



# Rod McLean Adventures in Advertising

By Peter Skinner

San Francisco-based action/adventure photographer Rod McLean has a simple philosophy about his approach to creating images—he goes on adventures to make pictures, rather than going on trips and taking pictures. Now that might sound too simplistic but the difference between “to make” by comparison with just “taking” pictures is huge. It defines how McLean and other photographers of his ilk are single-minded and focused on the goal of making meaningful photographs whether for themselves or clients. In other words, he gets the pictures that many others would not even see.

“Recently,” he says, “someone looked at my images and commented ‘you must be very adventurous.’ I think it is more that photography gives me the opportunity to be adventurous and allows me to explore environments and locations with images in mind. In many ways photography is the doorway to these places and experiences. It is up to me to portray them so I am always looking for pictures, not just looking at the scenery or how people are interacting with a wilderness environment.”

Invariably there is a symbiotic relationship between action-oriented photographers and their subjects—and mutual respect. “I do feel that there has to be a great deal of respect between the photographer and the subject. I gravitate to individuals who are giving it their all, but this is not to say that they have to be professional athletes or exceptional in



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their field. They just have to be pushing themselves to their limit. This piques my interest in them and ultimately allows me to create an image of them. They need to be kind of heroic,” he explains.

However, before jumping to erroneous

conclusions that McLean sets about looking for rock climbers, mountain bikers or other outdoor adventurers in life-threatening situations to shoot, be aware that the majority of his assigned work is for advertising. His images that portray people





in challenging outdoor settings invariably are meticulously designed and executed—from concept, through thumbnails to location selection and shooting.

“There is a lot of planning involved. By the time we get to the shoot date we have discussed the image to death. We know the weather down to the minute, the exact location, the wardrobe, what the talent will be doing, the hairstyle—everything has been covered. When we are on location, I have to rely on the people I work with to make sure the details are in order so I can concentrate on making the photograph. To do that, I have to basically forget everything we have talked about—the minute details—and look at it as a completely new image and a new assignment. If not, I get stuck in the details and could miss the moment completely. My job at that time is to capture the essence of the situation and convey the client’s story or message,” says Rod.

To date, Rod McLean has been able to achieve that goal effectively and consistently. In a relatively short time as a commercial photographer—about three years at this writing—the impact he has made in his chosen field is reflected by a growing list of clients. Rod has attended universities in Rhode Island, Switzerland,

New Zealand and Paris, and has a Bachelor of Arts degree, but maintains that most of his education has been through life experiences and essentially he is a self-taught photographer. He emphasizes that he is “inspired by anyone who can express their ideas and what they see in a unique

month, but they are mainly for fun. I am not sure how much competition there is because it seems that we are always bidding against the same photographers. I think there are the obvious ways to promote yourself—email, mailers, source books, showing your portfolios to agencies and

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way” and points out that his photography has been influenced by numerous other creative fields—painting, sculpture, architecture, performance art, theater, dance, opera, literature, music and film.

As a “graduate from the proverbial school of hard knocks” Rod emphasizes that he never stops educating himself. “I learn something new every time I make a picture,” he says. And Rod is not afraid of accepting new challenges.

“Most of my work is advertising and comes directly through agencies. I might shoot one or two editorial assignments a

various other ways. However, I think the most important thing is the interaction you have with the creatives and agency people. Once you break through the barrier, and your work is in front of them, how do you convince them that you are the right person for this job and every other job that they have in the future? I am lucky because I am up for some amazing projects so it is easy to get excited and give everything to creating the image,” he says.

In a nutshell, Rod’s advice and modus operandi could apply to many other fields of professional photography. “It’s about





covering all the bases, knowing as much as you can about your subject, the environment, the layout, the art director and client's needs—then letting things just happen,” he says. And as experienced sports shooters will concur, knowing the idiosyncrasies of athletes—what they are likely to do in any given situation—often pays dividends. “With athletes, the more you know about what they do and how they do it, the more you can anticipate what their next move is going to be. Someone once said that as photographers we get paid to make mistakes. I think this is very true—we want to create and capture the unexpected, or have a different way of seeing things,” Rod says.

One of the major challenges of a typical outdoor adventure advertising assignment is to tell the story of what might look like an extreme event but without taking any of the inherent risks a viewer typically equates with the activity. As an experienced and active outdoor sports enthusiast, Rod knows how to rock climb and mountain bike but that doesn't necessarily mean he needs to scale a sheer rock face to get the shot. “I am hired to create an image or images for an ad campaign. And that means that it is not so much about going to the extremes to get the shot but rather how do we get a shot that looks adventurous and exciting. I

still have to show the client and art director, who are there on location, what I am seeing before the shot is made. That means either I have to be able to get to them or they have to be able to get to me.” Rod continues, “Take a climbing shoot for example—I quickly learned that if I had to climb more than 30 feet I would never be able to get all the shots done in a day that we needed to. Too much time would have been spent getting back to the client and art director and then going back up to shoot.”

Another basic but vital aspect of keeping the creative people close to the action is communication—being able to converse with and direct the talent without having to resort to wireless communication or yelling instructions from a distance. It also means that Rod can use shorter lenses to get in close and tight. “Because of the way I shoot and composite images in the computer after the fact, I am usually close enough to the talent so that they fill the frame with something like a 50mm lens. I also try not to direct the talent too much while we are shooting, but rather give them the parameters of what I am looking for and let them do their thing. It's a formula that seems to work pretty well,” he says.

When Rod was first starting he used film and made the switch to digital in the last year or so but he admits to missing film

and its inherent look and quality. However, the transition to digital capture—he shoots only in RAW, maintaining there is no reason to shoot in JPEG—has gone smoothly. His equipment consists of a Canon EOS 5D, Canon EOS-1Ds Mark III, 50mm f/1.2 and 24–70mm f/2.8 lenses. “I do have a great Tenba backpack that I almost never carry. Usually we just bring a camera, a couple of lenses and some type of bounce reflector. I am not a big fan of tripods as I feel they are too limiting and prefer to be able to move around quickly. Getting in close and using shorter lenses helps me do that. Occasionally, we will bring in a Profoto Pro-7b for a fake sun, used as a back light at about 160 degrees,” he says.

He describes his approach to photography as being more like a painter, using digital technology and the computer in postproduction to composite separate images into a stunning final image. “When I shoot a landscape I take multiple images from left to right. I look for the way the light hits different parts of the landscape at different times and use those pieces. I expose for the sky or use a sky from a different time and place to complete the scene. The landscape is composed as it is unfolding in front of me and then I create it in postproduction using Photoshop. I add and blend multiple images from the shoot



to create an image the way I see, creating a moment in time.

“When shooting people the process is very similar except there are a couple more elements added to the final composite,” he says. “The ability to composite and manipulate images using the computer has completely changed the way I see and create images. The digital camera has changed the way I physically take pictures, but the computer has changed the way I see images,” he adds.

While dramatic lighting is often equated with outdoor adventure photography Rod much prefers more subdued, even lighting. “Overcast is perfect. I am not a big fan of strong, direct sunlight. If it is going to be a clear day we shoot in the morning and late afternoon. If I have to shoot in the sun I try to backlight the subject, keeping the sun behind them and over their shoulder. I do fill a bit and occasionally if I need a highlight on a cloudy day I will have a strobe with a full CTO (a color correction gel for balancing strobes to tungsten lights) 15 feet up behind the subject and over a shoulder. That gel over the strobes gives a sense of a warm sun highlight. I have found that if I keep the lighting simple I can push the direction in postproduction,” he says.

His postproduction skills in creating composite images is impressive and a fine example is a nine-image composite of

swimmer, underwater and gliding over a bed of sunlit marine vegetation, masses of bubbles trailing in her wake (see above). “I wanted to create an underwater landscape for my portfolio, but something more than just a swimming shot. So I spent days trying to figure out how to make it work. To get the clearest image I needed the model to fill the frame and as she swam by I would shoot a sequence of three frames—one in front, then her, and then one behind her for the bubbles,” he says.

Rod, who was underwater the whole time, used a Canon EOS 5D camera fitted with a 35mm f/4.5 lens housed in an Ewa-Marine waterproof bag. He instructed the swimmer, who was doing the butterfly stroke, to go deeper than is normal for that stroke, giving the feeling that she was gliding underwater. To ensure that the weeds were adequately lit, they were shot separately in relatively shallow water.

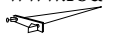
While the bulk of his advertising assignments are centered on action-adventure subjects, Rod is always seeking definitive landscape images, especially in the Pacific Northwest. “I love the Northwest—there is just so much diversity, crazy high mountains, beautiful coastal areas and great forests. I do have a hard time shooting a subject outside of a landscape. It might be a personal thing but I think it is more about putting someone in their element.

It’s really more about the story than just an action shot or a portrait. There needs to be a sense of place,” he says.

And landscapes, although stationary, are not the easiest images to capture. “I love creating landscapes but they are very elusive. I am lucky if one in 10 makes it into my portfolio. Most of the time I will look at the film or the image on the computer and ask, ‘What was I thinking?’”

In asking that question, Rod is not alone—most other photographers have at some time or another queried themselves in exactly the same way. But the key to being a successful commercial/advertising photographer is to frequently have satisfied clients say: “Great shot. I like the way you think and see.” Chances are Rod McLean hears that quite a bit these days.

To see more of his work visit [www.rodmclean.com](http://www.rodmclean.com).



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