GO Digital SASK

DIY Guide to Beautiful Product Photography

What is product photography?

Product photography refers to using specific photography techniques to take accurate and attractive photos of your products. Your product photos influence shoppers' purchasing decisions, which can increase conversion rates and sales for your business.

What do you need for product photography?

- A camera
- A tripod
- A white background
- White bounce cards
- A table
- Tape
- The right room with window lighting

How can I shoot product photography at home?

1. Invest in gear and equipment
2. Set up your product photography studio
3. Take your product shots
4. White bounce cards
5. Edit your photos online
6. Add them to your website

How do you shoot product photos?

1. Set up your table
2. Build your sweep
3. Adjust your camera
4. Set up your product
5. Set up the reflector card
6. Take the picture and evaluate
7. Retouch your pictures
8. Optimize images for your website

At-home product photography studio—what you need

Showcasing your ecommerce products with high-quality images can be the winning difference between a conversion and no sale at all. This is particularly true if you're distributing your products on marketplace sites like Amazon, where they are displayed alongside those of your competitors, or on social media, where people interact with your brand.

The perceived value of your products is directly impacted by the quality of your product photography.

The Window Light Technique:

From someone who takes products photographs everyday, this tutorial has been specifically crafted for business owners on a budget, and it's been designed to be simple, while producing excellent, professional product photography that gets results.

Gear is at the heart of photography and can be really exciting but, typically, it's the aspect most people become confused about.

There's no necessity to spend a large portion of your budget on high-tech equipment, so keep an open mind and try not to overspend on gadgets that do the same job lighting your product as a $5 piece of card can do. You can probably do this natural light setup for $20 or less if you already own a camera.

What you're going to need:

- A camera
- A tripod
- A white background
- White bounce cards made of foam board
- A table
- Tape
- The right room with a window

1. Camera

If all you have is your smartphone, that's OK too: check out this helpful guide to smartphone product photography.

When I did the test images for this, I started with my older model (2008), beat-to-hell Canon G10 point-and-shoot. I love the Canon G series point-and-shoots because they can go full manual and they shoot a really nice raw file. I picked this camera because it's definitely not top of the line anymore, allowing me to demonstrate that, with even modest equipment, good results are attainable.

So what's the best camera for product photography? I would just start out with whatever you have handy and see what the results are. It's a common myth that it's the camera that takes the pictures. In reality, the camera is only one piece of the whole. A photograph is made up of a series of choices that incorporates lighting, exposure, styling, and post-processing decisions.

2. Tripod

Again, you shouldn't need to spend a whole lot of money on a tripod at this point in your adventure, and there are many, many options out there that cost less than $30. I did a quick search on Amazon and found something that would work for $20.

3. White background

There are lots of options for a white background, and if you're going to be shooting a lot, you may want to get a white sweep from Amazon. I prefer a paper sweep because sweeps get dirty and you can cut off the dirty part and roll a new piece down.

A really cheap option is to go to your local drug store or art store and buy some poster board. I've seen it as low as $7 for 10 sheets. Remember to look for pure white, as off-white or cream will be more difficult to make pure white.

4. White bounce cards made of foam board

When you're lighting with window light, there will be a bright side where the light is striking the product, and a shadow side. This shadow side will typically be too dark and so we use something white to reflect the light back into the shadows and brighten it up. Foam board makes a great bounce card, because it's rigid and white.

Alternatively, you can use black foam board to make the shadows deeper. This is particularly helpful if you're shooting a white product on a white background. Adding black foam board to the sides, just outside of the photo behind the product will create a dark edge on the white product. Combine a white bounce card on the front and black bounce cards behind the product for a more sophisticated lighting setup.

You can buy foam boards on Amazon or at a local drugstore. Keep in mind, this is just a white card, so you might be able to simply balance a sheet of white printer paper or use a piece of poster board.

5. Table

A standard folding table works best, and a width between 24 and 27 inches is ideal.

6. Tape

Depending on the table you end up with, you can use tape or clamps to secure down your board so it sweeps properly.

7. The right room

A room with windows next to a wall is perfect, and the bigger the window, the more light you'll get in. Being closer to the window will create a softer light with darker, softer shadows. Being further away will give a more even light but with sharper, lighter shadows.

How to take professional product photos on a white background

The visual appearance of products is a key deciding factor for 93% of consumers. If customers can understand and envision the products you sell, they'll feel more comfortable giving you their money. Let's get into the step-by- step process for shooting your product photos.

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2. Set your sweep
3. Adjust your camera
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5. Set up your reflector card
6. Take the picture and evaluate
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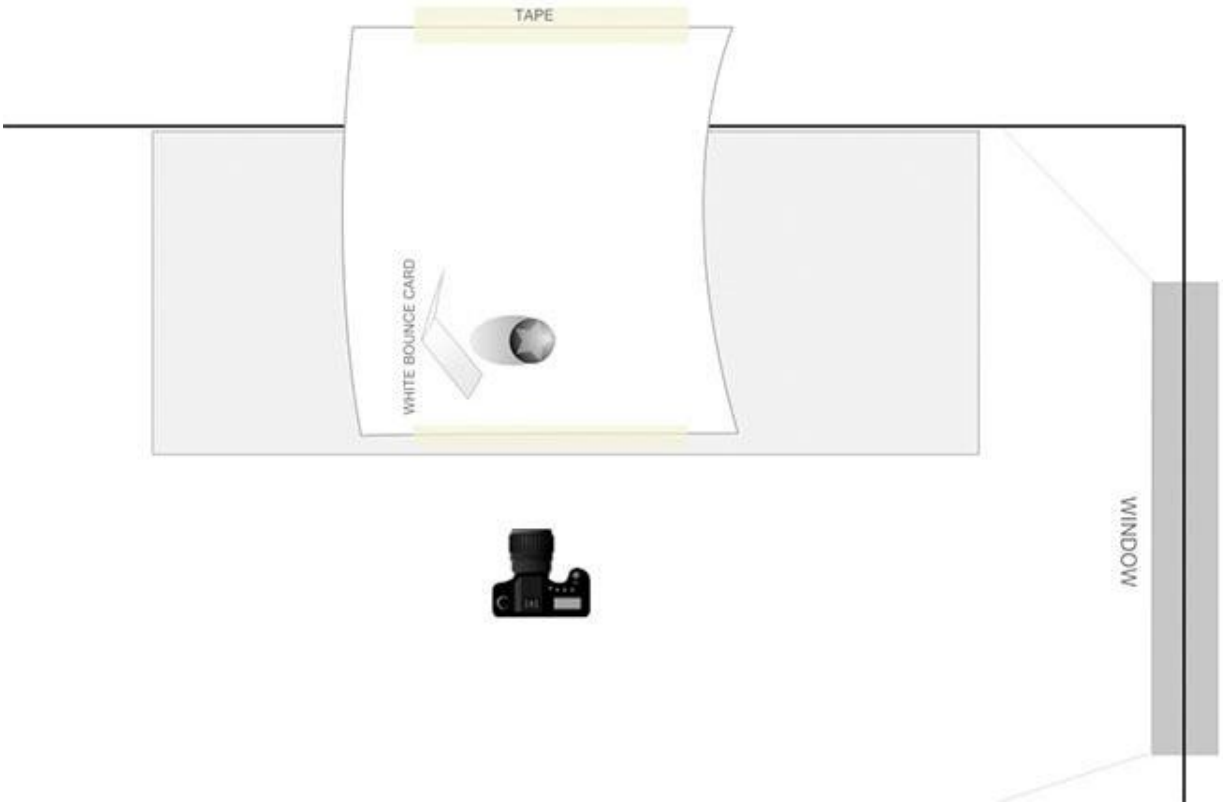
Video: How to Take Product Photography at Home with a Smartphone

Step 1: Set up your table



Once you have collected your gear together, it's time to set up your shooting area. Place your table as close to the window as possible without intersecting the shadow from the windowsill. You'll want to start with the window 90 degrees to the right or left of your setup. The closer you are to the window and the larger the window, the softer the light will be.

Also, remember to turn off all other lights inside the room you're shooting in, as other light will contaminate the set. This is very important and is the most common mistake.

You can try rotating the set so the window is at a 45-degree angle to the set, or try it with the window straight onto the set for a different style of natural lighting. Food photography is often shot with a window behind the setup and the camera shooting into the window for a more dramatic effect. Another variation is setting up in a garage with the door open—it will have the same qualities of light as a window, just without the glass. You do not want direct sunlight hitting your set. Direct sunlight is harsh and looks bad on most people and products.

Step 2: Set your sweep

There are a lot of ways to do this, but the ultimate goal is to have your mat board sweep from being flat on your table to being vertical. You may need to roll up the board to help it reach that shape.
In my setup, we placed the table against the wall and taped the sweep to the wall and the table. If you don't have a wall, you're going to have to make something to secure the back of the sweep to. Some bricks or a wooden block would work well.

Step 3: Adjust your camera

Every camera is a little different. Some cameras are fully auto and some have the ability to make adjustments. The beauty of this The Window Light setup is that you can set all camera settings to auto if you must and it will work.

1. Set Your white balance (WB) to Auto.

2. Turn your flash setting to Off.

Zoom In

Cameras typically have an optical zoom and a digital zoom. Don't use the digital zoom, as this will lower the quality of the image—it's essentially just cropping the digital image. If you have an optical zoom, try zooming in as far as you can without using the digital zoom. A longer zoom will remove distortion caused by a wide angle lens. Cellphones have a very wide angle lens, which is a common issue.

Step 4: Set up your product

Setting up your product is one of those things that seems simple but can take time to position correctly. If it's a bottle, pay attention to keeping the label type centered. Many times there are lots of tiny movements needed to get everything lining up perfectly.

Step 5: Set up the reflector card

This simple white card is the single most important light modifier we have in our photo studio, and we use it with everything. The light will bounce off the card and fill in all the shadows. How you position this card is a matter of taste, so try it at different angles to the product.

Step 6: Take the picture and evaluate

Once you take the picture, take some time and really look at what you've created. This is where experience and education come into play—what's working, what isn't working, and what can you do to make it better. Experiment with different ways of making your image better, and over time your skills will improve naturally.

Upload your images onto your computer to get a better idea of how they look. The back of your camera is never very accurate. I suggest using Adobe Lightroom to organize all your images. It can be used to do almost all of your editing except very advanced processes. You'll no doubt need to make some adjustments to the images to get them to look right.

Post-production software like Adobe Lightroom is very in-depth, and we don't have time to go into the details of using it.

Step 8: Optimize images for your website

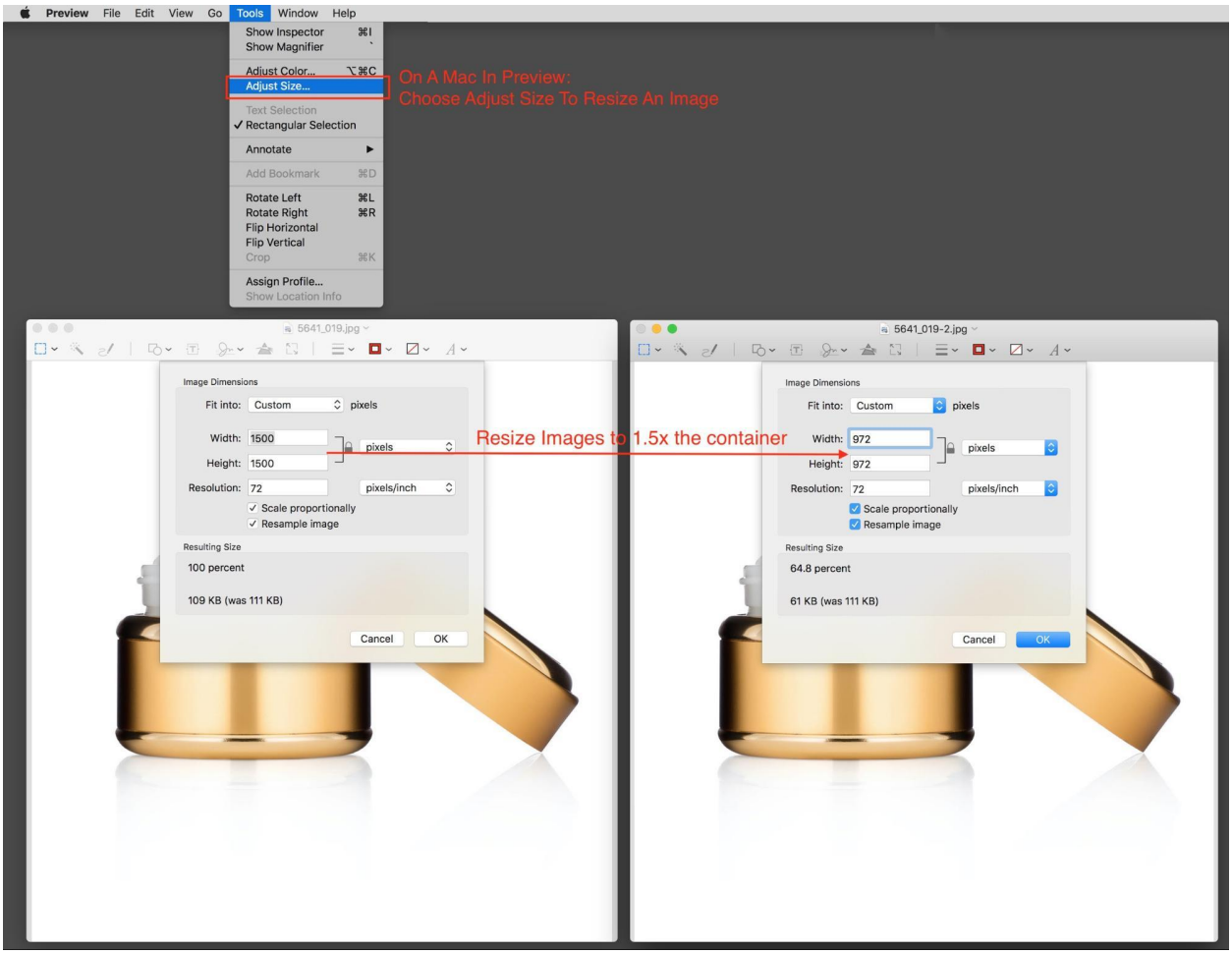
Search engine optimization (SEO) is crucial for all online sellers. One thing that is important is the load speed of your ecommerce website, and large images can really be a burden on this. There is a delicate balance between image quality and optimization, because if you over optimize, it destroys the image. As a rule of thumb, I try to make my images no larger than 200 KB, but shoot for the smallest image I can.

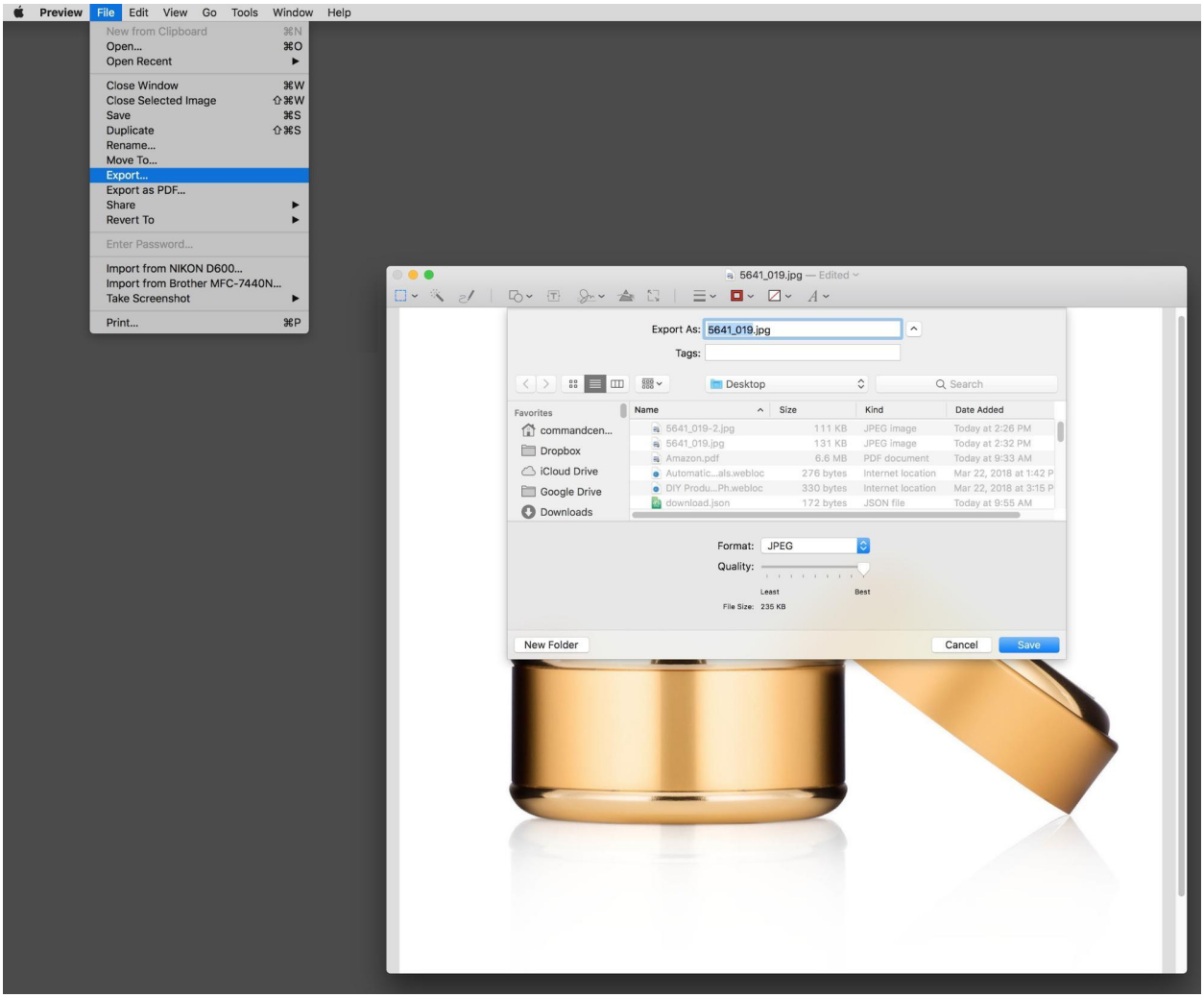
Resize your image for the container

The first way to optimize your image is to resize the height and width of the image. When you look at an image on a webpage you are actually looking at an HTML container with an image dynamically scaled to fit inside it. If the container on my website is a 648 px square and the actual image is 1500 px square, it will be displayed at 648 px, but the image it's referencing will still load at 1500 px. That's a lot of extra load time, especially if you have many images.

2. Resize the image

There are many free tools to help you resize your image. I recommend using Mac Preview or Microsoft Picture because they're built in and easy to use.





After you've re-sized the image, export it and save it to the desktop as a jpeg at 100%.

3. Compress the image

Once you've saved the image at 100% quality in preview, you'll notice that the file size is actually fairly large. This is because we don't want Preview to compress the image, because we can't see the results of moving the jpeg Compression slider. When we compress an image it actually removes data that's not being used—compress it too much and the image starts to fall apart and it looks blotchy.

So instead, we want to compress the image smartly. In the past I used to recommend Adobe Photoshop's Save For Web function, because as you lower the slider you get a preview. Recently, I discovered a software called JPEGmini that uses an algorithm to determine the best

compression for your image. After running a couple thousand images through it, I'm impressed with how quick and easy it is.

Use window light vs. lightbox

The number one question I get is, Should I get a lightbox? Window light is easy because it is a one-light setup, plus it is cheap and easy to do. When shooting with a light tent, you enter into a multi-light setup, which adds a level of complexity, usually requiring education beyond a simple article.

Multi-light setups introduce the following issues:

- You have to buy lots of extra gear, which can get expensive. The cost of the lightbox and lighting can add up, possibly costing more than hiring a professional.
- You'll need to understand how to balance the exposure of the different lights and how to position them properly. Learning how f-stops and shutter speeds work in relation to lights can be challenging.
- Color balancing lights become a concern, as each light source has a different color, which is called color temperature. Extreme color can greatly affect your image.
- If you decide to use flash instead of continuous light, be prepared for a challenge beyond basic exposure. Flash exposure is determined by f-stop only, has limits on sync speed, and requires special equipment to trigger.
- The quality of light from a light tent is very even and often shadowless. Shadows are important because they create the shape of a product and provide a sense of place. It is my personal opinion that the image resulting from window light is more dynamic and interesting than a light tent.

If you still find yourself wanting to purchase or build a light tent, be prepared to learn how f-stops, shutter speeds, ISO, and color balance are set on the camera and with individual lights.

Limitations with this setup

DIY window light setup vs. professional studio.

One issue people have with this setup is that their photos don't look perfect. For example, some people have struggled with reflective products using this method because it reflects the background behind the camera, like in the examples below.

Only a professional on an advanced set can achieve perfect results.

Like anything, there are limitations to DIY without getting serious with education and investing in professional equipment. Most people can shoot great photos in a single-light shooting environment, like with the natural window light strategies discussed above. However, to photograph difficult products like clear and reflective products perfectly requires a multi-light studio setup and a deep technical knowledge of photography.

Learn basic photo editing techniques

Once you've got the hang of taking amazing product photography, it makes sense to learn photo editing to polish up your images. It'll save you money because you won't have to pay for a service or professional editor. And it gives you complete control over the look and style of your final image.

A good place to start would be Adobe Photoshop Tutorials. It has an emphasis on using Adobe products, but the lessons are easy to understand and you can apply them beyond using Adobe Photoshop.

After you learn the basics, choose a photo editing software for retouching your photos. This will help you prepare them for publishing on your website. You can also use a tool like Taler to make ads and social media content with your product photos. It offers tons of filters, overlays, and other editing features to create branded images for your marketing campaigns.

Shoot multiple angles

The point of shooting multiple angles is that it's a change for shoppers to see products from different perspectives. Some shoppers may prefer close-up shots. Others may want to see items straight on. Everyone can envision themselves using your product in different ways, which can lead to more sales.

Some camera angles to try are:

- **Eye level**, which shows your product as you'd see it straight on
- **High angle**, which shows your product as if you're looking down as it
- **Low angle**, which shows your product as if you're looking up at it
- **Bird's eye**, which shows your product as if you're standing above it