

dear john



# Q A

## How often should I update my headshots and, when I do, how do I decide which ones to go for?

As with many other 'how much?' or 'how often?' questions, the answer on a subject as important as headshots is related not just to quantity but also to quality. I have on occasion seen new headshots that looked less like the actor they supposedly represented than those taken five or even ten years previously.

In these cases, despite the magic of Photoshop and other editing tools, the actor may end up having to shell out more hard-earned cash for a further set of shots.

As with any two professionals, the rapport between actor and photographer can make the difference between good and great. But the difference between good value and back to the drawing board is often as much about the thought and research the subject is prepared to put in before the shoot takes place.

To give us some helpful perspectives on that part of the process, here are a photographer and actress whose headshot collaboration certainly seems to be getting the desired results.

### what the experts say...



Michael Wharley

Michael is a theatre photographer specialising in actors' headshots and arts photography. He read English at Oxford and worked as a stage actor for six years before retraining at Photofusion in Brixton in 2006, and is now a qualified member of the British Institute of Professional Photography. Writing regularly on casting issues for The Stage and others, he also presents interactive headshot seminars for drama schools.

"Headshots are a very powerful way to promote yourself. But their importance – and the fact people get nervous about being photographed – means sometimes we treat taking them with too much reverence.

"There are two classic pieces of advice on headshots. First, a headshot absolutely must look like you. Second, when you're choosing your final shots, think, 'How do I want to be cast', not 'Which photo do I look best in?' The best people to help you choose are friends or contacts in the industry who understand your casting, career and ambitions.

Family will often choose the nice shot, not the shot to generate work.

"My advice is to go to a session prepared, relaxed but ready to be a proactive partner in taking photos – treat it like a trip to the hairdresser, not a trip to the dentist. Your input counts. Your photographer should get energy, vitality and variety into your shots and be good at assessing your appearance and casting quickly. But who better than you to brief him or her on what exactly you are aiming for?"

"Alex Bedward is a good example of someone who thought hard about what castings her previous headshots had got her and how she wanted to be cast. So we worked together to get varied shots that now seem to be doing their job."

### Alex Bedward

Alex served her acting apprenticeship in Derby youth drama sector and studied Theatre Arts at the city's university. After graduating in 2007, she moved to London and has since toured nationally and internationally with productions of the Little Mermaid and Alice in Wonderland. In 2010 she played Carol in Mame's Oleanna at Buxton Opera House and she has just filmed a commercial with Ian McKellen. This month she starts rehearsals for the role of Caliban in the Orange Tree Theatre's educational touring production of The Tempest.

"My previous headshot was very studio-based, showy and commercial, which got me a lot of testings for adverts and Rihanna-lookalike roles. It was effective, stood out and got a good volume of castings, but those roles weren't my career aims. I wanted more theatre, TV drama, classical and Shakespeare roles.



"I've learned – and this can be hard to accept – that a lot of the time it's about looking right for the part, and nothing to do with what you can do or have done, so the photo is massively important.

"From my session with Michael

I wanted photos that would sum me up as a person, rather than just make me look good. I wanted to make it easier for casting professionals to see the different categories I can fit into. For example, we took some shots in a hoodie that maybe I wouldn't have chosen, but my agent loved them for the sulky, younger feel. They are good for TV and film – the more perhaps stereotypical, 'urban' side of my casting.

"We also got some leading-ladyish, womanly shots, and some simpler, pretty 'outdoors and natural' shots. Those are my favourite ones, but seeing yourself objectively is really difficult. I might choose the ones I look good in, but my agent sees what will get me work.

"I do think a good headshot can make a difference in a career. Having just been cast as Caliban at the Orange Tree and getting that partly from my new headshots, they seem to be working."

### dear john sums up...

The quality of both shots featured on this page got an appreciative response from the expert eyes of my colleagues on The Stage, and not just for aesthetic reasons. In a world where the marketing of performers is increasingly done online and in print – as well as in the more traditional form of physical photographs – it is not only important for actors to have good-looking headshots that fully reflect their casting potential, it is also important to have those shots available in good-quality formats that will reproduce well in a range of different mediums. Sadly, this is not always the case, even with more experienced actors. With that in mind, I'll mention Alex's own take on this week's main question – "I think you should have your headshot redone once a year, I'd have them redone twice a year if I could afford it. I change the way I look a lot, but it's not always possible to have them done that often."

Given that most other performers face the same economic reality, this makes it doubly important to get the right results first time, and as Michael notes, that is just as much down to the actor's preparation and input as it is to the photographer's.

John Byrne is an entertainment industry career advisor and author of *The Right Agent Right Now* ebook available from [www.showbusinessuccess.com](http://www.showbusinessuccess.com). Michael Wharley may be contacted via his website at [www.michaelwharley.co.uk](http://www.michaelwharley.co.uk). Alex Bedward may be contacted via her agent, Jimmy Jewell at Ladida Management, [www.ladidagroup.com](http://www.ladidagroup.com). Public performances of *The Tempest* can be seen at the Orange Tree Theatre, Richmond, Surrey, on May 21 and June 11, [www.orangetreetheatre.co.uk](http://www.orangetreetheatre.co.uk).