eye for how composition impacts overall storytelling," says Blake. "As designers, we are used to just living with the images supplied to us."

"Producing your own photos will give you a sense of the intentions behind an image. This will help you utilise photos more effectively in your own work."

Just like a good designer, a photographer must strike the perfect balance between the purpose and function of an image

and its aesthetic appeal, says Deputy Editor of Design Instruct, Jacob Gube.

"What I found very enlightening about working as a photographer is that, after some time, I started seeing the world around me in terms of balance, placement and flow, as though I was taking a photo and constantly composing a scene in my mind."

"This newfound spatial awareness has already started to play a key role in his design work," he adds.

"I noticed that I wasn't second-guessing most of my layouts anymore. I also got better at judging scale and the space of various design elements I was working with, becoming a more productive and effective artist as a result."

Who needs stock photos?

Clients will often give you photos to use in your work. But sometimes they won't - which means you'll spend hours trawling through stock photo websites, trying to find that one picture that will bring your creative vision to life. But what if you could take that perfect picture yourself?

"Although it's a cliché, a picture really does say a thousand words," New York graphic designer Jacob Cass told Creative Bloq.

"And for this reason I use photography in the vast majority of my projects, especially in web design."

And the better you get, the more you'll find yourself using your own work - which gives you the kind of creative freedom you just can't find when you're relying on someone else's images, says Vandelay Design's Steven Snell.

"Whether it be for your own websites and projects or for clients, being able to reduce your dependency on clichéd stock photos can be a good thing."

Take your understanding of light and colour to the next level

As a designer, you might know colour theory backwards, but colour and light take on a whole new meaning when you're viewing them from behind a lens.

Practicing photography can help creatives develop a better appreciation for how colour and contrast impact the tone of a visual story, says Blake.

"Since both design and photography rely on colour theory, this is another way to explore and build on that."

Photography will help you apply what you think you know in a real-world setting.

Gube agrees. "After having taken thousands of photos, I found myself being more sensitive to changes in colour temperature, such as the warmness or coolness of light sources," he says.

"I became a stickler for accurate colours. When you start seeing the subtleties of colour, every shade suddenly takes on a different meaning."

Get inspired

Photography skills are not only practical when it's comes to direct application within your design work - they can also lend a helping hand before your soon-to-be award-winning concept is even a twinkle in your eye.

"A camera is also a way you can keep a visual diary of the things that inspire you in the real world," Gube points out.

"For designers, a camera - just like a notebook - can be an invaluable tool for keeping track of ideas and exploring them later on. You can take photos of typography found in storefronts, of street art, of architectural wonders in your city - the list of potential inspiration points is nearly endless."

Give yourself the edge

As previously mentioned, the design industry is a tough one - so adding another useful skill to your creative repertoire is going to make you stand out among your competitors.

Listing both design and photography among your services could make you a one-stop-shop for clients looking for someone who can take charge of every aspect of their project.

"Both the photography and design industries are filled with loads of freelancers and other service providers, so many creatives have found it to be difficult to earn a full-time income in one of these industries," says Snell.

"If this has been the case for you in the design industry, adding some part-time income from photography could close the gap that you need to earn a full-time income."

Want to take your photography skills to the next level? Friends of Design's 2-day Photography Essentials course will give you a kick start. The workshop will cover everything from the basics of cameras to planning your frame, image composition and the use of lens filters to enhance your photos. You'll also get to grips with mobile phone photography and shooting for Instagram and other social media.

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