

## 4-Week Short Course: Introduction to Product Photography With Instructor John Siskin

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### Lesson #4: Shooting Large Objects

#### Lighting Large Products

There is more to shooting large product than just backing off your lights. Large products are often not just big, they're also heavy. I had a machine that I had to get into the studio that was so heavy the wheels sunk into the asphalt in the parking lot. If you want to shoot a lot of big product, and this is a good business, you will want a big studio. It would be good if the studio is on the ground floor of a building and has a drive up cargo door.

This can be tough to find. I know a lot of photographers who only do large product at the clients' location. This limits the

photographer's overhead nicely, but it can also limit your image making. We will start with large product in this lesson, then work on shooting on location and finally talk about how you get to a location.



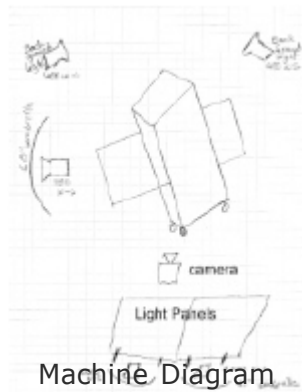
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Belco Heat Sealing Machine

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Machine Diagram  
Belco Heat Sealing

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The first product is a heat-sealing machine. It is about 6 feet long and almost 5 feet high. The important characteristics of the machine are the orange logo

color, the client, the sliding shelf that serves the oven, and the dials. Remember that the client is coming to us to help him communicate information about the product. Of course the client also wants it to look good! The first step for me, in setting up a product shot is to establish the location of the camera and its orientation to the product.

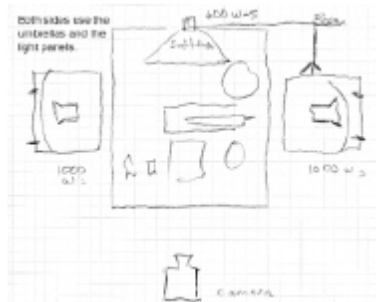
This product was very difficult to move, first it was heavy, but it also marked up the seamless. Since this was a film shot, we didn't want to do that, as the client would see the marks. I should point out that a 4 X 5 camera and tripod can also be difficult to move. The key to finding the right position was the gauges and the printing on the side of the orange oven. Remember, it is important to think your shot through. This saves a lot of time & trouble

In order to create a shot that will show this product in a good light we need a large soft light source. To me, that means light panels. In this case I used two light panels, with umbrellas, to light the long side of the product. This means that the side is very evenly lit and has a minimum level of shadows. A very large light source can practically eliminate shadows, but only when it is very close to the product. In this case the light source is about 7 feet wide, and it is quite a few feet from the product. After all I have to keep it out of the picture. I could have used a 6 foot softbox to do the same thing, but that would have been a very expensive soft box!

I also used an umbrella on the right side of the camera; this made the right side of the oven lighter than the front of the machine. This helps to define the shape of the machine. Finally I had light coming in on both sides of the background, this gives the background a little gradation. I should mention that the background is a 12 foot wide grey seamless. The 12 foot wide seamless is very helpful with large products.



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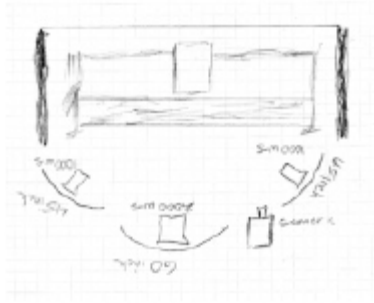
This next shot uses fabric for a background. This is a pretty simple shot to light, both sides have an umbrella and light panel combination and there is a softbox above the shot. You can see three separate highlights in the shiny products that show these lights. The problem here is setting up the shots. You will need boards and bricks to set up the steps for the product. I put fabric over the boards in this shot - it is much easier to use than seamless in

this sort of a shot. When you set up something like this, be sure you can access the area behind the set. You will often want to add boxes or other risers in back to even out the product in front. Setting up this many items in one shot requires great patience, especially when things start to fall. I should point out that you would want to encourage (demand?) that the client bring at least 2 of everything, sometimes things break. Preparing this shot takes longer than lighting it. Remember to set some time aside to clean everything!

## Lighting on Location



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This is another large product, but it is at the client's location. When the machine weighs a couple of tons you just can't get the client to drop it off at the studio. Wouldn't it be terrible if they didn't come to pick it up? The machine is actually outdoors in a sort of a garage, so the lighting is tricky. All the lighting on this machine was done with umbrellas. There are a couple of reasons for that, the most important one being that I needed a lot of light to compete with daylight. Since this is a film shot I couldn't just use existing light and let the camera filter it back to daylight. If I had done something like that it wouldn't have been even light anyway.

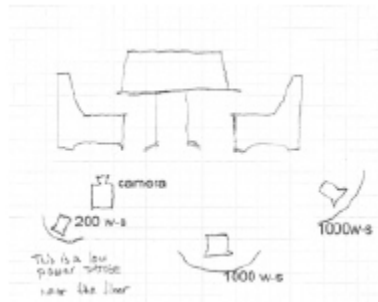
Another reason for using the umbrellas is that they spread light very evenly over a large area, clearly a good idea with a product this large. The diagram, unfortunately, shows the umbrellas as larger than they were, they did not cover the machine as evenly as it looks like in the diagram. The only problem with umbrellas in a shot like this would be wind. I just hate it when the wind blows my light over. I put up a 9 foot roll of seamless, horizontally, behind the product. I didn't do this because it would be a useable background, but because it would prevent bad reflections from the background and it would be easier to clip the subject from the background. The key in a shot like this is to light the machine as evenly as possible, difficult to do, particularly outside.



U-Build image 3  
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U-Build image 2  
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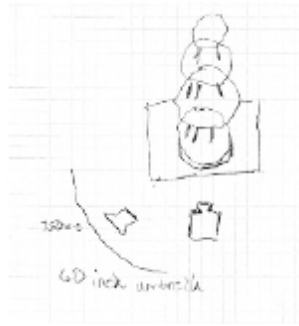
U-Build #2  
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This shot was made for U-Build, a company that sells plans for furniture. The product is the booth and table. This is a great shot for showing a few things about working on location. In the first shot you can see my umbrellas in the windows. This is a good place to point out that you need only keep things out of the part of the image you are using. You'll note that these problems are not visible in shot # 2; they were simply cropped out. Once again this is a three light shot using umbrellas. There is a 30 inch umbrella near the floor and just to camera left. This does not show in the windows of course. This helps to lift the shadows that would otherwise be on the floor and side of the bench.

The thing I really want to point out is the difference in the background in these two shots. These images were made within a few minutes of each other; the only difference is a change in the shutter speed. The shutter speed does not affect the strobes only the existing light. In the first shot the shutter speed is 1/250th of a second. The second shot was taken at 1/15th of a second. The client was able to decide whether the addition of the backyard drew too much attention from the product. You can tell that I often use just umbrellas on location, they are quick and easy to work with.



Wedding Cake  
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Wedding Cake  
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I just wanted to throw in a shot to point out that location work can be very tasty! The only real difficulty with this shot is to keep the window free of reflections. This is only one light, a 60 inch umbrella to the left of the camera. As with the last shot you need to get the shutter speed right in order to make the background look right. Remember, in a shot like this you will get a significant amount of light from the window. This light helps to open up the flowers and glasses on the table. Another point, usually I want a lot of depth of field when shooting product, but not in this shot. I wanted to keep the background out of focus. So, here I used less light. This also made it easier to get window to balance with the strobes. This seems much nicer than shooting on a white background and cutting out the product!

### Taking Gear on Location

Now that we have a bunch of equipment, we have to figure out how to take it with us. If you are careful about this you can reduce your need for an assistant on location. We will start with the rules. There are rules, and these are the rules. You can ignore the rules, but there may be a price to pay.

- Rule #1 Do not set up a case you cannot lift when it is full.
- Rule #2 You should be able to stand on at least some of your cases.
- Rule #3 A wheeled cart is more useful than wheeled luggage.
- Rule #4 Luggage that does not draw attention to itself is safer for your gear.
- Rule #5 Be redundant. Be redundant.
- Rule #6 If you travel by air be prepared to lose some of your luggage.
- Rule #7 Keep heavy gear from crushing light gear.
- Rule #8 Put tape on the outside of your cases.

**Rule #1** So I have know several photographers who violated rule #1, they thought that one big case is better than many little cases, but, of course, you have to have help to move the damn case. A large wheeled case does make sense if it will be used in the studio only. If you have a tower computer, a power pack and 3 or 4 heads in one case, along with reflectors and accessories, you will not be able to lift it. I know a guy who felt that since the case fit into the back end of the pickup and he could pull it off the truck he was Ok. Ok until he had to put the case back into the pickup at the end of the day.

**Rule #2** I knew a photographer who took a stepladder on every job. Why would you want to do that when you can just stand on a case? I think that you can make a case more useful if you pay attention to the possibilities. Several of my cases, including the military cases below, will hold my weight.

**Rule #3** My wheeled cart is one of the best accessories I ever bought. I use it for moving everything from flowerpots to props. It's better than wheeled luggage, first it's actually easier to use, and second I can move everything with it.

**Rule #4** I used to have an aluminum case with a big radioactivity symbol on the side. Very handy for getting an extra seat on a train, but it drew too much attention. Now I have military surplus ammunition cases. These draw some attention, but not like the radioactive symbol. The real deal is to avoid any case that says "hey, expensive photo gear, steal this!" I do not like Halliburton cases, but I do like Pelican cases. The Pelican cases are much more understated.

**Rule #5** Some things you can easily have two of: two sync cords, two camera body caps. Some things you should always have at least one more than you need, for instance, slaves.

**Rule #6** The key here is to start by taking out the gear you want for the job, then decide if you can take it all. When you know what you can take resist the temptation to put like with like; for instance don't put all your cameras in one bag, if you lose it you lose the shoot. Each bag should have some lighting gear, some camera gear and some grip gear. That way if you lose some of your luggage, you can still do a shoot. By the way the most important camera and the computer should go as carry-on luggage.

**Rule #7** Basically this means don't put your umbrellas in with tripods and light stands. I usually use duffel bags for this stuff; you'll notice I have two duffel bags on top of the cart. I also bought these at the military surplus store.

**Rule #8** This is more of a tip actually. If you put pieces of gaffer tape on the outside of your cases when you forget the tape, and this happens to all of us,

you will still have some tape. This only works with gaffer tape, everything else is junk when you remove it, gaffer tape is good for years. Also it makes your cases look junky, see Rule #4.

Now the cases I actually use come from 3 sources: military surplus stores, thrift stores and Home Depot. No credit for guessing which cases come from which source. I really like the ammunition cases for my Norman 900 series gear, especially because the power packs fit so well into these cases. The ammunition cases are incredibly tough and they are waterproof. I do not know if you could find a military case that would suit other gear as well.

I really like Pelican cases, and when I see one used, I buy it immediately. Unfortunately this almost never happens. Part of the problem is that these cases are not big enough to hold a strobe system, so finding a couple of them used is tough and buying a couple of them new could cost more than another strobe head. Consequently, I find myself running down to Home Depot or Lowes. Both of these companies, and I know there are others, sell a bunch of different tool cases, probably one or more will fit your needs.

Don't be afraid to modify your cases to fit your gear. I have used carpet in side my military cases to better fit the power packs.



Norman 1250 Power Pack Case

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Additionally, we can modify our cases to serve as light stands. I have a hole in the top of my military cases that I use to attach a stud for a light stand.



Strobe Case/Light  
Stand

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Strobe case/light stand detail

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You can get these studs for both sizes of light connectors, 3/8th inch and 1/2 inch. This page at the Calumet website has an adapter for 1/4 X 20 thread to 3/8 stud: [www.calumetphoto.com](http://www.calumetphoto.com)

This is what I used on the case above. By the way the 1/4 X 20 tread is the same as the tripod screw, so this same adapter could make a tripod into a light stand, could be handy to have a few of these. Of course there is another adapter for 1/2 inch lights.

On the case for my Norman 200B lights I have been a little more creative, which I can do because the heads weigh less.

Here I glued a nut into the top of the case (1/4 X 20) and attached either the pole shown here or a light stud, both are Bogen/Manfrotto products. Two things I'd like to point out about this case, first I can stand on it. Second the little drawers in the front of the case keep things like slaves and sync cords separate: easier to find and less damage. This is a great case for the Norman 200B system.



Strobe Case/Light Stand  
Norman 200B  
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While we're on the subject of going on location I wanted to mention something for a new piece of location equipment, the laptop. Where are we going to put it? I made a table top for an extra set of tripod legs I had, and this has worked out very well.



Laptop Table  
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I took a piece of plywood the size of the bottom of my laptop and put a 1/4 X 20 thread in it, then it fit onto the tripod legs. This is really easy to do, go to a hardware store, Home Depot or Lowes or whatever, and buy a 1/4 X 20 T-nut, as in this next photo.



Drill a 1/4 inch or slightly larger hole into the plywood, in the middle would be nice. Hammer the nut in to the hole. Now your tabletop fits onto the tripod. I would nail some elastic, as I have onto the bottom of the table to keep the computer from being knocked off the table. I've been really happy with this project!



Laptop Table Detail

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Light Stands

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should say something about light stands and if I don't say it now, I may never get to it. The first thing is that you will have a lot of weight tied up in these things. I know people who have spent about \$200 extra to get a lighter weight tripod, but when I go on location I have more weight in stands than in a tripod. So the first suggestion is to buy stands that are strong enough for your lights and not heavier

than they need to be. If you want a boom buy a heavy-duty-stand for that light, you'll need it.

I have different classes of light stands: stand I actually use for lights and stands I use for setting up diffusers, sets and props. The first class, the stands I actually use for lights are good quality and well cared for. The second class is often junk, but serves the purpose. If you have a studio you will find that you can use a lot of second class stands, just don't try to take them all on location. I should point out that there are now air cushioned stands; these will not allow your light to drop suddenly if you loosen the nut that holds up the extension. This is probably a good thing, but it is still a good thing to pay close attention as you set up your lights.

While I'm on the subject, let's talk about C-Stands. These are like light stands on steroids. They will hold a boom or seamless. These are two times when you really need a C-stand. Because there are arms made for them people often use them to hold diffusers or neutral density filtration to control lighting. Of course you could mount these same adapters on a regular light stand and reduce you weight. You will want to check out the accessories for the C-stand at Calumet, B&H, Samy's or another photo retailer.



C-stands

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Magic Arm on Rail System  
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Another thing you will want to look for is the grip equipment sold for the studio. I would be particularly interested in the gear from [Bogen/Manfrotto](#), and [Matthews](#). These companies have some very clever people creating very useful equipment. I have several of the Bogen super clamps (Matthews has a similar product) and these have saved me in some interesting situations. The more you work with lights the more grip equipment you'll need.

### **Assignment: Shoot a Large Product**

Shoot any large product you'd like - even an oversized box would be okay.

Shoot at least 2 angles and shoot your set-up.

If you'd like me to critique your assignment you can arrange that by paying \$25 on my website. Please visit [www.siskinphoto.com/workshop.php](http://www.siskinphoto.com/workshop.php) . I suppose you could also make a donation at the site.

I hope you find this class useful.

Thanks!

Have a good time.

Thanks!

John

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