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UPDATING THE TOOL KIT

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By BOBBY L. HICKMAN

Successful photographers are always evolving. Not just creatively, but technically as well. Many still photographers are updating their tool kit and now offer video capabilities.

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Professional still photographers, who only a few years ago transitioned from shooting film to using digital cameras, are now tackling a new challenge: Adding video capabilities to their list of creative services.

Photographers are using a new generation of digital cameras that offer HiDef video capabilities in addition to state-of-the-art still capabilities. They are also able to increase their billings to budget-conscious clients who see efficiencies in using one shooter who can produce two types of media products.

Many veteran still photographers are finding the technical transition easier by using D-SLR cameras with video capabilities that are similar to digital cameras they have used for years. The biggest challenge for many is learning the nuances of how to put a formerly still image into motion and how to edit the finished product.

Most photographers are learning their new skills online. Some read books, take courses or visit chat rooms. And they attend live seminars such as those offered by the Atlanta chapter of the Advertising Photographers of America (APA). Best of all is talking to other photographers in person or online to share tips and tricks about transitioning to the world of moving images.

Regardless of exactly which equipment they use, who their clients are and what level of technical expertise they seek, the six photographers we interviewed are striving to keep pace as marketing and media continues to move towards a video-centric future.

Jason Fobart ***Fobart Photography***

Jason Fobart, former director of APA's Atlanta branch, said he has "definitely seen a flood of interest" among photographers who want to add video to their toolkit. "A lot of people are testing the waters or jumping in head-first and praying they don't hit a rock," he said. "That's kind of the approach my buddies and I are taking. And if we hit the rock, we bounce off it and figure out what to do next."

What is driving that interest? "Simply the fact that we can do it now," Fobart said. "We can shoot high-definition video with the same cameras that we were using on our advertising and other jobs." Being able to do still and motion with "one set of gear is really cool," he added.

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Clients also benefit from the trend. "We can produce two different products in a little more time, with little more complication, not twice the time or twice the complication." Depending on the project, Fobart added, "It doesn't necessarily require a complete second crew just for the video now."

Overall, Fobart said, the transition provides a way "for photographers to make a little extra money by providing an extra service to our clients. Everybody in the creative industry has been dealing with reduced budgets. So it's a good thing when we provide an opportunity for our clients to get better value for their money by doing two things at once."

Photographers going into video need a few pieces of additional equipment, Fobart said, such as a microphone and headphones, but they are not required to "invest in a whole new kit." "Five years ago, if you were a photographer and you wanted to learn to direct, that's was a whole different world, especially shooting on film," he said. The "lingo is different," movie cameras are more complicated, and it was "intimidating to deal with all that," he said. "Nowadays we can dip our toe in easier because we already have familiarity with the equipment."

He said there are a "few technical things you have to know to execute video well," but they are relatively simple and "you can learn that in one day." After that, he said, the learning curve is "all about telling a story in motion." Fobart said still photographers are "used to getting a good picture in 1/500th of a second. Now you've got to string it together 24 frames per second times 10 or 15 or 30 seconds."

Fobart owns the Canon 5D Mark II and the Canon 7D, plus a few accessories. "I own enough just to get by," he said. "When we need more, we rent," as not every client requires the same level of production. He mostly works through advertising agencies, so the types of projects vary.

Fobart said his involvement in editing also varies by project. "On some stuff, you hand it off to the agency, which has its own editors and post production," he said. For small projects it is "easier to do the editing yourself." Editing is a specialized craft, Fobart continued, so "it's a nice toolset to know something about." He said he wants to know enough to communicate with the editors that his clients hire. "I need to be able to speak his language and understand the technical limitations he's dealing with," Fobart added.

Generally, Fobart said, photographers need to understand fundamental technical concepts and practices to work effectively. "If your client doesn't need an expert, you can do the basics," he said. "And if they need an expert, you'll know how to speak to an expert or hire one so you can get the job done."

Learning video "has been a fun ride," Fobart said. "I've always been interested in cinematography and the art of telling stories in motion. The ability to do that to a degree with the kit I already own and use to shoot pictures with has made it a whole lot easier to jump into this. And it's kept it fun." He compared the transition to "trying to drive left-handed stick in Europe. Familiarity (with the camera) means you can focus on shooting cool content instead of being caught up in the tools."

David Fields
Professional Photo Resources



The biggest transition for still photographers into video is an important one, according to David Fields, the store manager at Professional Photo Resources (PPR), a rental and sales house that primarily caters to professionals. "The photography industry got damaged several years ago with the new digital SLR cameras," he said. "The techniques of photography changed" and the skill levels became "really confused." Whereas manual cameras required a great deal of photographer skill and technical knowledge, "the D-SLRs do so much themselves, it's almost a point and shoot."

A similar change in equipment is now happening with video, Fields continued. "The new D-SLRs are attacking the film industry. Now every camera I sell, it's because it has video capability." A number of photographers who want to get into video do not have a video background, but Fields notes that they are facing the same obstacles as those who experienced the film-to-digital transition.

The Canon 5D Mark II, which is the most popular model, was not the first still camera with high-quality video capabilities, but it was "the first good one," Fields said. "Nikon had some video out first but the Canon is full HD 1080p." The Nikon works in 790p, which is "a smaller format of HD," Fields said. He noted the Canon 5D is "an all-around camera with full-frame, which changes the look of the image, depth of field and so on." Canon also has a 7D model, which has "a smaller sensor but is also full HD and 1080p," Fields said. He added the Nikon's "still capture is excellent, but the video is still a little behind."

“It is inevitable a lot of us photographers are going to be in this world of film, and ultimately the worlds are going to come together as one. So I think we all need to start embracing that.” - Zach Wolfe

With the push into video, Fields said, PPR is carrying a lot more video cameras and related equipment for sale and rent. For example, strobe lights are popular for still photography but are not used in video, so the company is “changing the type of lighting we’re renting.” The change is happening so fast, he added, even manufacturers “are overloaded like crazy. There are backorders on all that type equipment – even microphones.”

Fields, who also teaches photography classes, said demands of the marketplace are driving the changes. A number of his still photography customers are learning how to add video because it is more efficient for their clients to deal with one photographer than adding a videographer to the mix. “It also brings in more business for a photographer,” he said. “They are learning this new skill set in order to stay relevant.”

The trend is also learning so they understand their customer needs, added Fields. “I’ve been to workshops and I’ve learned an incredible amount just working with the photographers who are transitioning. We’re fumbling through it together.”

Fields expects to see more video in the future. “You’re seeing more demand for videos on the web and YouTube, and less demand for still images.” Magazines and newspapers are cutting back or folding, so there are fewer demands for print ads and less need for still photography. “Now, everything is online and everything is moving,” he said. “It’s got to be entertaining.”

The trend towards still cameras with HiDef video is also bringing the previously separate worlds of photography and cinematography closer together. Fields said he has seen “a number of video people in the store lately, which we’ve never really had before because I didn’t carry what they needed. But now as we’re changing our equipment, they’re finding us as a resource for what they’re doing.”

Fields said the film industry “has always thought of still photographers as a lower class” and their craft was “a less prestigious thing. But now the manufacturers are looking at the still photographers as the resurrection of their business. It’s given them a new customer base.”

Don Matter Don Matter Photography

Don Matter said he added video to his list of services because the market is evolving to include more multimedia. “I’m trying to provide my current clients with a new tool for their marketing,” he said. “Just being able to add movement to the still images I currently shoot allows them to use video on their website, in focus group settings or for PowerPoint presentations.”

Matter, who does mostly consumer brand shots, said photographers combining a still shoot with video have a competitive advantage. Clients “get a lot of value for their shoot day.” And, the photographer has another service to sell. Matter is creating three- to five-second clips that the client can use for various applications. “We’re not doing any editing,” Matter added. “I’m providing clients an additional resource, just as they would use a still image.” If the client combines the still image with an in-store display that features video, for example, “it makes a nice cohesive package because that incorporates still and motion shots of the same products done

with the same background and same lighting," he added.

The learning curve has been steep on the technical side, Matter said. "There are a lot more formats to work with." However, his main challenge has been "the transition from what looks good as a still to what looks good moving. You really have to start thinking differently to come up with the best solutions." Besides visual components, he said, shooting video means considering "what looks good mechanically and the time constraints of doing that. After all, you don't have Photoshop to retouch something."

Matter said he feels strongly that "the marketplace is leading us to more combinations of stills and video in different presentations. That's the way everything is going down the road." He expects to shoot more video in the future "because that's the route a lot of my clients are going for their advertising needs."

Greg Miller
Gregory Miller Photography



Greg Miller said his new technical skills "came by necessity." He said his clients, ad agencies, design firms, corporate and editorial, were requesting video to use online, "and I knew I had to learn to keep up with my competition." His first video project was an annual report for Whirlpool Corporation. "I read a lot and talked to folks about video," Miller said, "then I learned a lot on the job. It was a two-week job with travel to Iowa, Michigan, Italy, Germany and Brazil." He added the project "was a real crash course that yielded great results."

Miller owns a Canon 5D Mark II and Sony HVR Z7U. "I hire digital and sound support as needed," he added. "I

don't do any editing. I shoot and deliver the raw video files to the client. They use their own editors to achieve the final product."

Transition to video means a different approach to shooting, Miller said. "With photography, I'm constantly responsible for the creation of whatever I'm shooting in a way that's a little more frenetic than video can support." He said he "had to learn to be more patient and committed to my composition, to decide on my shot and follow through to the end. I can't change composition mid-shot. If I see something else I want to get, we need to do another take. It's not a completely different way of thinking, but it is a shift."

Zach Wolfe
Zach Wolfe Photography



Zach Wolfe's specialty is photographing urban music. After five years shooting stills of rappers and hip hop artists, he has spent the last year transitioning into video. When the Canon 5D came out, Wolfe started out "messing around with it because I was curious." He asked some of the artists he worked with if he could do some behind-the-scenes video. "One thing led to another, and now I'm only doing video," Wolfe said. He has been working with Big Boi from Outkast since early 2010, including live concerts, web documentaries and a music video that should debut soon on MTV.

"In the hip-hop world, it seems like budgets for photography are being cut tremendously," Wolfe said. Music industry budgets "are being cut in half or more. I realized if I didn't start looking to other avenues there wouldn't be much work left for me in the future." While video budgets have also been cut, Wolfe noted, "There was always more money in video. For me, a reduced video budget is higher than the still budget was." He also noted that there are "more photographers in Atlanta than there is work. I think a lot of photographers are getting driven into other avenues just because they don't have a choice."

Wolfe said he plans to expand beyond music. He wants to parlay his music background into other work, although he has not decided what other areas he wants to explore. "I just don't want to be pigeon-holed as a music video guy; I'm open to anything."

Learning to shoot video with the new DSLRs is no that difficult for still photographers, Wolfe said. "Exposing and composing your shots is the easiest part for us; the rest is a steep learning curve." One challenge is the intricacies of shooting motion. Says Wolfe, "Putting cameras on dollies and jib arms . . . those are not things still photographers use."

Editing is also "a nightmare," Wolfe said. "As a photographer, you could have loose ideas; go out on a photo shoot and wing it; then come back and put together a nice portfolio. With video you're not going to be able to do that. You have to pre-plan everything. Pre-planning includes anticipating the editing. Wolfe said he remains "very involved" in the editing: "I feel like if I pass my editing off to somebody else, my vision may be lost." He also wants to understand every step of the filmmaking process. "If I get a big budget for a music video and I'm on the set and I don't understand everything I'm going to lose control," he said. "I'm trying to learn every aspect of filmmaking so when the bigger budgets come, I have a way to communicate with people when I hire them to do certain things."

Wolfe said he "feels it is inevitable a lot of us photographers are going to be in this world of film, and ultimately the worlds are going to come together as one. So I think we all need to start embracing that."

Rich Addicks
Rich Addicks Photography



Rich Addicks spent 27 years at the Atlanta Journal-Constitution (AJC) as a still photographer before taking a buyout in May 2009. After years of traveling and "doing big projects you looked forward to," the industry changed. Reduced budgets and new business models meant less fun, challenging things were gone," he said. Before he left, Addicks learned how to make videos for the AJC's website. "I had been doing video on my own since the invention of iMovie," he said, "but it was mostly kid stuff." At the newspaper, he did a few videos which "got me energized. It was not just images but also sound. At that time, I saw it as a little bit of the future. Today I see it hugely as the future."

Now a freelancer, Addicks offers his clients both still and video services. He strings for the Associated Press as a photojournalist, and does portraits and other stills for corporate and private clients. However, "I recognize the industry is already full of photographers. I'd love to do photojournalism the rest of my life, but I recognize why they offered me a buyout. At this moment in time, journalism is not making any money." He also noted the market rate for photographers has also been depressed since digital photography replaced film.

Addicks said it does "not take a genius to look down the road to the future and see video is going to have a huge place in our lives. If print is going away, electronic becomes the new print. And the language of the web is video." He noted some people are learning new skills such as video, while others are "kind of hoping that when the economy rebounds, that things are going to be the same. I don't believe they'll be the same. They never are."

In addition to the pragmatic considerations, Addicks said, "I really enjoy doing video." Video provides a good fit for those who "tell stories visually and journalistically." Most of his work has been outdoor videos for private individuals and a commercial client. "I have a bunch more video work lined up this summer," he said. "By this time next year, I should have a full portfolio I can show to clients and prospects."

Addicks owns both video and still equipment. For the past two years, he has used the Panasonic HPX170, a traditional camcorder that "produces great images and has great audio options." A lifelong Nikon user, he bought a Nikon E3S in January. He said he just made his first video with the E3S and found it "quite different" from using the Panasonic. While he still favors the flexibility and broader capabilities of the Panasonic, he added, "I would use the Nikon again, depending upon the situation." He said he wants "to be prepared when I go to a still assignment in case someone says, 'Can you shoot a little video also?' Then I'll have the E3S right there."

Addicks also does all his own editing. "I want to be a one-stop-shop guy who does it all for a client," he said. "If I edit what I shoot, I'll learn more from what I did right or what I did wrong." He agreed editing is "really time consuming. Some photographers are embracing it, but many are intimidated by learning a new skill set like editing. I tell them to jump in and do it: You'll get hooked and it's a lot of fun. This is an exciting time for visual communicators."