

For the Emerging Professional Actor: Some Tips for Professional Headshot Sessions

Practice Sessions:

Primarily for financial reasons, many emerging actors wait until they have immediate need to have their first professional headshots taken. This is a mistake on many levels. Headshots are a *key* marketing tool in your early career, so the process shouldn't be rushed and you shouldn't enter as a "headshot virgin." Getting good shots, like good acting, requires letting go of self-awareness. It takes time and practice. Bad self-awareness in a shoot leads to images that appear forced, stiff, and don't let the real you resonate. Practice getting comfortable in front of the camera through practice sessions with peers, or other means you have at your disposal, so when you arrive for that vital shoot you are free and engaged in front of the camera.

Choosing a Photographer:

It's great to use your friends and novice photographers for *practice* sessions. You learn together and you begin to let go of inhibiting "on camera" self-awareness. However, it is vital to use a professional HEADSHOT photographer for your working headshots. These days, it's pretty easy for anyone to buy an expensive digital device and take some headshots, and sometimes they get lucky with an image or two. This is not the route you want for your professional images. In addition to knowing how to take images that offer consistent quality, a professional, *industry centered* headshot photographer also understands the industry and market changes in headshot needs and trends. Remember, this is a KEY marketing tool, and needs to be a professional priority. Be sure to examine the work of potential headshot photographers. Some are better than others, some more appropriate for distinct markets, and some have their own sense of photographic style that may or may not be right for you. Make sure the photographers work aligns with your marketing needs *before* you book. It can also be helpful to meet with the photographer in advance so you can see if you have a good rapport with him/her. This will help you feel more comfortable on the day you take your headshots.

Makeup:

You may or may not choose to engage a makeup artist. Make your decision thoughtfully. If using one, actors must communicate respectfully but clearly with the artist. The makeup artist should not be left to "type" you or guess your needs. Never put that responsibility in the hands of the makeup artist. Be clear about your look and needs. The actor needs to feel empowered and responsible for the makeup outcome.

Photographer Communication:

The same applies to the photographer. A photographer should not have to "type" or guess an actor's needs. The best photos come when the actor is very clear about photographic wants and needs, and is free of inhibiting self-awareness in front of the camera.

Marketing Considerations:

Many emerging actors aim for an "all purpose headshot." There are limited times when they may be successful in starting career communications with an "all purpose shot," but in general it's an ill-advised strategy. Again, the headshot is a key marketing tool. In order to create and engage a marketing tool you must know your target "customer." What is the specific purpose of your headshot? Headshot trends can vary by region and professional purpose. For example, your commercial headshot may not suit your needs accordingly when submitting to a regional theatre, and the headshot you submit in an attempt to garner a daytime drama agent will likely vary from your NY stage shot. As a result, actors aiming at an "all purpose headshot" often end up with a no purpose headshot. If you can only afford to have one look reproduced- set clear goals and strategize what your first marketing target will be, and aim your headshot squarely at it.

Know Your Target Market:

That being said, set specific marketing goals. Many actor's think "I just want to go to NYC or LA and work." Of course you do, but getting to work takes a marketing strategy, with purpose in each career step. Look at yourself. Research your chosen market. Create a timeline and list of articulated goals. What is your first goal? Is it getting a commercial agent? Is it being cast in an Equity stage production? Is it booking daily work on a daytime drama? If you haven't articulated your first steps, it's unlikely you'll climb the staircase. These choices heartily inform your headshot process.

Before the Shoot:

Get a good night's sleep. Stay away from caffeine and alcohol in the 24 hours prior, as both dehydrate. You want to be feeling healthy, relaxed, and confident entering your session.

Clothing:

Actors frequently ask, "What should I wear at my session?" The first primary answer is, "Who are you? How are you going to market YOU?" You've already focused the marketing goal of your shots, so choose attire that aligns YOU with that. With that in mind, the focus in the shot should be you and not your clothing. It's generally advisable to stay away from busy patterns, logos, and colors that wash you out. Most photographers recommend choosing a color that compliments your eye color. One consistent common denominator in variances in headshot market applications is that they should always look like YOU. Your type, your age, your personality. Whether at a commercial audition or an AEA open call for King Lear, the person they see in the headshot should look like the same one that walks through the door.

The GLAM Factor:

Emerging actors commonly "over-glam" in their early rounds of headshots. It's an easy mistake. It feels glamorous and we love the attention those beautiful shots bring us attention from our friends and grandmothers. This is a fatal marketing error. Your friends and grandmothers are certainly not the target audience of your headshots, and cannot book you auditions. Put all your focus in your session upon looking like you in your shots- from clothing selection, to photographer communication, to image selection- it should all be pointed at capturing the real you as respective to your target early career goals.

The Shoot:**Some helpful thoughts for the shoot include:**

1. Bring a friend. As a courtesy, touch base with the photographer first, but it's generally great to bring along a good friend. Having a friend present will contribute to your fun and ease, creating an environment that helps you get your best shots.
2. Inform your shots. This is vital. Your shots have to be informed from the inside. Working in front of a still camera is acting, and acting requires filling moments from within. If the photographer asks for more warmth, that just doesn't mean smile bigger. It means make a choice from within that radiates warmth and a connection to your partner, the camera. Yes. That camera is your acting partner.
3. Eyes, eyes, eyes. This relates to informing your shots. If your shots are informed, your eyes will be engaged in your shots. If not, you'll end up with "dead eyes" that don't resonate interest and connection to the person viewing your shots.

Selecting Images:

With the onset of digital photography, photographers fire images faster and in greater number than they used to. Many do no pre-sorting before passing the images to you. In relation- it is extremely important that the actor learn to choose images with purpose and clarity and with the guidance of a professional- yep, not friends or Facebook. If a photographer shoots consistently during a shoot, some transitional images will indicate changes in camera focus. In relation, an actor *must* view potential images at 8x10 scale. There is no reason EVER for an actor to ever have an image from a professional session that is slightly out of focus. Take time to choose. Again, seek the advice of a professional. Do NOT seek advice from friends and family in choosing your headshot. DO NOT post it on social media to see how many likes each image gets. This will confuse your selection process with opinions of uninformed parties who have a view of you that may not coincide with your goals or marketing strategy.

Reproductions:

Professional reproductions are a non-negotiable. Use a reliable reproduction source that specializes in performer headshots. Reproductions should have a border. Name in border. Walgreens or Walmart glossy's are never acceptable.