



Assistant's Bible

one hundred ways to give you the faith to be
the best photographic assistant you can be

Carsten Burmeister

I've been a photographer for over 40 years.
And I'm German. You need to know these
two tidbits, to see where I'm coming from
with this booklet. My photography is de-
fined by meticulous attention to detail ...
so - not to scare you off or anything -
guess what I expect from my assistants?



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Duties for Photographic Assistants

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 Return the Studio to Zero

1 ... Know your Photographer

1. Your photographer by and large is a normal person ... but right now, before a shoot, quite possibly a little anxious; then again, this may not at all be the case: S/he may well be in total control and perfectly calm within themselves. Obviously you are there primarily because they want you to help with the shoot ... but take a step back and think about what might be happening for him or her.
2. This is what you may want to do first: Ascertain which of the two is the case: Anxious. Calm. But don't walk up to your photographer and ask, "are you OK?" You must work this out for yourself, you may have to apply a little bit of psychology. Read them ... work out what the mood is.
3. Every commercial or editorial photographer when shooting a job is faced with the same quandary: They have a brief from a client who knows what they want ... but the client probably would shoot it themselves if they didn't expect the photographer to deliver *more* than what they know they want (to paraphrase Donald Rumsfeld: They also want what they know they *don't know* they want!)
4. So this is on the photographer's mind: "How can I go beyond the 'call of duty' and truly dazzle the client?" Because this is what superb photography is all about ... to dazzle and surprise the viewer.
5. The professional photographer to begin with has to fill the brief, but then they must go beyond that brief. If the photographer doesn't deliver that element of over-fulfilment, they ain't doing their job.

6. So that concern - how do I take this shoot beyond the expected - most likely occupies the photographer before a shoot; alongside all the other issues: Have I prepared for the job properly? Have I hired the right crew? The right assistant? These are some of the questions you can't help them with (you just cross your fingers they are resolved in the positive).

7. But the point is: Be aware this is happening for the photographer: They are busy ... not just with this shoot. And in order for this shoot to go well, you have to - beyond setting up the shot - help them be at ease. Just stop for a second ... think about this: There is a subtle dynamic between you and the photographer, you're there to *help*; furthermore, you literally must *un-burden* the photographer ... frankly, I have in the past worked with assistants who *were a burden as soon as they walked into the studio!* I just about had to show them how to blow their nose! Think about it.

8. Make a habit of seeing things from your boss' point of view, see issues that need addressing *before* they arise and *before* they become a problem. Be pro-active ...

9. ... don't wait until asked, figure out yourself what it is you can do; let me make this crystal clear: A good assistant - this is the naked truth, the A to Z of assisting, the catechism of assistancy - if you truly grasp this principle, you may not need to continue reading - a good assistant thinks for him/herself. They are always one step ahead of their boss (photographer or indeed other) and they find out themselves what needs to be done and when. And don't you forget it.

2 ... Studio Infrastructure

10. So there is - still way before setting up the gear - stuff you must help with: Who - how many - are going to be at the shoot? Are client / art director / account exec looked after? Are the other people on the shoot (stylist, hair/m.up artist, models) happy and in their designated place? The photographer may not have thought about this: Which space for each of them? They all need to be comfortable in their own way, this is something you should take off the photographer's hands right away ... in fact it's an important aspect of the shoot you should help with, before the shoot gets on the way: Organize the infrastructure of the studio or the location; namely: Who or what is where?

11. Inform yourself about fire safety, where is the Fire Extinguisher? Make sure you could work it.

12. Is there a First Aid kit? If you're thinking of further education, consider getting a First Aid Certificate.

13. Where's the rest room? Point it out to everyone ... don't wait until you're asked; also make sure there's plenty of toilet paper and clean hand towels.

14. Where's the kitchen, the coffee or lunch-making facility? What's the coffee making routine? Find out where you'll put the rubbish that will accumulate during the day.

15. What *about* lunch? Is it organized, or will you need to look after that? Check with the photographer or producer if juices, soft drinks or bottled water are required; you may need to get milk for coffee and tea; is there sugar?

16. How about snacks? Should you get some biscuits? Figure these things out right at the beginning of the day ... again, be proactive, this stuff is all way too trivial for the photographer.

17. Ask for petty cash and whenever you buy anything ... don't forget to get a receipt.

18. Make sure the clients have an area where they are out of the way but still in a position where they can observe what's going on.

19. Clients will need to work on their product / props / layouts ... is there sufficient room for that? Check it out ... do this *before* they arrive.

20. Clients quite possibly need to connect their laptop; make power available for them. If there's Wi-Fi, what is the password ... don't wait until they ask for it.

21. Check if clients need a charger for their cell phone; later on, when we discuss your 'Assistant's Kit', I'll advise you to carry a universal cell phone charging kit.

22. Some clients like to be entertained; see if they have any needs, pick up on whether they'd like a newspaper etc.; check if music should be played ... don't just play the radio *ever*, play an iTunes playlist. Here's a thought: The photographer may prefer you playing your selection of music 'cause they're sick of their own by now; be prepared, have a nice iTunes playlist on you iPod / iPhone.

23. Create a smokers' area with ashtrays ... then make people aware of it.

24. The stylist requires a space where s/he can spread the props out, as well as store them and their wrapping ... remember, after the shoot props will need to be wrapped up again, so the wrapping can't be discarded; fold wrapping paper, place it into the boxes the props came in. In my studio I have a table and an empty shelf unit available for the stylist's needs.

25. If the stylist provides wardrobe, a clothes-rack is required; and where are the iron & ironing board? Set them up. You may have to improvise these facilities, but it is important for an unhindered workflow that easy access to props / wardrobe is taken care of.

26. Same with the hair stylist, make-up artist & models ... they need their space. Check that models can change comfortably, ensure theirs and hair / make-up areas are clean 'n tidy; are there power points and/or extension cords for hair dryers, curlers etc?