

BACKSTAGE

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TAKE YOUR BEST SHOT

Choosing the Right Photographer

By **Toni Reinhold**

If you think having your headshot taken is a quick and easy task, allow me to burst your bubble. It is an involved, time consuming process that demands a lot of preparation and attention every step along the way. From making appointments to view photographers' books (or spending the time online), to picking up finished prints. How pleasant or unpleasant the task, and how much time it ultimately takes is largely determined by how professional and competent your photographer is and how responsible you are about doing your homework, keeping appointments, and following through at each stage.

I have been photographed during my journalistic career for special projects and articles, but unlike performers I have never needed to have a photograph taken that could have a critical effect on my career. And since writing about something and doing it are two completely different things, I decided to undergo the headshot process as if I were an actress who needed the best possible photograph for work.

The photographer Lance Evans of The Actor's Resource in midtown Manhattan (www.TheActorsResource.com) volunteered to run through the process from start to finish with me.

Getting into character was not that difficult, we all have a touch of egomania tucked away in our personalities that springs to life at the thought of being the subject of a photo shoot. But preparing for the shoot and maneuvering through the process were real learning experiences.

At the Starting Gate

I had an advantage over most beginners setting out to have a headshot taken, since I had already done several interviews for this article and had a good idea of what to ask about and look for and how to set up the shoot. I also knew that I had to have at least a general notion of what image I wanted to present in the photos. That meant I had to have a basic idea of the type of work I would seek with them.

Keeping track of time and appointments begins when you make your initial call to a photographer

"Your goal is to get as many usable images as possible from your shoot."

—Lance Evans
photographer



Bright lights can create shadows, exaggerate fine lines, and allow the eager eye of the camera to pick up every feature of your face and neck in great detail. They can also wash out important details that might add character to your look. It is the job of your photographer to know how to use lights to your advantage to create the look you want and enhance your image. Yet even with proper lighting, you still might find room for improvement through retouching. In the unretouched photo on the left, fine laugh lines and shadows under the eyes are a bit too prominent. Some hair is also out of place. Artistically handled so it does not change your actual features, retouching is used to lighten and remove unrealistic or exaggerated shadows and lines, eliminate stray hairs and make your photo look more like you do in person—but at your best. Lance's studio also offers special effect "green screen" retouching that allows swapping out the background—a really great option! On the left, the finished work of art. (Model: Bec Fordyce)

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to arrange to see his or her books. More and more today photographers have their portfolios online, but setting up a live meeting allows one to get a feel for the person and see if you click. I bought a small memo pad just for headshot business and kept it in my purse. My first appointment with Lance was to look at his books and discuss my needs. He said I should allot at least 30 minutes for this and he also asked me to call if I had to reschedule. It's a good idea to confirm every appointment you make with the photographer.

Our first meeting actually lasted a little over an hour. I looked at three books of headshots, fashion, and location shoots. Then I told Lance what I thought I should project in my photos: someone who is highly believable, honest, forthright, approachable, and serious but not dull. I would use them to get work in documentations, commercials, and industrials.

Being able to tell a photographer about the type and image you want to present gives both of you a starting point. A seasoned headshot photographer should then be able to tell you if he or she agrees with the way you see yourself and offer some useful suggestions.

The next step was to discuss price and the services that are included in his headshot fee. Some photographers, like Lance, oversee every step of the process if the client desires, from taking the photos to delivering finished prints. Because my time is usually stretched to the limits (which is often the case with actors and actresses), that was important to me. I didn't want to do anything except approve the work at various stages of production.

Different photographers offer different services. Some take your photos and then hand you the exposed film or digital files, and you must

do the rest of the work. Others take you through the retouching stage and then you must have prints made. If you are working with a photographer who is offering full services, the process is streamlined and most of the approval stages can be done online and through email. This is a big time saver!

Check The Guidelines

Once you've selected a photographer, be prepared to accept a certain amount of coaching and guidelines from him or her. Lance ran through a list of do's and don'ts which he considers important preparation for a shoot. Some photographers distribute printed lists of guidelines; others deliver them verbally. Lance's advice included these tips:

"If you forget everything else, remember to pamper yourself before the shoot. Get extra sleep if you can. If you usually require eight hours sleep, get 10 for a few days. If you need 10 hours sleep, get 12. You should be well-rested for the shoot because fatigue shows on the face."

Stay away from things you are allergic to and from foods that might effect your skin, such as sugars, fatty and fried foods," he added. "If you belong to a gym, get a massage to help you relax. If you usually exercise or take a dance class, don't skip it—exercise can help you feel energized.

"If you are having your makeup and hair done here, come to the studio on the day of your session with a clean face and clean hair. Bring your own cosmetics. If you don't really know how to apply makeup for photos, have it done professionally.

"Bring an assortment of clothing. Don't come in with only a couple of pieces that may not be suitable. Bring a variety of shirts and tops with several different collar styles, soft fluffy sweaters, and a dungaree jacket if you have one.

"Try to stay away from black and white or colors that are very close to them as they tend to block up or burn out and look too flat. On the flip side stripes, polka dots and other busy patterns are too distracting. But if your very favorite shirt—the one in which you will feel most comfortable—is black or white or polka dot, bring it and we'll try to make it work. Preferably, choose clothes with subtle textures, such as knitted sweaters, to add interest but not distract from your face. Bring simple jewelry."

This is the time to express any concerns you have about your appearance. I had a blemish on my face and wanted to know what I should do if it did not vanish before the shoot. I was also concerned about extra weight I had gained after I quit smoking. I expected to lose it over a few months but I needed photos immediately. I asked if there was any way to take photos so that weight would not appear to be a problem. These are common concerns of actors and actresses and you should not hesitate to discuss them with your photographer. My problems were easily corrected with some cosmetic concealer and lighting and retouching.

This is also the time you should ask about method of payment. Does the photographer accept checks, cash, or credit cards? Is a deposit required? Is it refundable? When is the balance of the payment due? Are there any charges you can anticipate that are not included in his or her headshot fee?

Give Yourself Space

Once I had the information I wanted, Lance and I set a date for the shoot and he cautioned "If you must reschedule, call as soon as you know, otherwise be on time because you will need at least four hours for the shoot." Read that as a full day because you must give yourself sufficient traveling time, extra time if you are having your makeup done professionally at the studio or elsewhere, time for unexpected delays, and time to relax once you get to the studio.

"You must be flexible with time on the shooting day," Lance explained. "At the very least you need 45 minutes to an hour and a quarter for makeup. You don't want your shoot to run like a

production line. You will have a much more relaxed and productive atmosphere if everyone involved is not rushed. You and your photographer have to take as much time as necessary to make as many frames in the shoot to work as possible. Your goal is to get the maximum number of useable images. Having your headshot taken is an investment in your career, and you've got to make the most of it."

I prepared my clothing, jewelry, and cosmetics the day before the shoot. Lance's associate Cleah, a makeup artist, was going to apply my makeup so I was careful to pack brushes, loose powder and applicators in my cosmetics case. But when it came to selecting clothing, I had some big questions about what to bring since my wardrobe contains lots of white, navy blue, black, gray and pastels. I settled on five items and four pairs of earrings.

Although I had tried to follow Lance's directions to the letter, I made some mistakes that could have been avoided had I telephoned him before the shoot. Two of my blouses, both ivory-colored, were immediately declared unacceptable due to being too light. The necklines on two other garments had to be modified with accompanying scarfs because they moved too far away from the face. Only two pairs of earrings were considered acceptable, the others were too fancy. At zero hour I realized why variety was so important, and how much easier and quicker clothing changes would have been had I telephoned Lance before the shoot and discussed my clothing and jewelry selections. Makeup application went smoothly because I had brought all the essentials and Cleah had a complete assortment of cosmetics that included concealer.

Lance shot for over an hour in digital format. Cleah remained for the entire shoot and made frequent makeup checks to correct shine and flyaway hairs. It was a good decision to opt for the professional makeup because it was one less thing I had to do myself, and one less thing to be nervous about. Because Lance and I had a good rapport, the shoot was relaxed and fun, and because of that I was better able to take direction.

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"Because Lance and I had a good rapport, the shoot was relaxed and fun."

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Close to four hours had passed by the time the shoot was over. Before I left that day Lance told me the “digital contact sheets” or “selects” from the session would be online for me to view sometime the next day. These are the best images that Lance pre-edits and then posts online to a personal website his company prepares for each and every client.

The digital contact sheets, Lance explained, are viewable from any browser so his clients can open the webpage wherever they are to view the images and make their selections. They can even pass the webpage to friends and agents to get others feedback before deciding.

Once you’ve selected the frame or frames to be used as your professional headshot(s), you must decide whether or not you want retouching. This is another stage where having input from your photographer is important. Retouching is an important processes which allows the photographer or retoucher to remove or add things, such as shadows, blemishes or stray hairs, from the photos. Retouching done digitally today is a very powerful tool to help the performer look their best.

“A good rule of thumb to use when deciding whether or not to retouch a photo is if you see things that normally aren’t there, like dark circles under the eyes or a pimple” Lance noted. “Such things should be touched out. Retouch anything that is not a permanent part of your face.”

If you are dealing with a photographer who offers retouching services, as Lance and The Actor’s Resource do, the next round of communications should be to decide what things you want re-

touched. Your photographer should have input here as well. This can be done in person or via email.

Lance and his studio offer a very special retouching option that involves Hollywood style “green-screen” effects. This allows him to change the backgrounds in post-production—after the photo shoot is long over. This special effect lets the performer to be placed in a theater, a nature scene, or anywhere they want. It’s really impressive!

The final retouched image can then be sent either to you the client, or to the reproduction house to have copies printed. You should consider having a “proof print” made of your headshot to make sure it all looks right before the mass-copies are actually ordered. After all, it’s no good having 100 copies of a headshot with your name misspelled.

Your Personal Marketing Tool

Time-consuming? Yes. Involved? Yes. Worth the effort? Yes, if you’ve selected a good photographer and have done your share of the work.

“A headshot is a marketing tool,” explains Lance. “Something you use to advertise yourself, and get jobs. You need time to get it right. I believe that if the person who is organizing your headshot package does not sit with you and find out what your real needs are, then he or she cannot produce a workable marketing tool for you.

“Your headshot session must be very individualized. Some photographers put together the same package for everyone, whether they are going for a commercial shot or want to look like Olivier. I don’t believe that makes for getting the best possible marketing tool.”

Lance offers these pointers to get the most out of your headshot session:

- Make sure the photographer understands your needs. While speaking with him or her, do you get any feedback? Do you feel he or she is going to be influenced by what you are saying?
- If you are slightly overweight, will you be photographed the same as a 90-pound person? If weight is a concern for you, this is an important question.
- Is the photographer interested in the kind of work you are doing? His or her genuine interest can make a big difference in the way you are photographed.
- Many people, especially beginners, don’t know what to look for in a photographer’s portfolio. Check for nice, clean, professional-looking shots. Is there character in the work, as opposed to everybody looking the same? Are the pictures in focus? Are there changes in lighting?

Parting Shots

“Which photographer you choose will determine how much of your own knowledge and self-reliance you will have to bring into this project,” noted Lance. “If a photographer is not full service, the decent thing for him or her to do is to have negatives and contacts made for you and refer you to a good lab. Or hand off digital files in an organized way.

“Since performers generally lead hectic lives, the more you trust a photographer to take care of things for you, the easier your life is going to be.” he says. “The more you have to fly solo, the more time, legwork and knowledge you will have to put into it.

“If your photographer does not refer you to a qualified lab, you must be careful about the lab you choose because there are different types of labs commercial labs that take care of advertising companies and photographers, and then there are headshot labs. Quality varies among headshot labs, and although their prices are generally lower than commercial labs, your finished photos may or may not be passable, depending on your needs, desires, and tastes. Ask your photographer to recommend a lab. If he or she cannot, ask other performers which labs they have found to be most reliable with the best quality. If you have a competent photographer taking care of this for you, who works with a good lab, this should not be a problem.

“For an actor who wants to get headshots as simply and easily as possible, it is a headache to have to worry about all these things.” says Lance. “It’s enough to have to work and audition and find time to have the headshots taken. A good photographer will try to make your headshot experience as pleasant and easy as possible. It shouldn’t cause you grief.” ■

Lance Evans has been shooting headshots and theatrical projects for many years, along with big-brand advertising clients like Miller Beer and American Express. He is founder of The Actors Resource in midtown Manhattan (www.TheActorsResource.com) that offers its clients a one-stop shop for headshots, actors video reels and voice-over demos. They can be reached at 212-752-8316.

(Note: This reprinted article has been updated.)

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