

IDUN DESIGN

PRACTITIONER'S GUIDE

Photography Direction for Luxury Brands

Why Stock Images Undermine Positioning

A complete guide to briefing photographers, directing shoots, and maintaining visual consistency — for brands where every image is a positioning decision.

GEOFFREY IDUN

Creative Director & Senior Design Consultant

hello@idundesign.co.uk | idundesign.co.uk | London

2026 Edition

Table of Contents

01 Introduction	3
Why photography is a positioning decision	
02 The Problem with Stock Photography	4
Trust, differentiation, and the credibility gap	
03 What Photography Direction Actually Means	5
Emotional register, light, and the exclusion list	
04 The Six-Element Photography Brief	6
A complete framework for luxury brand shoots	
05 Three Approaches, Three Brands	8
Elin Wyn Harley Street The Lion Inn	
06 Maintaining Consistency Across Touchpoints	10
Documentation, presets, and creative accountability	
07 The Checklist	11
Before every shoot — 18 non-negotiables	
08 The One Creative Mind Principle	12
Photography direction and brand identity as one	

Geoffrey Idun — Creative Director & Senior Design Consultant

hello@idundesign.co.uk | idundesign.co.uk | London

01

Introduction

The fastest way to identify a luxury brand that doesn't quite believe in itself is its photography. Not the logo. Not the colour palette. The photography.

A brand can have an immaculate identity system and a beautifully considered website, yet the moment a visitor encounters a stock image — the anonymous boardroom, the staged handshake, the model who looks expensive but feels borrowed — the illusion breaks. The brand communicates something it didn't intend to: that it treats imagery as a problem to be solved cheaply, rather than a language to be authored carefully.

Research from Nielsen Norman Group shows that 56% of users click on images first before engaging with any other content on a page. Photography is not supporting your brand's first impression. It is deciding it.



Sources: Nielsen Norman Group; Salsify Consumer Research; Nightjar photography data.

This guide is written for brands — and the designers and creative directors working with them — who understand that luxury brand photography is a strategic decision, not a production task.

"Photography is not a content problem. For luxury brands, it is a positioning decision. Every image either reinforces the brand or quietly contradicts it."

Geoffrey Idun, Idun Design

02

The Problem with Stock Photography

Stock photography actively undermines luxury brand positioning because it signals the opposite of what luxury communicates: that something was chosen without consideration.

Only 19% of consumers find stock photography authentic. Meanwhile, 86% say authenticity is a key factor when deciding which brands to support. That gap is not a minor preference difference. It is a structural trust problem.

STOCK VS. CUSTOM — WHAT THE DATA SHOWS

Stock Photography	Custom Photography
19% consumer authenticity rating	Up to 35% higher conversion rates
Shared across competitors' sites	Exclusive to your brand
Signals: commodity thinking	Signals: considered positioning
Visual consistency: impossible	Revenue uplift of up to 20% from brand consistency

Sources: Nightjar custom photography research; Squareshot brand consistency data; Sproutbox visual trust study.

The credibility gap is widest in industries where trust is the product itself: healthcare, financial services, hospitality, legal services — the sectors luxury brand clients occupy. A private clinic using stock photography of a generic consultation room is not saving money. It is spending its credibility.

Stock libraries are shared. A competitor in your market can license the identical image tomorrow. For a luxury brand, where distinctiveness is a core part of the value proposition, this is not a theoretical risk. It is a daily one.

03

What Photography Direction Actually Means

Photography direction is not choosing a photographer. It is deciding, in advance, what every image must communicate emotionally — before the camera is picked up.

Most brands approach a shoot by thinking about what to photograph. Effective photography direction starts one step earlier: how every image should feel. That feeling, once defined in precise language, becomes the filter through which every decision on set is made — light quality, depth of field, subject posture, objects permitted in frame.

TWO DIFFERENT CONVERSATIONS

Logistics (What most brands think direction means)	
<i>"We need 10 photos of the reception."</i>	<i>"Every image must feel like a private consultation — unhurried, expert, authoritative."</i>
<i>"Natural light preferred."</i>	<i>"Soft, directional natural light from a single source. No overhead. Shadows permitted."</i>
<i>"Modern, professional feel."</i>	<i>"Warm stone palette only. Nothing institutional. Grain is acceptable. Every surface in frame must sit within brand colour temperature."</i>

Direction also means defining what stays out of frame. For a luxury brand, negative space is not an absence — it is a statement. A composition that gives the subject room to breathe communicates authority. A cluttered frame, however beautifully lit, signals that the brand hasn't decided what matters.

Research consistently shows that warm tones and minimalist compositions evoke luxury and relaxation, while high contrast and sharp focus signal excitement and youth. These are perceptual mechanisms, not aesthetic preferences.

04

The Six-Element Photography Brief

A strong photography brief for a luxury brand contains six elements. Without all six, creative decisions are left to chance — and chance rarely produces coherence.

01

The Emotional Register

Define 3–5 feeling words that every image must evoke — not descriptive ("elegant") but experiential ("the feeling of walking into a room where everything is exactly right," "unhurried," "a private conversation between equals"). These become the on-set reference when a decision must be made quickly.

02

Light Quality — Not Light Setup

Specify how light should feel, not the equipment. "Soft, directional natural light from a single source" produces a fundamentally different image from "evenly lit, studio clean." For luxury brands the instruction is almost always restraint: one source, natural where possible, shadows permitted.

03

The Exclusion List

List the visual elements that must not appear in frame. For healthcare: clinical equipment in plain sight, fluorescent overhead lighting, anything institutional. For hospitality: empty plates, visible staff workings, anything that breaks the guest's perspective. The exclusion list is often more important than the shot list.

04

Colour Temperature & Grading Parameters

Specify the warmth of the image before post-production begins. If the brand palette is warm stone and aged brass, the photographer needs to know images will be graded to those tones — it affects surfaces chosen, clothes worn, time of day for exterior shots.

05

The Shot List — Structured by Priority

List images required, ranked. The first three are the ones the shoot exists to capture. Everything else is supporting material. A prioritised shot list prevents costly reshoots and ensures the photographer allocates time correctly.

06

Usage Context

Specify where every image will live: website hero, case study, social, print collateral. This determines aspect ratios needed, negative space required for text overlay, and whether portraits need compositional space left or right. A hero image that cannot accommodate the headline is not a hero image.

The brief should be written before a photographer is selected — because the brief determines which photographer is right for the project.

05

Three Approaches, Three Brands

The brief translates differently for every brand. Three Idun Design case studies demonstrate how the same principles produce entirely distinct photographic languages.

Elin Wyn Personal Training

Natural light / Real skin / Refinement over performance

Elin Wyn's clients are high-achieving women who want results without trading their taste.
Brief instruction: this is not a fitness brand.
Natural light only. Grain permitted. No performance poses.
Colour grading matched to the identity's warm neutral palette.

The result is a brand that reads as a refinement studio, not a gym. Every creative decision — from the clothes worn in the shoot to the texture of the surfaces in frame — was made in conversation with the identity's colour system.

The Private Harley Street Clinic

Clinical precision / Architectural restraint / Warm authority

For a private medical clinic, trust is the entire product.
Brief: architectural photography. Nothing institutional.
Colour palette — warm stone, deep green, aged brass — was also the brief for the environment: surfaces had to exist within those brand tones.

Nothing could read as institutional. Everything had to feel like a private consultation. The identity's palette did not merely guide the graphic design — it specified which surfaces were photographable and at what time of day.

The Lion Inn — Clifton upon Teme

Editorial warmth / Golden hour / The quality of an invitation

Brief structured around one question: does this image feel like an invitation?
Exterior: golden hour or soft overcast light.
Interior: candlelit or late-afternoon warmth, set tables, nothing empty.
Result: +30% increase in bookings following rebrand and website launch.

When a potential guest encounters imagery that makes them feel the warmth of the place before they have read a word of copy, the booking decision has already been made. The photography language was not incidental to the 30%

increase in bookings.

"In each case, the brief was written before a photographer was selected — because the brief determined which photographer was right."

06

Maintaining Consistency Across Touchpoints

Consistency in luxury brand photography requires written rules, not just a shared aesthetic.

A shoot produces a set of images. A photography language produces a system that can be applied across every future shoot, by any photographer, and still feel like the same brand. The difference is documentation.

WHAT THE PHOTOGRAPHY SECTION OF BRAND GUIDELINES MUST CONTAIN

- ✓ Light quality specification — preferred sources, time of day, direction
- ✓ Composition logic — negative space requirements, subject placement, depth of field approach
- ✓ Subjects permitted and excluded from frame — with visual examples of both
- ✓ Colour temperature range — warm / cool / neutral, with reference imagery
- ✓ Post-production grading parameters — contrast, saturation, skin tone treatment
- ✓ Approved photography examples — minimum six images defining the photographic language
- ✓ Examples of what to avoid — images that break the language, however technically accomplished

Consistent brand imagery can increase revenue by up to 20%. That figure requires a document that travels beyond the original creative director's memory — one that any photographer can open and understand without a briefing call.

Grading presets should be shared with every editor who works on brand imagery. Without this, images from different shoots carry different temperatures, different contrast levels. The brand looks, over time, like several brands rather than one.

The most effective consistency mechanism is a single point of creative accountability: one person who reads every brief, approves every final selection, and asks the same question each time — not "is this a good photograph?" but "does this photograph feel like the others?"

07

The Checklist

Use this checklist before every brand photography shoot. All 18 items should be confirmed before a photographer is booked or a shutter is pressed.

BEFORE THE SHOOT

- ✓ The emotional register has been defined in writing (3–5 feeling words)
- ✓ Light quality has been specified — not equipment, but the quality of the light
- ✓ An exclusion list exists — what must not appear in any image
- ✓ Colour temperature and grading parameters are documented
- ✓ The shot list is written and ranked by priority
- ✓ Usage context is specified for every image on the shot list
- ✓ The brief has been shared with the photographer in writing
- ✓ Reference images (mood board) have been agreed and approved
- ✓ The photographer has confirmed they can execute to the brief

ON SET

- ✓ The brief is physically present on set for reference
- ✓ Every surface in frame exists within the brand's colour temperature
- ✓ Nothing appears in frame that is on the exclusion list
- ✓ Each image is reviewed against the emotional register before moving on
- ✓ The negative space in each composition has been considered deliberately

POST-PRODUCTION

- ✓ Grading presets from the brand guidelines have been applied
- ✓ Final selections reviewed against the brand's existing image library

- ✓ Approved images added to the brand's photography guidelines as new references
- ✓ Photography brief updated to reflect any decisions made on set

08

The One Creative Mind Principle

Visual fragmentation in luxury brands almost never comes from bad photography. It comes from photography that was directed by someone other than the person who designed the identity.

When a brand's visual identity and its photography language are created by different people who have never had a structured conversation about emotional register, colour, and what the brand must feel like in three dimensions, the result is a brand that looks polished in isolation and confused in totality.

THE FRAGMENTATION PROBLEM

Identity Designer	<i>No shared briefing</i>	Photographer	<i>No shared presets</i>	Editor / Retoucher
Defines colour, type, tone		Shoots to own aesthetic defaults		Grades to own preferences

Result: three separate creative sensibilities producing one brand. Coherence is accidental at best.

The answer is not to spend more on photography. It is to bring photography direction under the same creative intelligence that designed the identity in the first place.

At Idun Design, brand guidelines always include a photography language section: light quality, composition logic, colour temperature, and what must be excluded from frame. For clients where photography is directed personally, colour grading ensures the tones in the images and the tones in the identity are in precise conversation with each other.

"Luxury is not a logo. It is the feeling that every detail — from the website to the wayfinding, from the business card to the photography brief — was conceived by a single, considered mind. When that coherence is present, a brand communicates authority without saying a word."

Geoffrey Idun — Idun Design

WORK WITH GEOFFREY IDUN

Geoffrey Idun is a Creative Director and Senior Design Consultant based in London, working with a select number of private clients each year across brand identity, digital, print, environmental design, and photography direction. Currently Senior Design Consultant at Goldman Sachs.

hello@idundesign.co.uk

idundesign.co.uk

London