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STYLE | FASHION

Is Your LinkedIn Headshot Holding You Back? How to Master a Stylish Professional Portrait

So many work photos miss the mark. How to get a shot that will attract prospective employers. Plus: four folks who nailed theirs.

By Ashley Ogawa Clarke

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WRINKLED SHIRT, sociopathic smirk—and is that 'do from the 1980s? Scroll LinkedIn and you'll witness an endless string of drab, uninspired and occasionally frightening mug shots that would look more at home in a police file.

If your headshot is ho-hum, you're wasting an opportunity to make a memorable first impression, said Andrew Weitz, who runs a personal image consulting firm in Los Angeles. He bemoans all the dated, decades-old profile pics dominating LinkedIn and other work sites (as well as the proliferation of blank, gray circles where actual headshots should be). Like it or not, colleagues and prospective employers will judge that photo, said Tessa West, author of the forthcoming book "Job Therapy" and a professor of psychology at New York University. "Everything from someone's hair to earrings...influences our unconscious judgments of their personality," she said. "Those are very difficult to override."

The good news? You can nail your headshot with a minimum of second-guessing if you know what to focus on, say pros. Start by figuring out what you want to convey, says Weitz, who asks, "What is your personal brand?" Perhaps it's hard-won corporate wisdom—or go-getter creativity? Such strategizing applies whether you get snapped by a professional or take a selfie (see our DIY Guide, below).

ILLUSTRATION: ERRATA CARMONA

Once you've settled on a vibe, focus on "the chest up," said Lauren A. Rothman, a style consultant in Washington, D.C., who works with CEOs and politicians. Ensure that everything—complexion, teeth, hair and accessories like glasses—looks clean and neat. These details matter more than choice of clothes, said Rothman. "You want to get a little zhuzhed up," said Weitz. Men should trim their sideburns and brush their hair. But overachievers beware: You shouldn't look like a different person, said Rothman. "I've seen guys who spray in bald spots" for the photo, he said. "Don't do that, because if I see you in real life...it's going to look like you've aged." Ditto for women: Expensive blowouts or excessive makeup can backfire. If you're not looking like that every day, "it's not convincing or authentic," she said.

As for the background, choose one that's plain and light. "Don't go in front of a dark wall, because it will absorb too much light," said Jamiya Wilson, a New York photographer who specializes in corporate headshots. Do yourself a favor and face a window so you're bathed in flattering, natural light, he said.

Ahead of a shoot, Wilson sends clients a checklist covering everything from wardrobe options to skin care guidelines. Among his tips to look fresh in your pic: Get [a good night's sleep](#), drink lots of water beforehand and [neatly press your clothes](#). “Preparation is everything,” he said.

Though a headshot typically has a shelf life of 3-5 years, it will age about as well as milk if you wear garments that scream “now.” So avoid overly trendy, [quick-to-date fare](#), said West, adding, “Don’t do shoulder pads!” Instead, she recommends classic, well-tailored pieces. Eschew antic prints and busy necklines that distract from your face, says Wilson, and keep jewelry “small and simple.” If you’re selling yourself as a creative, subtle design twists beat in-your-face eccentricity.

Stylists generally agree that darker tones like burgundy or hunter green skew more professional than bright primary hues. But there’s scope to play. For men who feel boxed-in by the white-shirt-dark-suit combo, Rothman recommends button-ups in pale pink or lavender. They “liven up the screen while still being soft, whereas light blue feels a little too predictable.”

Since formal garb can sometimes read as unapproachable, said Rothman, most guys should feel free to forgo a tie. At the other extreme, tech folks should steer clear of the sloppy, screen-zombie stereotype. “I would always advise against a [worn-out T-shirt or hoodie](#),” said Laila Chima, a software engineer and stylist to people in tech. A better choice? A “nice crew neck sweater in a neutral color.”

Once you’ve got the shot, limit postproduction tweaks. While a spot of “digital Botox” might be tempting, beautifying apps or [AI programs](#) that contour features or iron out wrinkles rarely fool anyone—and can read as insecure, said Wilson. “Just go with the real version of you,” said West. “A slightly better—but real—version of you.”

PHOTO: JAMIYA WILSON

Christine Aaron, 34, Design Director, New York

As a graphic designer who works with corporate clients, Christine Aaron wanted her photo to look professional with a hint of creative flair. “I wanted [it] to be an accurate depiction of the energy I bring into the room when I’m physically there,” she said. She enlisted photographer Jamiya Wilson’s services. He suggested bringing multiple outfit options to see what popped on camera. Aaron settled on a herringbone blazer over a bright nutmeg sweater (“something I would wear on a normal day but that gave some color”), with her favorite gold earrings. She hired a makeup artist and wore her hair “in a natural texture that’s reflective of how I usually wear it.” She says the lively shot has won her lots of compliments.

PHOTO: VERN EVANS

Jamil Zaki, 43, Psychology Professor, Stanford, Calif.

A lecturer at Stanford University, Jamil Zaki dresses more formally than many of his colleagues. For his headshot, he chose a polished outfit he'd wear to work: a textured Proper Cloth [blazer](#) over an unbuttoned shirt. According to West, "you don't want anything in the background that is distracting." The street scene behind Zaki works because it's blurred, so the focus remains on the professor. This image was taken at the end of a shoot; the photographer suggested getting a few snaps in the middle of the road. "I think the happy look comes from a sense of surprise," said Zaki, "and a tiny bit of fear [that] cars might zip down the hill at any second!"

PHOTO: SAM BLOOM

Lauren Singer, 32, Activist and Investor, New York

The inspiration for this subtly moody headshot? Ashley and Mary-Kate Olsen. “I went a little crazy in preplanning,” admitted Lauren Singer, who made a [moodboard](#) that included images of the famous sisters’ portraits for their luxury brand the Row. Singer was snapped in front of a striking blue wall at her partner’s apartment. Unlike typical high-definition portraits, she sought a vintage, grainy look for a point of difference. And though a toothy grin is the norm in corporate headshots, she elected to keep things a little more serious. “I think there is an expectation that women should smile in photos,” she said. “You can still show vulnerability and power and approachability without having to smile.”

PHOTO: REED SMITH LLP

David Pisciotto, 43, Law Firm Partner, New York

“I don’t think a great headshot is necessarily going to get anyone hired as a lawyer, but it’s certainly an opportunity to make a negative impression,” said David Pisciotto. No danger of that happening here thanks to the suave corporate lawyer’s neatly coiffed hair and [stylish Persol glasses](#). For this portrait for his firm’s website, Pisciotto considered how his clothes would translate on camera. Smaller patterns on shirts and ties generally don’t read well on-screen, he noted—nor do “fabrics with higher levels of sheen” that can look cheap in the wrong light. His gray wool suit worked well, he said, because it’s “relatively matte.” A black and white picture is a smart choice, said Wilson—it reads as “timeless and sophisticated.”

Take It Yourself: A DIY Guide to Professional Headshots

Don't want to enlist a professional snapper? Six expert tips to take your own winning headshot.

1. Ace the background.

Find a light, plain wall—a dark backdrop makes things gloomy and risks turning you into a floating head, said Wilson. That's only useful if you're after a job as a magician's assistant.

2. Light like a TikTok.

For flattering lighting, pros advise turning to an influencer's best friend: a ring-light tripod (Chima recommends Sensyne's \$30, 10-inch model). Prop up your phone on the tripod and switch on the self-timer—nobody wants to see that telltale selfie arm in a work photo, said Chima. Use Portrait Mode (on Android or iOS) for top-quality shots, she added.

3. Crowdsourcing help.

Unsure about your smile? Play around with different expressions and show the results to friends, suggests West. You're often not conveying what you think you are. "Try smiling with teeth and no teeth, and ask a few people what they think," she said. "When some people smile without teeth, they can look like they're up to no good," she added.

4. Beware of looking mean.

If you choose not to smile, be careful not to look like you're a killer on the loose. "Know that if you don't smile, there is no such thing as a 'neutral' face," said West. "We know from the science of studying faces for 50 years that when it comes to facial real estate, neutral usually means 'mean.' I have Resting Bitch Face because my upper lip turns down, so I could never get away with [not smiling]."

5. Take lots (and lots and lots) of photos.

If you can't get the shot, try and try again. "Often you have to take 1,200 photos to get two good ones. That's normal," said West. "Even a very simple, ostensibly easy-to-take photo probably took a lot more work than you'd realize."

6. Avoid AI.

Ridiculously flattering AI filters make photos look fake. Snappr, a prominent AI program, will generate six professional photos for just \$19, but the results can verge on otherworldly. “There’s a difference between a professional photographer hiring a professional retoucher, who does it in a way that looks natural, [and] this heavy-hammer AI version,” said West. “Once you start losing the natural contours of the face I think it gets dangerous. You don’t want to look like [M3GAN](#),” the vicious doll in the eponymous 2022 film.

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Further Reading

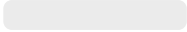
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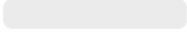
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