



The
Lifestyled
Product

CREATIVE PRODUCT
PHOTOGRAPHY FOR MAKERS

MY-VAN DANG

The Lifestyled Product | Creative Product Photography For Makers

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02

Getting Started

I think of a photography shoot like painting a room. Sure it's annoying as heck to tape out the room, lay down the drop cloths and properly cover all the furniture. But when you put the extra effort up front in preparing the room properly, painting it will go so much smoother and quicker.

Anytime that I've not put in the extra effort, I've spilled paint on the beautiful hardwood floors, or worse, the carpet. I've found paint splatters on the dresser and accidentally painted over outlet covers.

All these mistakes required me to spend unnecessary time cleaning up the mess that could've been avoided if I had prepared in advance. So, treat your product photography shoot like painting a room: Put some time into the preparations before the shoot and your shooting will go a lot smoother.

CREATE YOUR PHOTOGRAPHY STUDIO

Whether you work out of your home or you have an off-site studio, I'm here to tell you that you can create beautiful product photos anywhere. Depending on the size of your handmade item, your "photography studio" doesn't need to be big or have a bunch of fancy gadgets either. At the minimum, you'll need:

- A table or floor space
- Natural light
- A selection of backdrops and props
- Camera and equipment

That doesn't sound so bad, does it?

FIND YOUR SHOOTING SPACE

Look around your home or studio and observe the natural light filtering through certain spaces. You're looking for a space that gets plenty of natural light. Don't worry about the light being too strong as you can always manipulate that with photography equipment I will share in the next section. Don't shy away from using unconventional rooms either, such as the bathroom or the guest room. If the light is excellent there, take advantage of it!

CAMERA & EQUIPMENT

I'm not a camera snob. You can be #teamCanon or #teamNikon, or #teamApple or #teamAndroid. I don't care and you shouldn't either. I firmly believe, and have seen, extremely good quality photos from all types of cameras from DSLRs to point and shoots to smart phones. Taking photos is all about knowing how to use

your camera and manipulate the light. Setting up a good photo takes an editorial eye that comes with lots of practice.

If you “only” have a camera phone, who cares? Get to know your lighting, your environment and master your phone camera. No one will ever know the difference if you don’t tell!

In addition to a camera, you’ll need the following photography equipment to make your life easier:

- Bounce cards and reflectors
- Diffusers
- Tripods, remotes and tethers
- Clamps
- White card
- Photo editing program

BOUNCE CARDS & REFLECTORS

Have you ever taken a photo where there were annoying shadows or dark spots? If you had a bounce card or a reflector, you could have “bounced” some light onto those dark spots, thereby evening out the shadows. You can read more about how to manipulate these problems in Chapter 3: Lighting.

Bounce cards don’t have to be expensive. I usually use white foam boards that I pick up from the dollar store. The reason why I like foam boards is that they’re cheap, lightweight, and easy to replace. In a pinch, I can also use them as backdrops if I need a white background.

Reflectors offer a stronger light than bounce cards. A hand-held mirror or a piece of cardboard wrapped in aluminum foil will do the trick.

DIFFUSERS

Diffusers help to diffuse strong light. This is especially helpful if you shoot in a space that has too many windows and gets too much light. Why is too much light a problem? If you work with any products that bounce a lot of light, like glazed pottery or glassware, you've likely encountered a lot of annoying glare and reflection in your photographs. Diffusing the light will break it up and reduce the glare.

My photography studio is in my sunroom, which gets amazing light, as you can imagine. But on a sunny day without a single cloud in the sky, that sun can be a nightmare. Clouds are a natural diffuser, so don't ever shun the clouds when you want to shoot your products. If anything, you should welcome them as they'll do a bang up job at softening the shadows surrounding your products. Hard shadows can be a distracting look for your photos.

However, I can't wait for cloudy days all the time. Oh, that inconstant Mother Nature! To take matters into my own hands, I hung up lightweight curtains over all the windows in the sunroom. They are lightweight enough to let through enough light to make my shooting space bright, but disperses the light evenly so I'm not battling hard shadows. I have also used copy paper to cover windows as well. Flat bedsheets also do a great job at diffusing light.

TRIPODS, REMOTES & TETHERS

Nothing is worse than blurry photos. These honestly can't be salvaged in post-editing, so just don't take blurry photos. Blur is bad because it distorts the quality of your product and gives your brand a bad name. Get it right in the setup by using a tripod.

In addition to tripods, consider adding a remote to your photography equipment. This item is strictly optional, but I think that you'll find it to be very convenient. The remote basically hooks up to the camera, so you need only click a button that will release the shutter on the camera. You would never have to touch the camera once you've set it up! Any chance of not touching the camera in order to achieve sharp photos is always a good thing.

Another optional equipment is a tether cable. This is usually included with your camera, along with the software needed for your computer to read the camera, so the cost would be null. Tethering is the ability to connect your camera to your computer so you can see your image on a larger screen. This is advantageous for styling and fixing any imperfections on the spot rather than realizing it later in post-editing.

CLAMPS

Clamps are not required photography equipment, but they're nice to have if you need an extra pair of "hands" to hold up your bounce cards. Clamps are also handy for standing up backdrops or clipping fabric to a backdrop. They can be obtained from any home improvement store. Just go to the tools aisle.

WHITE CARD

Slightly different from a bounce card, a white card (also known as a gray card) is exactly what it sounds like. It is a small white (or gray) card or plastic that you can carry with you to get the white balance correct in your camera. You can also use it in post-editing as a way to make sure the whites are truly white in your images.

PHOTO EDITING PROGRAM

All professional photographers edit their photos to some degree, so don't be shy about editing your photos. I always promote getting the photo right in the camera so you don't need to spend so much time at the computer after the photo shoot. But, sometimes, you just need to bump up the exposure levels a tad bit or fix the contrast. This is why it's important to have a photo editing program, such as Photoshop or Lightroom, or an app (if you're using a phone camera). It's even more important to understand how to use the program and have a process that works well for you.

KNOW WHAT YOU WANT TO SHOOT

Before picking up this guide, did you ever feel like your photos didn't feel cohesive? That there wasn't a strong message behind them? That they didn't seem high quality to your customers?

What you were missing was focus. If you're reading this cover to cover (first, I applaud you for being such a go-getter), then you'll have read that I suggest you brand your business properly. Your product images need to reflect your brand. The mood or vibe you want to convey, the colors you choose and the story you want to tell will all stem from your brand.

EVERY PRODUCT TELLS A STORY

Chances are when you set out to create your first product, you were inspired by something. There was a beginning to your journey and how each item is different from the next. These are the kinds of stories you want to relay in your product photos. Your customer wants to see what makes your product unique. Think about highlighting these aspects in your photography.

KNOW YOUR PRODUCT

Before you start buying props and clicking any shutters, take some time to think about how you want your photos to look. Ask yourself the following questions and write down your answers. You'd be surprised the key words you forget about once ideas start to flow.

- **WHAT IS MY PRODUCT?** This is an obvious question, but write down what it is you're selling. Describe it to someone who has never heard of what you make. How does it work? What material(s) is it made with? What makes it special?
- **HOW CAN I SHOWCASE IT EFFECTIVELY?** Knowing what your product is and how to showcase it in your photos will sell it so much easier than if you have no clear idea of what you're marketing.
- **WHO IS MY CUSTOMER?** Your photos need to speak to your customer. They need to catch their attention. Make sure you know who your ideal customer is so your photos are addressing them.
- **WHERE WILL THESE PHOTOS BE USED?** Social media? Website? Business cards? Print collateral? Knowing this will make you aware of size limitations and which composition to use to best tell your story.
- **IS THERE A SPECIAL SEASON FOR MARKETING?** Holidays like Valentine's Day and Christmas, as well as spring and fall, can change the props you use to convey a different mood from your everyday photos.

STORYBOARD YOUR IDEAS

The best way to get your photography ideas out of your head is to put it on paper. Sketch out the images you want to take. Make it as detailed as you can. Fill in the margins with notes about the props you want to use and the lighting you want to achieve. Is there a background you want to use for a certain product? Write or draw that in!

Now look back at the previous section where you asked yourself a number of questions about your product and your customer. Hopefully, you wrote down all your answers. Look for any key words that define your product and your customer. Are they reflected in your storyboard? If not, what can you change or add to include those key words?

CREATE A SHOT LIST

A shot list is a written list of shots and angles you need to take during your photo shoot. This is where you would indicate sizing, orientation (landscape or portrait), usage requirements (i.e. social media, website banner) and the angles you need to take the shot (i.e. overhead, vignette, 3/4 angle, detail). This shot list would be helpful when you edit your photos so you can crop your images to size and create the files you need for their intended purposes. You can find a printable worksheet on page 17.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR AND STYLIST



Hiya, I'm My-Van! I'm a prop stylist and still life photographer, currently calling it home in Vancouver, Canada. All my life, I knew my life's journey was in the creative industry. I followed this path into interior design, which introduced me to interior staging and styling. Coupled with my extended experience in retail, where I learned about product merchandising and consumer habits, I combined all my creative interests, made a career change and founded Planq Studio.

I love capturing the magic of photo styling and making still life images come to life. It is an underrated art form. My passion is to make beautiful things all around me and to help others develop an eye for beauty and potential in the most ordinary things.

Feel free to connect. I'd love to hear from you!

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