

Commercial photographer Jason Lindsey of Champaign, Ill., has a dual perspective. He learned about the business of image creation during his years in commercial design and art direction.

COMMERCIAL

By Jeff Kent



All images ©Jason Lindsey

n business, it often helps to see things from the perspective of your customers. For a public relations agent, it's useful to spend some time working in the media. For a real estate broker, it would pay to go through the home-buying process. For a commercial photographer, it certainly helps to have been an agency art director.

Commercial photographer Jason Lindsey of Champaign, Ill., is living proof of the value of having a dual perspective. Lindsey had always been interested in photography, but his education and early career experience were in graphic design. Over five years of commercial design and art direction, Lindsey learned about the business of image creation from the perspective of an ad agency. He learned how to deal with clients, figure out the logistics of commercial projects, and how to turn a concept into a fully realized campaign.

Meanwhile, photography kept pulling at Lindsey's heartstrings. He started shooting tourism and travel images, first for fun and then for a fledgling list of clients. Lindsey found an increasingly receptive market for his images. Clients liked his style. Art directors liked his knowledge of the industry.

When Lindsey felt the time had arrived, he dove headfirst into the business of commercial photography. He bought a lighting kit the night before his first big commercial shoot, but had to hire someone who knew how to work the lights. The technical skills came soon enough, but have never been a focus of Lindsey's. Instead, he

Flip side

Jason Lindsey forges a commercial career with a dual perspective



sells his particular vision of the world, with an emphasis on emotion, innovation and a clear sense of commercial artistry.

A decade later, Lindsey's business is going like gangbusters. His clients include Anheuser-Busch, Fujifilm, the U.S. Postal Service, Geico Direct, Amazon.com and dozens of others. He's done editorial shoots for National Geographic Books, *Smithsonian Magazine*, *The Wall Street Journal* and *U.S. News and World Report*, to name just a few. We sat down with Lindsey to get some details about the approach that's made him so successful.

Professional Photographer: *How has your experience in art directing affected your work as a photographer?*

Jason Lindsey: Not only was I working as a designer, but my degree from college was in



“When I started shooting professionally, my portfolio and promo materials were what I thought clients wanted to see. Later, I put together materials that were much more personal. My business almost doubled.”

Tell us about your approach to lighting, particularly the difference between your environmental lighting and your thematic, communicative lighting.

Back when I started, I asked an established photographer friend if I should take a lighting class. He told me no. “I think it’s a good thing that you don’t light by rules,” he said. He had a good point. I don’t light certain things certain ways because of some lesson I learned in a class. I developed my lighting style more naturally.

I light with one of two approaches. The first is based on emotion, on what I’m trying to communicate in the image. For example, I did a portrait of an author whose book opened with a nighttime car wreck on a rural stretch of road, so we did the shoot before sunrise and replicated the look of truck headlights illuminating a scene at night. I set up a battery-powered light kit and lit the author with strong directional light from the side to create a connection to

design. In school, we learned about trying to communicate something for a specific purpose or need. It’s more a commercial way of thinking than a purely artistic approach. Much of the photography training I’ve seen is more about art. My design training is valuable for my work because it was all about being creative on demand, or creating something for a very specific purpose. That background helps me talk to art directors and get on board very quickly with what they are trying to accomplish.

Tell us about your working style. Do you do a lot of planning before a shoot, or do you work more intuitively?

In general, I try to make the images feel natural or intuitive, but much of my work is consciously produced, even if it’s an intuitive consciousness. I try to do as much preparation as possible before going on location. Once there, I can work more intuitively. The more prepared I am going into a shoot, the more reactive I can be to the changing situations on location.





the scene in the book. If my light is very noticeable, as in this case, you can be sure there's a reason.

My other approach to light is based on how the subject would appear in a natural environment. In natural environments, light comes from everywhere, not just a window or single light. It reflects and bounces around from all sides. I visualize how something would look in a natural environment and use that as my guide.

I like shooting outdoors after sundown. I also make a lot of images shooting directly into the sun, intentionally creating lens flare. In general, I don't worry about photographic rules. If there's lens flare, but the shot has more emotion, more impact, that's fine.

From where do you draw your inspiration?

A broad variety of sources. The Web has been an amazing source of inspiration. I look at online magazines, photo news groups and other photographers' portfolios. I also often

brainstorm with a photographer down the street named Christopher Rory. He does children, seniors, families and pets. We look at each other's work and draw inspiration from each other. People often put the [commercial and retail portrait] markets in separate categories. It's strange that those two worlds don't usually meet. Maybe they should. My interactions with Rory have broadened my visual reference significantly.

How has your work developed from your first days of pro shooting?

When I started shooting professionally, my portfolio and promo materials were what I thought clients wanted to see. About two years later, I put together promos and a new portfolio that were much more personal. The new materials were focused on how I see the world, how I like to shoot things. My business almost doubled after I started showing my vision. It was encouraging that my outlook had such value. It helped me to

have confidence in my approach from a business standpoint. I still have to remind myself to push out there further, to pursue my photographic vision.

What would you recommend to those interested in establishing a stronger career in commercial and editorial photography?

Make sure you're listening to yourself in terms of how you see the world. What I sell is my vision of the world, how I interpret a scene or a setting. I don't sell my equipment or my technical expertise. These days, because there are more and more high-quality digital cameras out there, it's easier for clients to shoot certain things on their own. When they hire a professional photographer, they want that photographer to bring a unique vision to the project. That's how you find a market for your work in this field. ■

To see more from Jason Lindsey, visit him online at www.perceptivevisions.com.