

Small Shop - Big Results



Take Great Shop Photos – Rule 1

By Chuck Behm

Central Iowa Chapter

So, you would like to learn to take good shop photos? May I offer some advice? My go-to rule on taking great shop photos is simply this—make sure the pictures you take are worth the ink.

Shop photos should be more than just eye candy—we’re not talking about nature photos destined for an outdoor magazine, for heavens sake. Good technical photos will actually help do the heavy lifting of explaining the how and wherefore of methods used in the shop. They will help the light bulb go off in the reader’s head, and enable him to say, “I see!” and really mean it.

“But how do you accomplish that?” you’re wondering.

First, keep in mind what shop photos are not. Shop photos are not snapshots. Snapshots are pictures intended to convey the flavor of a place or time. My wife takes snapshots—she is the queen of snapshots. Every trip we have taken in the 40 plus years of marriage is recorded forever in family history with literally hundreds of snapshots, nearly all of which have 2 things in common: (1.) there is something of interest [historic landmark, scenic overlook, etc.] in the background (2.) a family member is posed in the foreground, smiling at the camera. (Occasionally there is the picture of the cute roadside critter that wouldn’t hold still long enough for anyone else to get in the picture, but those types of photos are rare.) Shop photos transcend this by actually accomplishing a purpose—they cut down on the number of words needed to describe a process, and make it easier for the reader to understand.

Let’s cut to a case in point—a photo to help in the description of an actual shop tool. One handy little tool which should be in every technician’s bag is the string winder (A.K.A—tuning pin crank), which is the deceptively simple little device meant to help wind coils on the end of strings. I was asked by Herb Johnson of Schaff Piano to do a little write-up on this tool—it seemed that new technicians would quite often purchase the tool, but then call Schaff to inquire how exactly to use it.

I had to laugh when I heard this request because for years, I had carried a little “Aptitude Test” kit in a baggie in my tool case just for the purpose of stumping people who would ask if I thought they would be well-suited for piano work. In the baggie were 5 items: a pair of needle-nose pliers, a tuning pin, a 6” length of treble wire, a completed coil, and a sting winder. When asked whether piano work were difficult to learn or not, I would pull the kit from my case with a flourish, and give them the challenge—take the proffered items, and produce a coil just like the example using the two tools, the tuning pin and the length of wire, but nothing else. Then I could safely go back to my tuning in peace and quite while the curious customer wrestled with the problem.

It always amazed me how complicated this little task could become for the first-timer. Over the years I’ve had a couple of customers actually figure it out on their own, but usually they would need to see it done. The fellow that stands out in my memory was a civil engineer who snorted when given the task (I think he thought it was beneath him).

He took the tools in hand with a confident air, and I went back to my tuning. Several minutes passed, and I noticed he was grunting, so I turned to see his progress, and had to laugh out loud at his efforts (usually I'm more tactful, but if you were there you would have laughed as well!). The guy had planted the tuning pin in the crank like a flagpole and was holding it firmly in his left hand, while in his right hand he was using the pair of pliers in a vain attempt to wrap the string around the pin. He had managed to stick the end of the string through the eye of the needle (it was protruding at least a half of an inch), but the coil he was producing was not what you would call 'compact' by any standards. The funniest thing, however, was not his procedure (I had seen this exact method used before)—it was the expression on his face. His tongue was clenched firmly between his teeth, and he was staring so intently at his effort that he was nearly cross-eyed! To his credit he thankfully started laughing himself, and asked if I would kindly show him how it should be done, which I did. After he saw the task performed, he tried it a second time, and within seconds, had made a coil of his own.

So, if one was to write an article on how to use this little bugger of a tool, what photos would be "worth the ink?" To determine this, one needs to examine the process to be described.

If you break down the process of making a coil with a string winder into steps, there are exactly five of them. For my Schaff articles, I have the luxury of being able to use as many photos as I wish (since the articles are put on-line as PDF's where there is no limit as to length) so I could simply include five (or more, if needs be) photographs. Let's say the write-up was for the Journal, however, where space is at a premium, and only one page was to be allowed. One photo, perhaps, or at the most two. What picture, or pair of pictures, would be the most important?

Run through the procedure in your mind. As with most shop tasks, there are easy steps which are simple to describe, and not worth the trouble of taking a picture of. When making a coil on the end of the piece of treble wire, a beckett must be first put in the end of the wire. Hopefully, any technician worth his salt could figure that out without a picture! (Imagine you were writing an article outline a procedure for M.D.'s, and the first step was to "place your stethoscope on the patient's chest." You would hope every doctor reading that could picture it being done without an actual photograph!) Ditto the second step—put the beckett through the eye of the pin. Simple and straightforward—no photos needed.

So, where does the trouble begin? It's what to do next. How does one hold the tools to perform the task? I know how it's done (as do you), but how does one go about describing the procedure to the person who just opened the box and got out his new, shiny string winder to try out for the first time?

Every technical writer knows that most everything may be explained in simple words—the trick is doing it in such a way that the reader on the other end actually understands. Here the writer faces the challenge of describing a process where both hands are actively engaged at the same time, each doing its own thing in a precise way. I can describe what either hand is doing, but without including a picture I would have little confidence that the newbie would "get it." So, to take the shot I need, I get out my camera, mount it on my tripod, set it on 10 second delay, and take a picture of me performing the task at hand (Photo 1).



Photo 1: No problems mate!

Now, with the picture to do the aforementioned “heavy lifting,” writing up this step of the procedure is a piece of cake. The right hand holds the handle of the crank and turns, while the left hand cradles the pin and guides the rotation. The thumb of the left hand is the star of the show, bearing down on the wire and forcing it to bend into the desired shape. A bit of writing, one additional shot showing the desired results (Photo 2), and the write-up is a done deal.



Photo 2: Like so.

If one or two pictures can do the trick for a simple procedure, a fairly complicated job in the shop is easily explained if space permits for a series of photos. Close-ups of the steps involved in a recent job on a damage leg sent to me for repair show how valuable shop photography can be. Without any words whatsoever, the method for this repair is clearly explained:



Photo 3

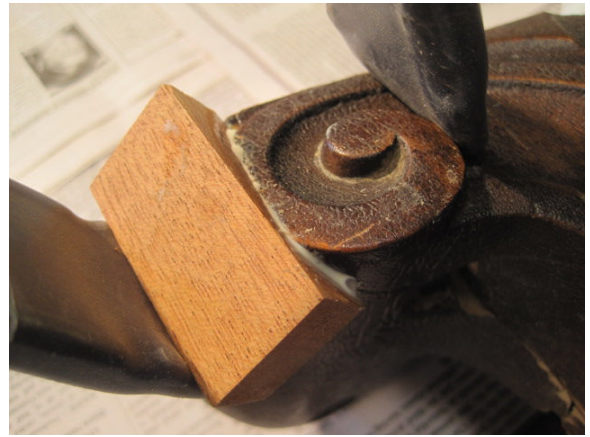


Photo 4

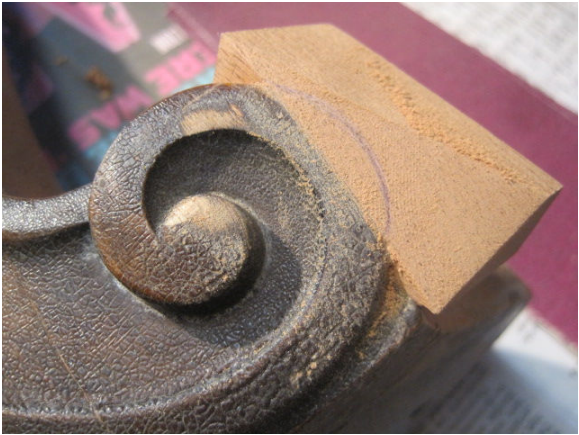


Photo 5



Photo 6



Photo 7



Photo 8

Do you see what I mean? With all the important points covered, your imagination can fill in with the minor details which have been left out. Six photos have accomplished what it would take hundreds of words to explain.

When I was a kid, I was a huge fan of a one page feature of the magazine *Popular Mechanics* (I'm 99% sure that was the magazine it was in, anyway) called "Wordless Workshop." In it, a shop project (such as building a bird house) was explained in a series of little sketches showing a man solving a problem (there was always one sketch of him with this "aha!" look and a light bulb going off over his head), and the steps he took to carry through with his plans. I think there were usually no more than a dozen of these little sketches, and never any captions or words involved. More often than not, I would go down to my dad's workbench in the basement of our home, lay the magazine out on the bench, and attempt to duplicate the project. Oftentimes I succeeded, all with out any instructions other than pictures.

Based on the fact that I myself am a very visual learner, and with the realization that others out there are probably the same, I have incorporated photographs into every article I've written. (And I know they're appreciated—most of the time when a reader emails me to comment on an article, they mention how much they liked the pictures, but rarely do they say anything about the writing that I struggled with!) You too can take great shop photos if you keep in mind my rule of thumb—make them worth the ink!

I'm sure at this point there are those who are wondering why, in an article about shop photography, I haven't made any mention of the type of cameras, lenses, lights, etc. that one needs. I haven't done so simply for the reason that for the type of photos that we are dealing with, fancy equipment is unnecessary. I'll talk more about equipment later, but for now suffice it to say that every one of the 400+ photos I've had in the Journal to this date were shot with a \$120 point and shoot from WalMart. Obviously, there's no need to go out and buy a camera that will break the bank to shoot good shop photos.

Save your money for ink.

Chuck Behm is the owner of River City Piano Restorations in Boone, Iowa. He can be contacted at behmpiano@gmail.com.