Lighting Video:
Five Important Aspects of any Lighting Setup

BY CHUCK PETERS

A lot of people mistakenly believe that shooting with a better video camera will give them better footage.

In reality, shooting with a top-of-the-line high definition video camera often does more to reveal the flaws in your shots than it does to improve them.

The biggest difference between bringing home so-so shots and fantastic footage isn't what you are shoot with; it's what you are shooting at. The best way to shoot better shots is to take greater control over the look of the things you are shooting. This means thinking less like a video camera

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operator and more like a Director of Photography. Think about it: a video camera operator stands behind the camera and shoots what he or she sees. But, a Director of Photography moves all over the set and takes control over everything in the frame. A Director of Photography isn't only concerned with the camera settings. The DP makes decisions about everything from the color of the shirt on the subject to the position of the props and the look of the lighting. Lighting is the most critical factor in determining image quality.

When it comes to making lighting decisions, there are at least five factors to consider every time you turn on a lighting instrument: Position, brightness, quality, shape and color.

1) Position

Light positioning is about adjusting the length, direction and angle of shadows that an instrument casts. A light source positioned near the video camera creates what is known as flat lighting. Flat lighting is low on the creativity scale, and neutral in terms of emotion. As a light is moved farther to the side of the subject it becomes increasingly more dramatic and emotional. When a single light strikes one side of the subject's face at a 90-degree angle in relation to the camera, it creates a very dramatic look. And when it is pointed at the wall behind the subject, the result is the uber-dramatic silhouette.

2) Brightness

The overall brightness of a scene is often referred to as being high key or low key. High key lighting floods the entire scene with high levels of light so that everything is brightly lit. It is used for happy, or upbeat scenes. By contrast, low key lighting is dark. It makes greater use of shadows than illumination and, as a result, it creates drama and suspense.

3) Quality

Quality refers to a light's hardness or softness. A hard light is characterized by a sharp, defined shadow edge and a deep, dark shadow. Hard light pulls out the angular features of a face and draws attention to wrinkles and creases. It can make a subject look strong, or weathered, or wicked. Hard lighting can make a subject seem intimidating. Soft lighting has a broad, gradual

Pointing the lights at the wall behind a subject creates a dramatic silhouette.

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shadow edge and a faint shadow. It is more flattering on the face. It conceals wrinkles and hides lines in the face, and makes people seem more friendly and approachable. Possibly more trustworthy. The hardness of a lighting instrument can be altered by adjusting the lamp from spot to flood, or by adding diffusion material or a softbox to the front of the instrument.

4) Shape

Shape is about controlling and focussing a light. In most cases, light shouldn't just wash evenly over everything in the scene. It should only go where it is wanted. The lighting designer selectively shapes light into shafts and pools to highlight certain parts of the scene while allowing others to fall into the shadows. Professional lighting designers shape video lights using lighting tools such as barndoors, snoots, cookies and gobos, but anything that blocks light will work. Light can be shaped using household items like foam core, window blinds or an artificial tree branch.

5) Color

Light color is a huge consideration that is often overlooked in video production. Light color can be easily altered using gels, and light color has an immense influence on the look and feel of a scene. Yellow or amber gels give a scene a warm feeling. They can also create the look of a morning sunrise. Shots tinted light blue feel cold; like winter. Red or orange hints at evening, especially when combined with a light position that creates long shadows. Lighting an entire scene with navy blue lighting creates the looks of nighttime. Shots can be tweaked by using a small amount of color, or completely changed by bathing them in gelled light.

Using gobos to create patterns in your lights and gels to change the color can have a great impact on the atmosphere of your scene.
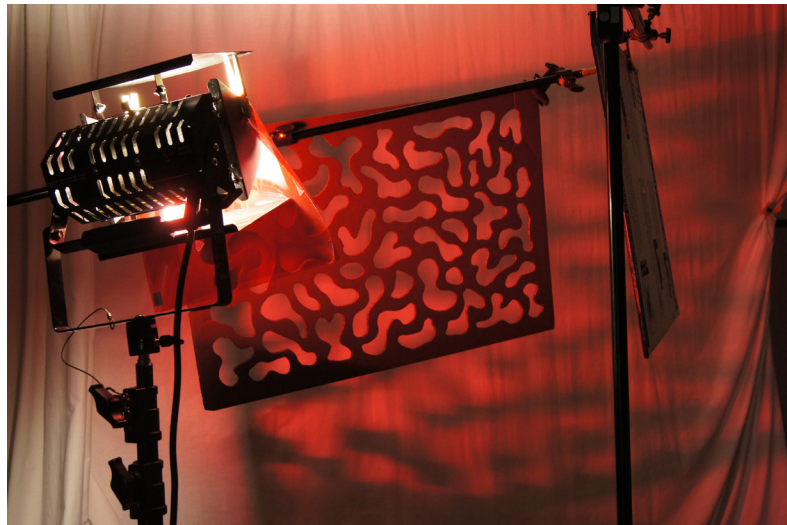
The best way to improve the look of your shots is to think less like a video camera operator and more like a Director of Photography. Give careful consideration to your lighting setups. The secret to shooting fantastic footage isn't to buy a better video camera, it's to take greater control over what happens in front of the video camera's lens.

Chuck Peters is a 3-time Emmy Award winning producer.

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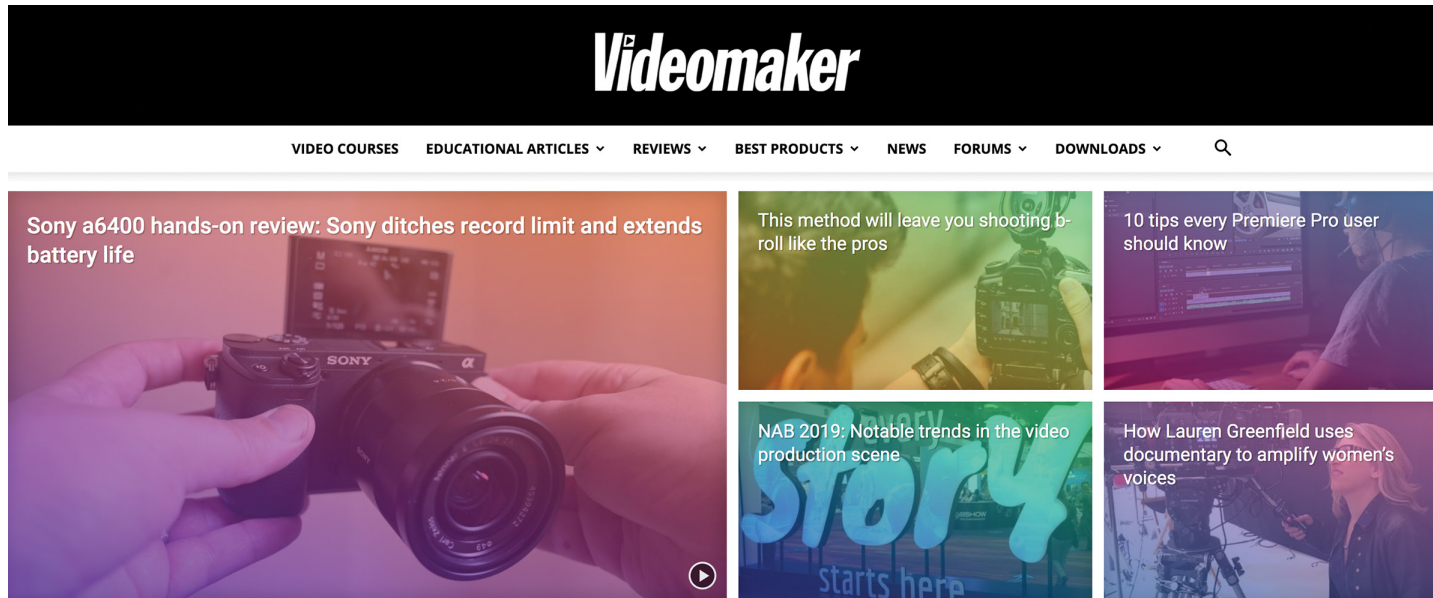
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