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Picture Perfect.

Why great photography may be the best investment your hotel ever makes.

We live in a world that's all about image. Where people make snap judgments and buying decisions based solely on the way something looks. Putting on a good face is no longer a figurative imperative, it's a literal one. Consumers are bombarded by over 3,000 marketing and advertising messages per day and everyone is competing to be noticed in a world that's increasingly built around sound bites and brief flashes of photography and video tantalizingly sliced to capture your attention.

If you believe "a picture is worth a thousand words" then you can only imagine how exponentially more valuable a really great picture is worth, especially as you think about a networked society that's taking these images and effortlessly distributing them to every corner of the world and sharing them on mediums ranging from computers to PDA's to phones.

How you depict your hotel has never been more critical and the role that photography plays has never been more important. Yet it's surprising how poor the general quality of photography is as you leaf through brochures and surf across the internet. Given the investment owners, developers and management companies put into their hotels, it's amazing that there doesn't seem to be an equally significant investment being made in creating imagery that shows off the property in the most engaging and compelling way possible.

According to a study done by Hotels.com, nearly 70% of respondents agreed that seeing photos of the hotel and hotel rooms are key to their decision-making process. Why? Because in the customer's desire for immediate gratification, photos are the easiest and fastest way to absorb something about that hotel, and when combined with customer ratings, descriptions and maps, they are the best way to convey the ambiance, quality, service, features and style of your property.

Given the way travelers research and access information today, the single most important marketing expenditure your hotel will ever make will be in the visual images that you use to tell your story to the marketplace.

But getting great photography doesn't happen by accident. In reality, it's part art and part science, and through the years I've seen million dollar spaces made to look dull and uninteresting and simple guest rooms at budget hotels made to feel cozy and comfortable. While digital photography and automatic features on cameras has improved the quality of most picture taking, capturing the spirit and flavor of your property requires far more than snapping a few images as you walk around the hotel. As my friend Robert Reck, an accomplished photographer whose work is regularly featured in *Architectural Digest* constantly reminds his clients, great images are "made" not "taken."

As you contemplate creating the best possible imagery for your hotel, here are some things to consider:

Finding the right photographer: The most important step in creating great images is to find a great photographer. And while that might sound obvious, it's often not that easy. Like painters, sculptures and other artisans, every photographer generally has a style, or at least a style they excel in. Some are great with people. Some are great with natural light. Others can shoot incredible still-life. A rare few seem to be excellent across genres. To find the ideal photographer for you, consider the images and imagery you're trying to create for your hotel, as well as the intended purpose and applications. You'll need to have a sense for these things as you conduct your search and in the ensuing conversations you'll have with the potential photographers. If you're working with an ad agency or a design firm they can often conduct this

search for you, or you can ask your architects and interior designers for references. In many larger markets you can also contract with an “art buyer” who does these kinds of searches for a living or you can turn to the American Society of Media Photographers whose website (www.asmp.org) offers a search tool for finding resources by specialty and geography. Start by looking at the websites of photographers to see whose work you like. As you narrow the search, request that the photographers send you their “book” which contains samples of their work. While the web can give you a good sense of style, the books will better represent the quality of the images and will more clearly show the nuances of their work. Look for photographers whose style and aesthetic aligns with what you want your images to convey. Be careful not to get too fixated on what they’ve previously taken shots of, especially if it’s grand spaces and places that might not be representative of what they’ll be shooting for you, and instead focus on the feel of the images. Remember you’re hiring an artist to help you capture the spirit and style of your hotel. As you identify the photographers that most appeal to you, then ideally you should set up a time to meet them to walk them through the assignment and to get a feel for their working and personal style. Chemistry in choosing a photographer is no different than choosing an architect or other project partner. You’re searching for the right fit. Once you’ve narrowed your search down, ask the photographer(s) to submit a written bid.

Have a Shot Plan: It’s important to have a plan and be clear on what you want your photography to convey in terms of mood, style, audience and marketing message. As part of this, you need to develop a list of the shots that comprise the areas of the hotel you are looking to capture, as well as the specific services and amenities you are hoping to convey. Not every shot will be so literal and not all will be about the architecture. There are countless ways to convey service, the soothing feelings of your spa, the challenges of your golf course, the beauty of your lobby. Often your ad agency has already conceptualized ways to convey these things, but many times the photographer can work with the hotel and your marketing team to develop approaches to effectively communicate these ideas. Make the photographer a part of the creative process and you’ll get a better final product that will more successfully address your specific needs. You’ve hired the photographer for his talent, so do everything you can to tap into it.

Time Matters: It takes time to create great shots and you need to plan accordingly. It’s not unusual for it to take a full day to get a particular photo completed. Depending on the size and set-up of the spaces being shot, two to five shots a day is probably more typical. (Reck will admit that he’s done up to eight in a day, but only in rare circumstances). Setting up the room, styling the space and the people, arranging the lighting are but a few of the considerations that goes into every shot, and they all take time. Don’t expect that someone is going to shoot your whole hotel (interiors and exteriors), and do a brilliant job, in a couple of days.

Prepare Your Hotel: Time is money and the more organized your hotel is for the shoot the more efficient the engagement will be. Do everything you can to get your property ready. Make sure all the lights work, power is readily available, carpets are cleaned, broken and worn objects are replaced, linens are pressed and landscaping is completed. Prepare your staff for the shoot and make sure that specific resources are assigned to take care of the various last-minute requests that the hotel will need to address. You’ll also need to block the necessary space and be flexible to the reality that any schedule will likely be constantly revised to factor in a variety of changes and delays.

Be Creative: Sometimes the best shots aren’t the ones you had planned for or expected. Not all spaces or things are going to make good photos. Small guestrooms and miniscule bathrooms can be nearly impossible to make look exciting. Don’t try to document the whole space. Often a small detail conveys a great deal. A tight shot of the designer sink. A small corner of the room highlighting the view from the window, with the rest of the room reflected in an adjacent mirror. An open window with the breeze gently blowing the curtains. By capturing the emotional drivers of the space you can create imagery that will resonate with customers and allow their imagination to help connect to the overall mood and style of your hotel. It usually makes sense for the photographer to work with a stylist who can bring added life

and texture to a shot through little touches. Search for interesting spaces, details, colors, materials, all of which can become important assets to document and have in your image library.

People or No People: This is often the most hotly debated of all questions and there are advantages and disadvantages to both. Generally, if you have great architectural spaces, worthy of a design magazine, then people can often be a distraction. People tend to date images because of clothing and hair styles, and too often hotels shoot scenes with the same models in all the photos so a brochure or website starts to look like a “day in the life of Mr. and Mrs. Blonde Couple.” Allowing people to imagine themselves in the space, without distraction, can lend an air of serenity and exclusivity. On the other hand people can add scale to a shot. They can add energy and personality, especially to bars, nightclubs and other areas of a property where excitement and crowds are part of the allure. They can also help you portray diversity and they can allow you to depict market segments that are important to the hotel such as families, couples and business people. The important thing about using people is that you don’t do it in the cliché way (do we really need another shot of the solitary wait staff in the meeting room setting the table?) and that you use models and professionals that can help you achieve a real and natural feel to the shot. Nothing is more distracting than something that’s been heavily posed. Today you are also seeing more and more subtle imagery where a hint of a leg, an arm, an exposed shoulder, a shadow, all provide a touch of humanity while helping to evoke more emotional feelings from the viewer.

Light Matters: The most important element of photography is light and a great photographer will use light the way a painter uses oils. Different spaces look better in different light and it’s important to create the right atmosphere for each picture. An ordinary window with no real view can become a room’s focal point when it’s filled with a blue dusk sky. A stone patio can take on a romantic glow when it’s wet down and the interior lights from the ballroom are reflected in the water. A good photographer will use nature’s light to dictate a good part of their schedule, so don’t be surprised if the shoot starts at 5 a.m. and runs late into the night. And whatever mood nature can’t supply, a photographer can often create through the clever use of artificial lighting and careful composition.

There’s Always Photoshop: Today’s photography is almost always digitally enhanced through computer programs like Photoshop. Be sure you know to what extent this element of the process is included in the photographer’s bid, as some photographers will actually spend more time cleaning up and perfecting the images in front of the computer, than in front of the lens. Colors can be adjusted, signs can be removed, skies can be brightened and just about everything else you can image can be done to help create the ultimate shot.

What Does it Cost: Like most things in life you get what you pay for. Top photographers can easily be in excess of \$10,000 per day and up. But don’t fear. Really talented people exist at all price points and most photographers are willing to negotiate and work within given budget parameters. It’s important that when a photographer bids on your project that they clearly list everything that’s included. This means the number of shots, crew, models, equipment rentals, stylist, hair, make-up, wardrobe, transportation, film, developing, retouching and everything else that might be essential to complete the shoot. If it’s not listed on the bid, chances are it’s not included. Be sure you get everything itemized and detailed in the estimate, plus have them provide costs for the unexpected extras like rain days, additional shots and more. Ideally, you’d like to get a fixed bid for the project, but often a project takes numerous twists and turns once underway and it’s critical that everyone have a clear understanding of the cost implications every time something changes in the shoot.

Know Your Rights: It’s important that you negotiate rights usage with the photographer. Although you are hiring the photographer, the actual work is their property, which is why you need to have a written agreement on who owns what images, for how long, for what use and in what mediums (print, online, broadcast, etc.), how it’s credited and more. Ideally, you’d like to negotiate a full buy-out of the images across all mediums, but it will generally cost you more the broader the use and the longer the time frame. It’s critical that you get these details agreed to in writing as part of the contract with the photographer,

otherwise it may lead to numerous copyright and legal problems in the future. Similarly, when you use models and other people in your shots, you need to get release forms providing you with the rights to use their images in these shots. All of these documents should be reviewed by your counsel and the signed documents need to be held for as long as you plan to use the images.

Don't Be Shy: Most photographers welcome the participation of the client in planning and conducting the shoot. You're the one that will need to live with the finished work so you need to weigh in during the process and to speak your mind. Great creative work tends to be a collaborative effort, and at the end of the day the photographer wants to please the client and deliver great work.

Be A Good Client: It's important that you allow the photographer to do their job, so don't try to manage them like they're another one of your employees. They are craftsmen who need to be allowed to practice their art. Yet you should ask questions and be candid in your comments. This is a partnership and like most relationships requires good communication to be successful.

Every photo shoot comes with its own challenges and creative opportunities and I've never found any two to be alike. With careful planning there's no reason that your hotel can't come away with an impressive array of images that help to capture the personality and wonder of your property.

You'll find that there's no stronger return on investment than what you'll reap from a well-executed photo shoot.