

PETER HURLEY

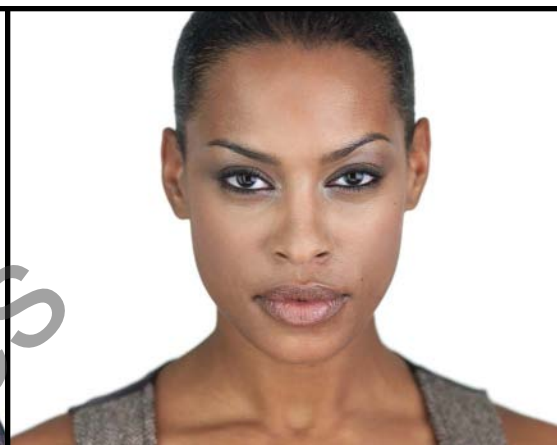
THE HEADSHOT

THE SECRETS TO CREATING AMAZING HEADSHOT PORTRAITS

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CHAPTER 4

My Lethal Combination

Confidence coupled with approachability is my staple. It's my everyday grind. It's what I live, eat, and breathe with headshot photography, and I will for the rest of my life. Getting somebody in front of my camera and capturing them with an expression that conveys confidence and approachability meshed together is the whole enchilada for me.

Infusing this combo into a headshot really is what creates a shabangin' shot for me. It's a lethal combo that, once I capture it, I have the ability to end the session at any moment. In that expression, I've captured the one look that I need and I can go home. I just killed the session in one click of the shutter and, for me, that is what it's all about. It's precisely what I go into my studio on a daily basis to try to accomplish. So, I really can't stress how important this one expression is to me and the work I'm producing.



Injecting Confidence Into Their Personal Brand

Early on in my career, I would look at somebody in front of my camera and I'd think about what I really wanted from him or her. I didn't know what it was at that time, but I knew I wanted a bit of their personality meshed into the image somehow. If they're using the headshot for marketing themselves in some way, then it becomes their #1 personal branding tool, and capturing a bit of them is of utmost importance. I thought it would be pretty obvious to all my clientele that they would want to look approachable while simultaneously looking like they have their act together. Little did I know that they really don't have any clue as to what they want to convey to the camera. I think most just want to get through the process, hoping they get a picture of themselves that they like. It has never dawned on them what the image will convey to others. When I explain the reasoning behind wanting to capture a shot that has the ability to convey confidence in them while hitting their approachable side, as well, they begin to understand its importance.

For me, it started with actors—I felt a casting director wouldn't want to waste their time by bringing an actor in that didn't look like they knew what they were doing. My goal became upping that actor's game by giving the illusion that they are exuding confidence in their headshot and the industry started to notice. I saw so many headshots where people looked eager or spaced out, and wanted my work to be as far away from that as possible.

I refused to let work go out of my studio where I didn't capture my subject looking confident; it just wasn't going to happen in my world.

A casting director for ABC at the time started sending me a ton of actors and told me that there was something about my work that she loved. She said publicly, "Peter makes actors that need headshots look like they've made it already—they look like celebrities." When I heard that, I was floored. It was exactly what I had set out to do years earlier. That was probably the moment when I felt like I had arrived. I had blasted through the pecking

order of headshot photographers in New York, and all my theories and what I stood for were summed up in that one sentence. I created headshots that spewed confidence and approachability all over these casting directors, and the actors that came into my studio benefited greatly from it. The news was out and my studio was busier than ever. It wasn't because of the white background, killer lighting, horizontal, chopped off head format that I love—that really wasn't why this became a phenomenon. I believe it was because my images oozed what we'll call, from now on, C&A.



Max Elk



Brace Rice

Here's a quote I've been known to throw around the last few years: "I believe it's our responsibility as photographers to pull the best out of our clients; no matter how stiff & lifeless they are." —Peter Hurley

So, for every actor that I shoot, the plan is to use the headshot to get acting work, and in order to do that, they need to somehow convey in a still image that they can act like you wouldn't believe. If I'm shooting a real estate broker, they're using it to try to get clients to pick them as their broker over the next guy. It needs to say, "Yes, I get the job done and you are going to love working with me to find your new home." If I'm shooting a CEO, it's pretty much the same: "I run this company and we not only get the job done for our clients, but this is also a fantastic place to work." Basically, you want the person to look like they're extremely capable of doing whatever it is that they do, and that they are fantastic to be around while they are doing it.

I shoot a lot of corporate stuff these days, so a really good example would be when I have a CEO come in front of my camera. Let's say he comes in and immediately diminishes or avoids the camera altogether. I'm just looking at him and I'm thinking: "This guy runs a company? What kind of operation is he running in his brain right now? How the heck did he get to where he is and just fall apart in front of me? If I take this picture and he uses it in the annual report or something, he's not going to look like the guy that runs the show at all."

So, I need to figure out how to get him (or her—I shoot a lot of women that are CEOs and presidents these days, too) to snap out of it. How do I get this guy to up his game and get him to where he should be? It's really just a different muscle for these people that has to be triggered. The guy may be great at his job, but he doesn't possess the skill set of taking decent pictures while in front of the camera. At least, not yet!

This headshot needs to reflect that he is a powerful human being and good at being the figurehead of the company. But, as I've said, the way he behaves in front of a lens is totally different than the way he'll behave in the office, and this guy is a runner. So, how are you going to let this person who has gotten to the top of their company look completely out to lunch in their headshots? You aren't!

You need to up this person's game fast, and having the skill set to do it is priceless. If you get them where you need them to be with this C&A thing, it will not only make them look good in the eyes of the company and





whoever sees the shot, it will also secure you as the headshot photographer of choice for their entire operation! This is where you'll want to be. Turn-over in companies often happens fairly rapidly and being the go-to headshot photographer who makes their people look great is the best recurring income you can have. Treat your clients like gold and keep them coming back for more. If you build up a handful of companies like this, you'll really start to understand what it's like to make a living as a headshot specialist.

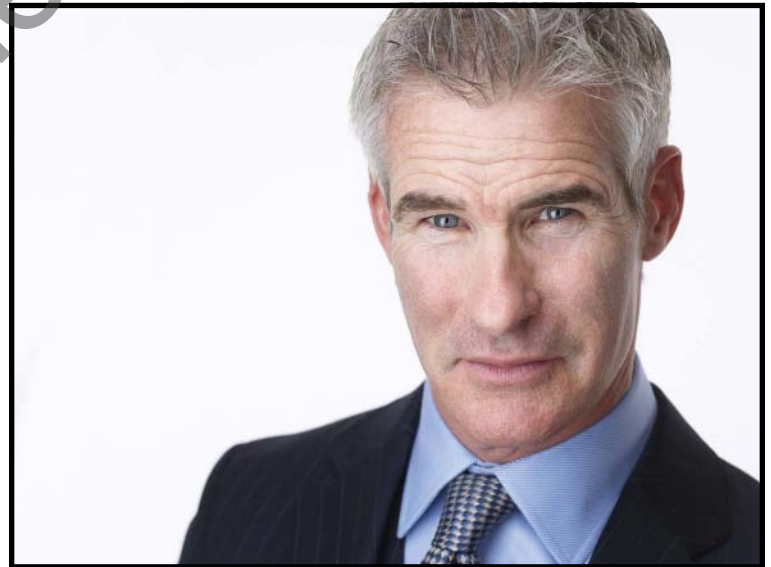
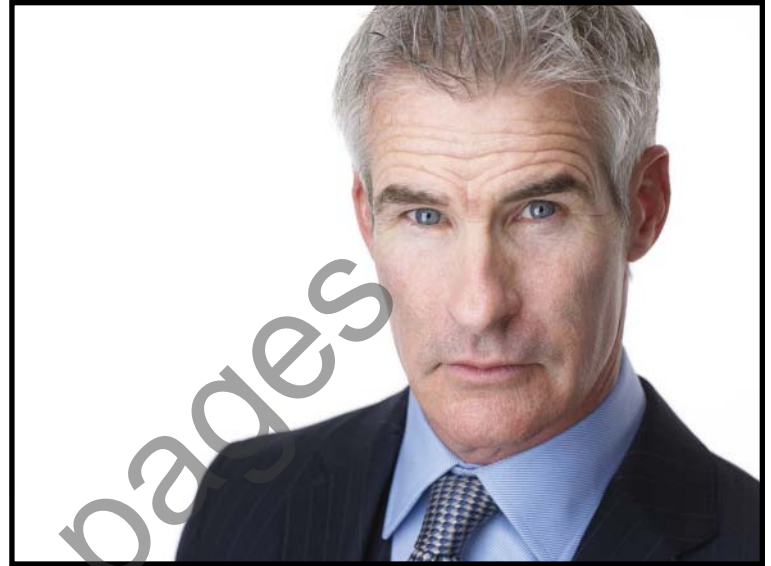
Our job as photographers is really to own our subject's expression for them. I'm sick of photographers thinking that they just have to take a technically sound photograph. That's totally ridiculous in my world. You can't afford to have this guy walk out on you at the end of the session without having captured a confident look. I just couldn't ever bear to do that—no way, no how, no can do, not happening in my world.

So, I've always put the fault on myself. If I don't get confidence out of my subject, then it has nothing to do with them and everything to do with me and my direction. Even if they get in front of the camera and they don't want to be there—they are freaking out and want to be out of there lickety-split—it's still my gig and I own that turf they are standing on. They aren't going anywhere. You have to hone in on getting the confidence out of them and get the job done no matter what.

Layering Confidence on Top of Approachability

For me, the C&A thing came into play very early on in my career. I realized way back that confidence comes from the eyes and approachability comes from the mouth. Combining the two is what we need to do to make this fly.

Now, we get into the eyes in the chapter on squinting (Chapter 9), and we'll talk in detail about the mouth in the chapter on smiling (Chapter 8), so what we're looking at briefly here is layering the two together. We're adjusting people's eyes and mouths and directing them toward this stuff, until they get it. Remember, we are their mirror! We have to tell them what their face is doing and have them continually tweak their expression until



Neil Corcoran

Norma Aurel



we see something we truly like. Once they get started down this path and we build some trust, they start getting it and we can begin to relax the direction a bit, so eventually they will begin to own the experience. I do work on the confidence first with the squinch, but if they're not adding a slight smile to bring approachability to the mouth, they're going to be falling flat.

I couple the two together by directly telling them to do this at the beginning of the shoot. As the shoot evolves, they usually get it, embrace it, and enjoy it. It's easier said than done to get the eyes and mouth to behave the way you want simultaneously. Usually, when I speak to them about their mouth, their eyes widen, and when I speak about their eyes, their mouth falls flat, so it may take

some time for them to key in on this. They're seeing the pictures come up on my screen because shooting tethered is my most powerful coaching tool. Seeing is believing and it builds their confidence, giving them a sense that they are pointed in the right direction. As this confidence builds and the shoot goes on, they usually start to show signs that they are able to own it. Getting control of their muscles and working the magic in by giving me the looks I'm seeking happens a lot faster if they can see for themselves whether they are doing it properly or not.

Don't think that LCD on the back of your camera is an acceptable form of showing them in order to improve their confidence. To me, it's not useful unless you are in a pinch. Everyone looks good on a small screen like that.

You need the real deal to be able to properly convey what they are doing, right or wrong. I take my Aero tether table and cables from Tether Tools everywhere I go. If you are shooting a headshot, you should be rather stationary, so I recommend working out a tethered solution, or at least have a setup where your shots get transferred to an iPad using some sort of Wi-Fi solution. It's extremely

rare, if at all, that you catch me shooting to a CF card when shooting headshots. Tethering is an integral part of my workflow and there's no way I'm going to have the progress that I have in a short time with my clientele without being tethered. If you haven't tried it yet, I suggest you do. Currently, my favorite capture software is Capture One Pro, and it's definitely a worthwhile investment.

The only time I would dissuade you from tethering is if your work needs work. Show them as little as possible if you aren't technically savvy yet. Work on that first and then go to the tethered solution. If your base images need a ton of work in Photoshop, you aren't playing the game properly. I'm happy to post all of my images straight out of camera to the web without batting an eyelash and you should be, too. Once you are at that point, then you know that you are on the right track and should be showing your clients everything that

you are doing using a tethered solution. In the future, we'll be shooting these suckers over Wi-Fi like you wouldn't believe, and then you'll be free to roam, but for now, tether it up!

Just Can't Seem to Nail C+A

So, what happens when you get into a situation where you're just not getting that C&A out of them that you want? I mean, they're attempting to squinch and they're working on the smile, you are coaching them up the wazoo, but it's still falling flat. What do you do? Well, again, I'm layering it all in. So, what I do is to concentrate on continuing to shoot through it while teaching them the entire time. As they warm up, they will start to get it, you just have to keep being supportive and have some patience until it clicks with them.

In the beginning of the session, I'm teaching them as I teach myself. I'm teaching them their angles that I feel work for their face. I'm getting their jaw line out. I'm looking at their body position and ascertaining how they move in front of the camera. I'm positioning their head and neck where I want them and seeing how they take direction. These moves are part of a system that I use that is coming up in Chapter 10, so we'll be going in-depth on it there.

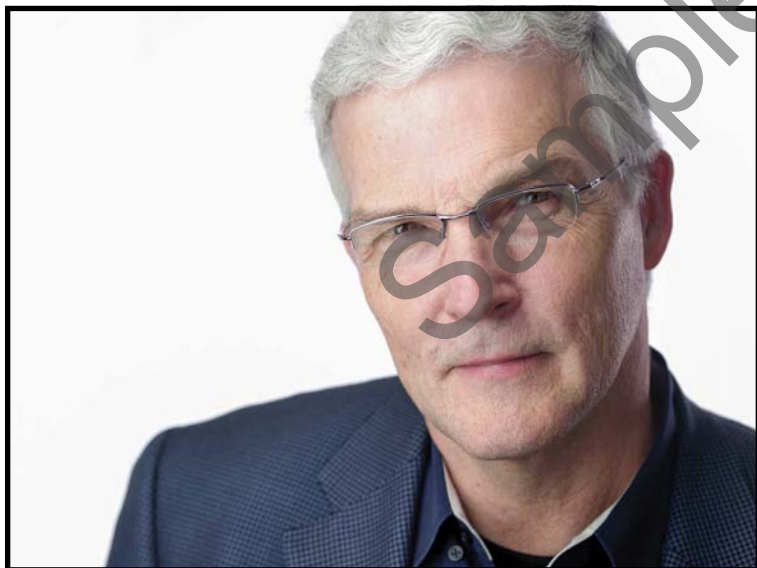
It's really about dumbing down the session, so that they feel less pressure. Capturing their brain in a different way. Trying to get them to have an experience, rather than being so immersed in the pictures. Because, if they're not taking my direction at all, or even if they are getting the squinch, but it's not believable, it's because they're hesitant about something. Something in there isn't clicking, so I kind of throw it all out the window, and start to mess with them a little bit



Ade Otukoya



Greg Richman



Dave Moser

more by telling them things that absolutely make no sense in order to get their mind off of it. It's my ace in the hole and we'll be delving into it in Chapter 6.

From Zero to Sha-Bang!

Maybe you are having a bit of a struggle getting them to behave the way you want. You are trying to get your subject to own it by simply moving them up the charts from avoidance to diminishing, from diminishing to posing, and then finally from posing to owning it. I like to call it taking them from “zero to SHA-BANG!” I've found that everything starts by assessing where my subject is and running them up the chart to owning it. It's our job to get our subject into what I like to call “flow” in front of the camera. Most people will come in anxious, which is a normal reaction to being placed in a vulnerable position in front of a camera. Over the course of the shoot, if you're doing your job properly, you want to ease them into flow.

It happens by coaching them in a way where you are essentially taking them under your wing. As the nervous energy drains out of them, they will begin to fall into what I call “the flow zone.” This is where your best shots begin to appear. Now, like everything in life, we can't stay in the flow zone forever and our subject will begin to get a bit bored. It's a standard scenario that happens, so you need to sense it and either get them out from in front of the camera by giving them a break or just direct them back into flow by adjusting your banter accordingly. There is no way you are going to get a genuine-looking expression that conveys C&A if your subject is bored.

You need to take a step back and get them out of there: do an edit, make them change their clothing, or whatever you can do to enhance the energy on the shoot. Someone that is bored is never going to hit a smile that is believable, so be aware and give them a break, firing them back in there when you have a good reason to do so. My best excuse to get them back in there happens after I've edited the shots we've taken together, showing them what they are doing right and what they are doing wrong. I'll say to them “Let's just go back in and try to nail this one on a slightly different angle. You ready?”

Marcia Meade

Normally, actors will want to stay all day in front of your camera, but corporate types want to be done with it and leave. This is a perfect way to get another 50 shots out of a CEO.

They definitely become aware that the approachability has to be in the shot. That's a pretty easy concept for everybody to see. Again, the worst-case scenario, if you aren't shooting tethered, is to show them the shot on the back of your camera. It's small, but they should be able to get a sense of how approachable or non-approachable they look. Since I'm shooting tethered, I show them exactly what I'm talking about. In the edit process, I'll say, "This is not the guy. Your Board of Directors is not going to be happy putting a shot like this out to the world. You've got people to take care of and I'm sure your shareholders want to see a leader. If you're going to be a leader, you've got to draw them in with some approachability, and you've got to convey confidence at the same time, and I need you to mesh the two together in the same look." So, you're constantly working toward getting them to layer these two concepts on top of each other in a single expression.

Again, layering the squinch along with the smile is what all my headshot work has been based on, and really all I've been doing on a daily basis for the



last 14 years. When I take a step back and look at it, it really has been just that. It's hard to believe, but that's all I do. Once I've got a shot that conveys C&A, I can say bye-bye to my client and feel like I got the job done, or I can start to play with other ideas that I'd like to try.

I'm layering the expressions in along with various facial angles, so I can capture a confident and approachable shot on just about every angle

that might look good for them. I'm testing as many variations of it as I can with them and also going for the C&A with different outfits that I hope they brought along with them for the shoot. This gives me even more range and changing a person always mixes up the energy of the shoot for a bit.

For men, I'll even vary the lighting a touch. So, you're always keeping the shoot fresh by telling them to do different things, making little changes

here and there, but all we really want them to do is a bit of a squinch and a tiny little smile the entire time. Once you've captured that left, right, and center, you are able to say, "There it is. You got it." C&A down, now I can go home.

Goin' Sneaky on 'Em!

It's my belief that once I've nailed C&A, I can close down the session and be on my merry way. However, why the heck would I do that when I have a perfectly good human being standing in front of my camera? It's time to push the envelope and get something that goes beyond the ordinary, producing an image that finds a sweet spot for itself in the middle of my portfolio.

That's it, PEOPLE! You can't just let opportunities slip by you. Sure, you got the job done and nailed your C&A, but for my aesthetic, I've got to take it up a few notches. So, where do we go from here you may ask? Let me tell you, this isn't for the faint of heart. You've got to dig, and if you aren't the type to be a little irreverent, then this might not be for you, but this is precisely where my juices start flowing. I'm going for my self-proclaimed signature look: I'm going sneaky on 'em!

That's right! Years ago, I was minding my own business in my studio and I looked over at my assistant and said, "I wish everyone that walked through that door, got in front of my camera and just looked sneaky as hell." That's it. That's all I really needed in my life. My favorite pictures are always the ones that look sneaky. I decided then and there it was my mission, because getting someone to look sneaky causes the onlooker to think, increasing the lookability of the shot tenfold.

If you can actually pull off having someone look like they are up to something, then in my book, you are a champ and the furthest thing from a chump. Do that day in and day out and you'll be runnin' at the top of Headshotland. All of my favorite shots that I've taken have a sneakiness to them or look like the person has something up their sleeve. I can't help it. It's my jam.

So, I may capture my C&A right off the bat, but you'd better believe right afterward I'm going in for the sneaky kill. It's the one look that makes my heart sing and produces a resounding SHA-BANG for me every time!



Diego Ajuz



Douglas Taurel