

ASSISTANT'S GUIDELINES

A Compilation of Responses From the ASMP Forum
And personal experience
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Commentary

Working with an experienced, professional commercial photographer can be both exhilarating and exasperating. If I had to pick one thing that it takes to succeed as an assistant it would be an unequivocal dedication to the successful completion of the project. You will receive none of the credit, except possibly from the photographer who recognizes and praises your contribution. The rewarding experience involves the intrinsic satisfaction associated with taking part in the creative process and helping to overcome and resolve the numerous problems. At the end of the day, you may be dirty, tired, wired, scraped, pinched, and punchy. On the other hand, some projects may be so low key and enjoyable that getting paid seems a little peculiar. One day it's setting up for forklifts and backhoes, the next it's wedding cakes and ribbons, or celebrities and CEOs. It is this type of variety that keeps making each day a new and exciting adventure.

There is one aspect to be aware of when working with a photographer for the first time. Initially, your every move will be watched. It may seem that he/she is finding fault with everything you do and the way you do it. Don't defend or argue. This usually originates from the fact that they are watching to see that their very expensive equipment is being handled properly, and also trying to help you do your job better. Once they are comfortable with your capability this will subside.

Another aspect to be aware of and remember is that the photographer is under a great deal of stress. He/she carries the responsibility for the project's success. The more professional photographers are less likely to let pressures affect the treatment of their team, but it can happen. Not that anyone should accept verbal abuse, but if you are spoken to sharply or abruptly at times it may be from pressures that you are not aware of. Just move on. Hurt feelings, grudges, and anger just get in the way of your concentration.

An assistant may be able to avert some problems by simply noting and interpreting small details in the photographer's actions. For example: If the photographer walks across the room to set down his/her drink instead of next to the shooting area, then obviously don't set your drink in the shooting area. On the other hand, just because the photographer gives a lens cap a toss into the camera case, this does not give you permission to do the same. Just use common sense and pay attention.

Remember, an assistant is a part of a team, a tool that the photographer uses to achieve his vision. You are not there to talk about yourself. That was done when the photographer hired you. No chattiness with clients, art directors, etc. Common courtesy and pleasantries are fine, but remember your purpose is to be there for the photographer and do everything within your power to help him/her attain the artistic goal and to not interfere with a smooth shoot.

Attitude/Attributes:

- A positive attitude, a positive attitude, and especially a positive attitude.
- Have: a sincere desire to be there, a willingness to learn, enthusiasm towards the project.
- Be: a listener, flexible, efficient, punctual, able to follow instructions, aware of what is going on, motivated and show initiative.
- You must be able to swallow your pride...it's not a question of *if* you will catch it, just *when*. Whether it's your fault or not... might as well get over it and move forward.
- Anticipate: what is going on, what will be needed next, what will next go wrong and prevent it.
- Always look busy. There is always something to do.
- Turn your cell phone off or put it on silent (not "Vibrate"). A photographer will interpret your preoccupation with your cell phone to mean that you are bored, disinterested and not concentrating on the job for which you were hired.
- Be ready to help other crew members/production professionals, even if it isn't your job.
- Always have clean breath; consider bringing gum/mints for others.
- Remember good manners and be politically correct.
- Compatibility. Try to be amiable, but... sometimes it works, sometimes not.

Communication:

- Try to get an understanding of what is expected of you. Each photographer has different requirements and expectations. Talk to him or her, build a relationship.
- Know when to speak and when to be silent. Chattiness is deadly. Most likely you are missing something important if your lips are flapping.
- Speak softly and be discrete when talking to the photographer, especially in front of the client.
- Be aware that sometimes you will be listening between the lines, to subtleties.
- Don't assume. If you're not sure... ask. Better to ask and feel stupid than to not ask and be stupid, and possibly destructive.
- Be discreet: if you need to let the photographer know that something isn't right, don't announce it to the whole set. There is a time and a place for everything; figure out when/where that is. A good photographer is alert to his/her team and will usually be able to recognize that you need to tell him/her something.

Preparedness/Tools:

- Wear the proper clothing for the job, ask.
- Arrive at the job 10-15 minutes earlier than the call time.
- Know the nature of the job, ask.
- Use proper terminology; always know the equipment – if you are unsure, ask.
- Sharpie, watch, fanny pack, small pad for notes/instructions, a survival tool, band-aids, aspirin, and for emergencies: some cash (\$20-\$40) and a quick snack/water. A more advanced kit might include: a small flashlight, various tapes (black photo, white, double-sided), a plug-in electrical circuit tester, gray card, work gloves, dual timers/clock for timing Polaroids, and various hand tools, like pliers, a crescent wrench and a utility knife.
LABEL YOUR OWN EQUIPMENT!
- The A.S.H.: This is an Adjustable Sense of Humor that can be set to fit each photographer's personality. Don't forget to bring it.

Safety:

- Think. Don't run around impulsively. Move carefully and decisively.
- Protect equipment from theft and damage.
- Use down time to repair, organize, re-stock, check cords, and clean-up set.
- Protect against trip hazards, such as cords, stands, or wires. There are certain ways to set up stands and hang cords. Your carelessness could be quite expensive to the photographer. THINK.

Skills/Technical:

- Be alert to what *is* happening or *is not* happening with the equipment.
- Be attentive to: sync cords, recycle times, strobes firing, gels, reflectors, stands, props, ... basically *everything*.
- Watch that slaves don't get blocked.
- Notice where gear comes from and put it back in same place, same way.
- Keep equipment clean and organized.
- Put things back in cases instead of around the set so they are less likely to get lost.

ADVANCED: These are things to consider ONLY if the photographer has requested your added participation. NEVER touch the camera unless instructed to do so.

- 35mm - check that shutter speed is not too fast for sync, med/large format - pull dark slide, check that sync cord is connected.
- Make sure F-stop and shutter speed are correct for film being used.
- Be able to load various formats of film. Cameras differ and a photographer can review any peculiarities of his/her equipment. If you have to be taught, don't expect to be paid full rate.
- Count shots and be ready for roll changes.
- Put roll #'s on the film and keep with the Polaroids in one place.
- Never shoot while photographer is shooting, unless requested to do so.
- Keep track of: exposures and pertinent technical data, model releases, materials used, etc. as required by photographer.
- Make sure all cameras are unloaded at end of shoot (double-check that they are rewound before opening back).

Business:

- Define your rates, policies and payment terms *in advance* and confirm them with the photographer or the person hiring you.
- Define reimbursement: vehicle use, mileage, tolls, overtime, personal gear rented to the photographer, etc.
- Keep track of all receipts. Make sure they are legible.
- Keep track of reimbursable expenses to include with invoice: mileage, tips, etc.
- Have invoice ready to present at **end** of shoot. Include: Client name, shoot date, your address, phone number, and ss# . (Some photographers will request invoice mailed or faxed within a specific time frame. Omitting information will delay your payment.)
- Practice confidentiality about client and photographer. Gossip is for busybodies, not a professional assistant.
- Ask for photographer's business card. It helps to have contact information and can give you ideas when you begin to look at designing your own stationery.

FINALLY:

Remember: you were hired by the photographer to assist him or her. You should NEVER promote yourself during the shoot or while on set; NEVER tell client how you would do a shot; and NEVER discuss money matters around client or art director.