



SANTA PHOTO OPS

How I provide the Photography-side
of a Santa Operation

Mission



- I'm going to talk about a lot of equipment and procedures and business considerations, and it's very easy to get wrapped up in all that stuff, but it's crucially important that we don't lose sight of our primary mission.
- We are not in the business of selling prints, or of creating great photos, but of creating memorable experiences.
- You have to create the right experience in order to capture it, and if you capture it then the sales will take care of themselves.

Mission

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Who are you?

Shannon Settles

- Life-long photography hobbyist
- Lots direction over photo shoots
- Santa since 2007, FT since '08
- Managed Photo Ops at HRF since 2012



- Photography hobbyist since a young child. We lived with my grandparents who had a darkroom in the basement.
- Spent two decades as a graphic artist and directed innumerable photo shoots.
- I've been Santa since 2007, and have been bleaching year-round since I went pro in 2008.
- I have been running the Santa photo operation at Hill Ridge Farms since they began their Festival of Lights in 2012.

Primary Operation

- Hill Ridge Farms
- 1500+ Guests per Night
- 250 “Visits”
1200 Photos



Hill Ridge Farms in Youngsville, NC is a small farm-themed activity park with a hayride through a large light display as our headline attraction, and a not-too-shabby Santa in a close second. We have 1500 visitors or so per night and the Santa operation runs Thanksgiving night through Christmas-Eve eve, though the park itself is open Christmas Eve... but Santa has other things to do that night! The photo operation takes about 1200 pictures per night over the course of about 250 visits, averaging about 1 “visit” per minute. We track “visits” instead of children because many times there will be multiple children who will come up at once, one visit, or parents will want three photo combinations of two children, three visits.



We take multiple shots during each visit, trying to capture at least one good candid shot (talking, hugging, being silly) and one posed shot (looking at camera). I hope you'll agree that we are grabbing images that come close to rivaling what you could get in a studio.

Procedure Overview

- Tethered Shooting
- Instant Preview
- Claim Card
- Online Sales & Fulfillment



We shoot with the camera tethered to a laptop, meaning it is connected with a long USB cable, so that the photos transfer immediately to the computer without having to remove the memory card.

Preview Monitor

- Shows shots as taken
- Review best shots
- Big screen = “wow”
- “Wow” = orders



As the photos arrive at the laptop they are displayed on a guest-facing, 24” preview monitor, so they can immediately see if we got a good shot or not. We used to preview photos on an iPad, but we found that moving to the large display made a big difference in our print orders. You have to “wow” them to get them to go through the trouble of going online and ordering a print, this big monitor helps to “wow” them. I love to hear a parent say “oh, that’s a great shot, if I’d have known they’d be this good we’d have dressed up more”!

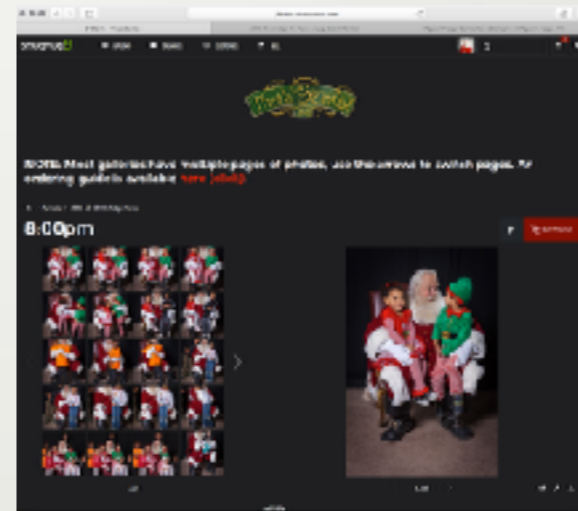


At this location we do not do any prints-on-site, we show the guest the preview and give them a claim card where they can order prints online later. The pressures to move the line are just too great to slow it down further dealing with cash transactions, slow print selections, and printing times.

At other locations, though, we will flip through the shots we took and get a quick (hopefully) agreement from the parent as to which one will make the best print and print it.

Online Sales

- SmugMug handles:
 - Displaying the galleries
 - Accepting orders
 - Processing payment
 - Printing
 - Shipping



So how do we get from showing the guest a preview to them ordering a print? I use a service called SmugMug to host my photos. They handle displaying my galleries, take orders from guests, process the payments, print the photos (in a high-end professional lab like would be used by wedding photographers), ship them and then send me my share of the profit.

Make Galleries

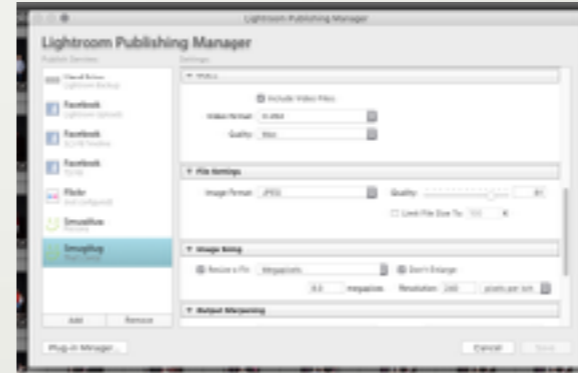
- I handle:
 - Breaking into galleries
 - Upload previews quickly
 - Replace with high-quality versions (slow)
 - Retouch ordered photos
 - Collect the profits!



My part of the work is I cull through the evening's shots, deleting the useless ones (out of focus, someone standing in the way, overlapping flashes, etc). Then I break the day into galleries of about 100 images each, divided by times (6:00-6:30pm, for instance). I try to keep the galleries small so clients don't have to wade through too many pages of images to find theirs (they are given a time-stamped claim card to find their images).

Uploading

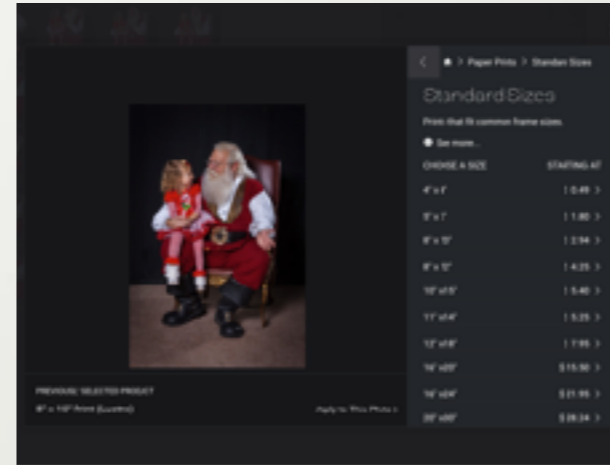
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Then I upload these galleries to SmugMug at a really high compression rate (low quality). These are just for on-screen preview, at fairly small sizes, so the main thing is getting them uploaded quickly so that the clients can see them very soon after their visit and order prints. Right after that upload is complete, I will begin re-publishing these folders with a much lower compression ratio (higher quality), replacing the low-quality versions. The software I use, Adobe Lightroom, tracks the relationship between the image on my computer and the image in SmugMug's gallery, so when I make changes it knows that the one online needs to be updated and replaces it for me, and I don't have to reconnect the edited print with the order, it is seamlessly updated.

Print Delay

- I handle:
 - Breaking into galleries
 - Upload previews quickly
 - Replace with high-quality versions (slow)
 - Retouch ordered photos
 - Collect the profits!



When a guest places an order it goes into a holding queue and I get an e-mail saying which prints have been ordered. This queue gives me 3 days to retouch and color-correct only the ordered images and re-publish before releasing to print. This is a very important bit, because you do not want to waste your time fixing a thousand images if only 60 of them will ever be printed, you want to just fix those 60! Once the hold is released, the prints are made and shipped and the profits are direct-deposited.

Just a couple of quick notes about my equipment choices.

- I shoot with studio strobes.
- I shoot with old cameras.
- I use a studio stand with a pivoting head
- I use X-Rite hardware and software to color calibrate
- I use a custom made rolling cart



My first year I tried using constant CFLs but they just did not produce enough light.

The next year I switched to Speedlights but the constant hassles with batteries (especially when it was cold) made them a real pain.

Now we use two White Lightning 1600s (one in a 3x4 soft-box, the other a grided and barn-doored hair light).

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- I shoot with fairly old Canon t1i digital SLRs. These create a very acceptable quality image (especially under ideal lighting situations my studio strobes provide) and they do not provide more quality than I can use. For a while I shot with a t5i and that produced a much bigger RAW image file, which took longer to transfer to the laptop, ate more of my storage, and took longer to process, all with no appreciable gain in quality for the types of prints my guests are apt to order (I think a 16x20 is the largest print someone has ordered yet, and the t1i can provide that easily). So why pay twice as much for the cameras (you need two, one as a backup) and hard drives if you can't use the extra quality?
- I also shoot tethered. Our first two seasons we shot with an Eye-Fi wireless camera card and displayed previews on an iPad. When it worked it was great, but when it didn't we were stranded with no way to show what we'd gotten and the online sales were miserable. Tethering has been dramatically more reliable.

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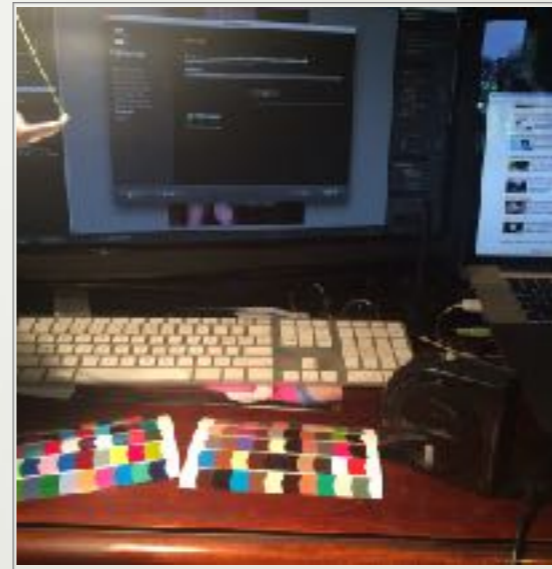


- I have a studio stand with a pivoting head. My “photographer” is typically a high-school part-time employee at a theme park, not a photographer, so I prefer to keep the camera securely mounted to my stand rather than being handheld.

The pivot head allows the camera to remain attached and switch from landscape to portrait and back. The studio stand is extremely heavy and durable, so it's not going to tip over, and it rolls if the camera needs to be pulled back or pushed in.

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• I use X-Rite hardware and software to color calibrate. Our lighting setup is static so I dial in the lights and camera once and then do an X-rite Passport profile at the start of the season and apply it to all shots. This is important because my suit is a tricky shade of red, it can easily shift toward cranberry (purplish red) if the color calibration is off. And often, in the process of trying to warm up the red yellow colors can be introduced into the beard. I got tired of choosing between a blonde Santa or a plum suit!

I also use an X-Rite "ColorMunki Photo" calibration device on my laptop screen, preview monitor and the three dye-sub, so the color my assistant sees is the color my guest sees is the color we print.

Just a couple of quick notes about my equipment choices.



- I use a custom made rolling cart

- The third season at HR we setup a laptop and monitor on a table and shot tethered. That proved very reliable, but the horizontal monitor was not the best way to show our portrait pictures. Last year I finally got around to building a purpose-designed preview and printing cart. It is a rolling cart with a 24" preview monitor on one side, built into the cart and held in a portrait orientation so the photos we take fill the whole screen.
- The other side is where the attendant works; it has the Macbook Pro and Wacom tablet on a pull-out tray, and below are bays for 4 dye-sub printers, two small formats on top and two large formats on bottom. The printer drawers pull out fully so that the printer can be opened completely and the media changed without lifting the printer out of the cart.
- The whole thing folds up into a box, a locking box, and can be rolled to a secure location (since our Santa house has no doors).



Shinko S1245
8x10 or 8x12
\$1.10 or \$1.25
40 seconds



HiTi P510L
4x6 or 5x7 or 6x8
17¢, 40¢, 60¢
25 seconds

My dye-sub printers will create a drug-store quality 8x10 or 8x12 in 40 seconds and a 5x7 or 4x6 (depending on the media loaded) in about 25 seconds. Media for 4x6 costs about 17¢, 5x7 40¢, 8x10 \$1.10, 8x12 \$1.25. I use two of the 8x10 printer, one: because you always need a backup, but two: they take twice as long to print as the HiTi.

My Printers

- Media is matched
- Color are mixed
- Instantly dry
- Smudge proof
- Gloss or matte



These are commercial printers and the media comes in a matched set of a roll of paper and a giant color ribbon, both of which are good for a set number of prints at a set size. So, if you are printing 5x7s you load the 7" wide media which can print 360 photos. The roll of paper and the ribbon are both depleted at the same time, so you don't get hit with the headache of changing the ribbon one minute and changing the paper the next. The printers can also split the print, cutting an 8x12 page into two 6x8 photos, for instance. Dye-sub technology actually mixes the colors in the paper so even under magnification there are not dots of ink like with an inkjet, making for a very smooth photo look. Dye-sub also do not require any drying time and the prints are smudge proof, water proof and finger proof as they spit out. One other feature that makes these kinds of printers different than home printers is they can print either glossy or matte with the same media.

Ways to Structure Offerings

- Guest Pays
- Client Pays Per Print
- Client Pays Set Rate
- Get Paid, do Whip-Nae-Nae



In my ideal scenario, the client has paid a set fee for the event which covers all the prints for their guests, Santa's fee, a photographer and helper's fee. This eliminates any cash register hassles, and it helps distance the image of Santa from sales. The client's logo generally appears on the giveaway prints as a promotion, but the guest is also given a claim card where they can go online and order additional prints without the logo, in a variety of sizes and media.

www.ThatsSanta.com/Helpers

*This presentation, including presenter notes, and lots of other
freebies for Santa, including my bleaching guide.*