

Present Yourself to the Press

Dear ARTE Sellers!

You need to be prepared with photos that represent you and your business.

We cannot tell you how many times we've been working on a story spotlighting an excellent person — seller, blogger, figure in the arts and crafts world — but they either don't have a headshot or they send us the most low-quality, blurry photo.

As ARTE gets even busier and popular, members of the press will be looking for unique gifts with interesting angles. The stories of crafters, artists, and small business owners should get out there, but in order to take part and get the most out of any exposure, you need to have a mini media kit at hand.

I know, I know, you are creators and you're busy making things! Yes, I hear you. You are makers of objects and art, not self-portraits! But I'm begging you, take a day to invite a photographer friend to come over and style some photos for you.

Here are the basic shots I look for and what many bloggers and journalists are seeking:

- 1. A nice headshot** - This is a portrait that is NOT a fuzzy, grainy photo that you obviously took of yourself with your cell phone. It's NOT a snapshot cropped to include your ex-boyfriend's hairy limb draped around your shoulders. This is a high quality, professional portrait of you looking your best. Like any good portrait, it gets across your vibe and makes you look good. You are the centre of the photo, not the Statue of Liberty you're posed in front of with your group of friends. Want to get artsy? Do it! As long as it intentionally reflects your personality and your brand.
- 2. A photo of your studio or workspace** - Use natural light, not flash. If the room is too dark even in the day time, set up some lights. Tidy up your work area, or if a workspace crammed with stuff is your vibe, make sure it's artfully portrayed.
- 3. A photo of you in the creative process** - Have a photographer friend take some action shots of you in the midst of making. Don't be afraid to strike some natural poses and style these shots as you would a magazine shoot. Arrange your supplies, tools and background just so, make sure your outfit, hair and makeup are done the way you like it. Capture some of the action. Experiment with different angles.
- 4. Your items in context** - If you're a painter show some of your pieces arranged beautifully on a wall. If you're a potter, show some of your excellent tableware displayed on a kitchen shelf or in a dining room setting. Take some close-up detail shots and some shots that show the whole room. These photos are great for your listings as well as for press outreach.
- 5. Your items against a plain background** - Shoot some well-lit shots of your items against a plain white background. Some bloggers and magazines prefer simple photos with solid backgrounds. These make it easier for them to incorporate your items into their posts or spreads. (An item on a white background won't compete with the design of their website or blog.)
- 6. Keep a high resolution version** - Have on hand a version that is at least 300 dpi and 2500 pixels across. You can always size it down and send that copy (learn more about photo resolution on <http://www.photoshopessentials.com/essentials/image-quality/>).

Now you'll be prepared when you get that call from a blogger or journalist, and with these new photos you can get out there and do some outreach of your own. They may not even use these photos, but the images may speak to them and get across the essence of what you're all about. Here are some of the other uses for these photos:

- 1.** About Me or Contact Me page of your business website
- 2.** Your blog
- 3.** Facebook Fan page
- 4.** Your Flickr stream
- 5.** One of the images in your Etsy listings
- 6.** A blog, magazine, or newspaper interview

Helpful Pointers to Improve your Product Photography

1. Know Your Camera

The first and the most important thing you can do to help your product photography is to read the camera manual. Boring, I know, but it's worth it, as you need to know what your camera will and won't do. There are lots of settings and terms, which can be confusing, but your manual will help with this. Visit the website of the manufacturer and also YouTube, as many manufacturers and photographers offer free online tutorials. This is great if, like me, you learn by seeing and doing after reading about it.

2. Colour

Problems with colour are almost always the result of an incorrect exposure or white balance setting.

3. Exposure

To fix over or under-exposure you need to experiment with the features that your camera offers. Step away from the "automatic" setting! If your camera allows, the features you will need to use to manually alter exposure levels are shutter speed, depth of field/aperture, and ISO — these are the three elements that make up exposure. If your camera doesn't allow for manual setting adjustment, then you can still try the other automatic settings, such as landscape, macro, etc. Also look for a feature called "exposure compensation," as this will allow you to tell the camera to expose more or less than it normally would.

As a general rule, I suggest placing your product in a well-lit area, such as under a window or outside, and aim to shoot it using only natural light. This means turning off the flash and other lights, which is the best way to achieve a photograph that shows the true colour of your product.

Flash is great for product lighting, but small flashes (those on most digital compact cameras) can cause harsh shadows. I understand shooting with natural light alone is easier said than done, so more tips on lighting are coming right up...

4. White Balance

This setting tells the camera what is pure white. If the camera gets white right, then all the other colours follow.

One way to confuse the camera completely is to use two or more sources of light. For example, if you have turned on a household lamp (orange) and also use the camera flash (white) to take your photograph, you are mixing colours and probably casting a murky tint over your images. No matter how many times you change the white balance, the colour will never be quite right. Avoid this by using only one light source. For example, leave the lamp on but turn off the flash and set the white balance to "lamp" (or tungsten). Alternatively, turn off the lamp, leave the flash on and set the white balance to "flash." The camera flash is daylight-balanced, so combining flash and natural light is also OK. If you cannot change the white balance setting in your camera, then ensure you use a single light source to avoid that murky colour cast.

5. Light

"Should I use natural or artificial light?"

Given the choice between natural and artificial light, I recommend natural light. Natural light is unreliable, I know, but the good news is that there are simple techniques that will help you get the most out of whatever nature has sent. If you cannot use natural light, however, don't worry, as there are more ways to improve product photos using flash and artificial light.

"I prefer to photograph outside, but it's often too dark or raining. Help!"

Low-light or dull days don't have to equal dull photographs. Excellent photography doesn't have to be bright.

If you have increased your exposure time to let in more light, you need to keep the camera perfectly still to avoid blur.

Can't afford a tripod or a beanbag? Just use a pile of books or a bag of rice. Pop on the timer for an even sharper result.

Look closely at many excellent product photos and you may see a window in the reflection. This often means that whatever came through that window was the only source of light used to get that lovely image.

Reflect light onto your product by making your own reflector using a piece of card wrapped in tin foil. Allow the light to fall on your reflector and tilt it towards the unlit side of your product. White card will do the same thing but with a softer effect. This works for both natural light and flash photography.

“I need to use the flash or go into the sun but that’s often too bright.”

If you need to use the flash but are finding it too strong or harsh, soften it by taking a sheet of white facial tissue and placing it over the flash. You may have to tape or tack the tissue to your camera if you don’t have a "pop-up" flash. Bright, sunny days can hinder your photograph as much as low-light, because sunlight is very harsh and casts dark shadows. You can soften sunlight using a piece of sheer fabric. For indoor near-the-window- shots, hang the fabric over your window or, for outdoor shots, hang it on the clothesline between the sun and your product. Depending on the thickness of your fabric, you will have diffused the light and created softer highlights and shadows. When positioning your item outside in direct sunlight, soften the effect by shooting towards the sun, so that the sun is behind your product. Often this will create a warm glow around the edges. If the background is well-lit but the product is still too dark, try adding the flash. Remember, you can diffuse the flash if its effect is too strong.

6. Reflection and Translucence

“How do I photograph my shiny product without showing my reflection?”

Reflection can be a good thing, as it can add lustre and dimension to inanimate objects, such as food or jewellery. It can also be a pain, though, when you’re photographing a print in a frame and you can’t see the print due to the bright glow from the flash!

An easy solution is to remove the glass or plastic cover, where possible. For other reflective surfaces try shooting from an angle. This might be slightly below or beside the object and also works for prints in frames when the glass cannot be removed. Reflection will be reduced if you turn off the flash.

Too much light with your photographs of shiny products, most notably metals, will lack detail. Too little light and the lustre will fade. Achieve the right balance of light naturally using the tips above and add in a dark reflector. This can simply be piece of black or dark card held near one or both sides of the object. You will see the dark reflection on one edge of the product. This creates depth and contrast nicely with high-shine. Once again, turn off the flash and the texture and detail will show through perfectly.

The photographer’s reflection is a tricky one. If you take a closer look at the eyes of the model on any magazine cover, you’ll see a reflection of the photographer and lights. Any shiny/reflective surface that is square-on to the camera will reflect the lens/lighting/photographer, and this is difficult to avoid without digital editing. If it bothers you, consider zooming in so that the camera/lens is farther away. Use the timer so you can walk out of shot. Rest assured, though, that if your potential buyers are looking at a sharp, detailed and well-lit image, your reflection in the item would not be a problem.

7. Translucence

“How do I photograph semi-transparent products without making them look dull and flat?”

For shiny or semi-translucent items, such as gemstones, glass and metal, try to light them from behind. Get up close and keep the flash turned off. This technique is also handy to show depth and detail.