

Brain Games, Professional Photos, and your Vacation Rental

Brain Games

If there's one thing you can count on, it's that many guests won't thoroughly read through the entirety of your listing description. No matter how compelling the listing description or copy-writing, images and media will always get more attention and more importantly they'll get that attention *first*.

Your image set is your first and best shot at conveying what your vacation rental has to offer. And while I tend to believe that most people are inherently good, I would argue that it can only benefit hosts to have high quality images to showcase the pride and care that goes into your vacation rental. When a space looks like its been pridefully put together, curated, and professionally photographed, it helps set expectations in guests minds that they should respect the space as well.

It's a fascinating correlation and subconscious trigger that when something appears well appointed and clean in images - and those images match what guests see when they arrive - guests are more likely to care for and respect your vacation rental. I think back to when my parents took me to another family's home. When it looked nice and clean, my mother would immediately tell me to take off my shoes, setting the tone that I should take care at least not to dirty the floor. Similarly, that first impression both in pictures and later in person have the potential to set the tone of how guests will treat your rental. This alone I believe can be one of the biggest long term benefits. If your guests are taking care of your space, owners will spend less time and money replacing items from wear and tear or worse, repairing actual damage. Take a moment to consider this quick before an after below.

AFTER



At the risk of oversimplified comparison, consider how you shop online for products. Did professional product images or lack thereof influence your decision? Or perhaps in justifying the price paid?

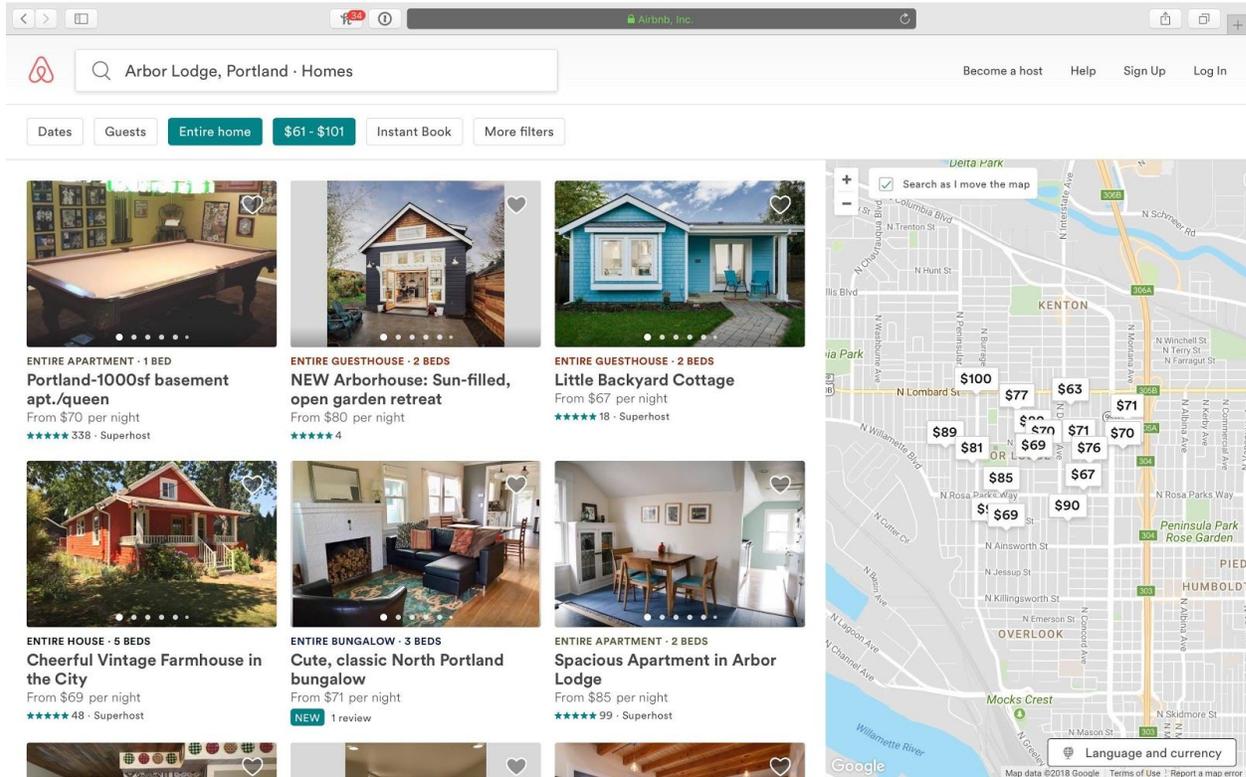
Attention!

Do I have it yet? Bear with me. Search results are a game of attention and, though we may not like it, vacation rentals are a bit of a game of visual clickbait. You're vying for the coveted click through. Recent research has shown that you'll have less than 3 seconds to capture a user's attention - hopefully with a stellar leading "hero" or "cover" photo. This first impression is especially important when first publishing your listing!

Now I'll preface this with a quick precaution: every platform is a little different and search algorithms will always be changing. BUT If you're new to hosting - when launching and going live, platforms like AirBnB will typically give a boost to new listings in search results. It greatly benefits you if your very first impressions on each platform are high quality photographs. This way you can take advantage of the potential search boost and capture attention you'll get simply from being new. You can always modify and optimize your listing description and the

text therein. But think about the last time you purchased something online. Was that product image professional or from an iPhone? Was your confidence in your purchase influenced by the quality of the image shown? Online, I believe your first impression should be your best impression because it could be your *last* impression.

As of the time of this writing, below is a screenshot of 1 example set of search results in the



Arbor Lodge neighborhood of Portland. I'll readily admit I'm slightly biased because 2 of my clients happen to show up in the top 3 results - and no I did not photograph the billiards table. But all bias aside, let's consider a few things from this screenshot. That nearby similarly priced arrangement has 330+ 5 star reviews! But which images perhaps convey something more visually enticing? I might also point out this small search example hopefully demonstrates a bit of the importance of a professional "cover" photo or lead image to capture attention and drive traffic to your listing. Also of note is that new listings with far less reviews but with great images still show up near the top of search results. If anything, in markets where vacation rentals are booming, know that you *can* compete, and professional images give your listing that much more of an edge.

Show me the Money

There is direct correlation between the perceived value created by professional images and adding money to your bottom line. Owning and operating a vacation rental is no easy business. Increasing your nightly rate is a straightforward way to increase profitability without requiring any ongoing labor from you the operator. In my opinion, the simplest way to confidently increase a listings perceived value is by utilizing professionally produced images. Its an

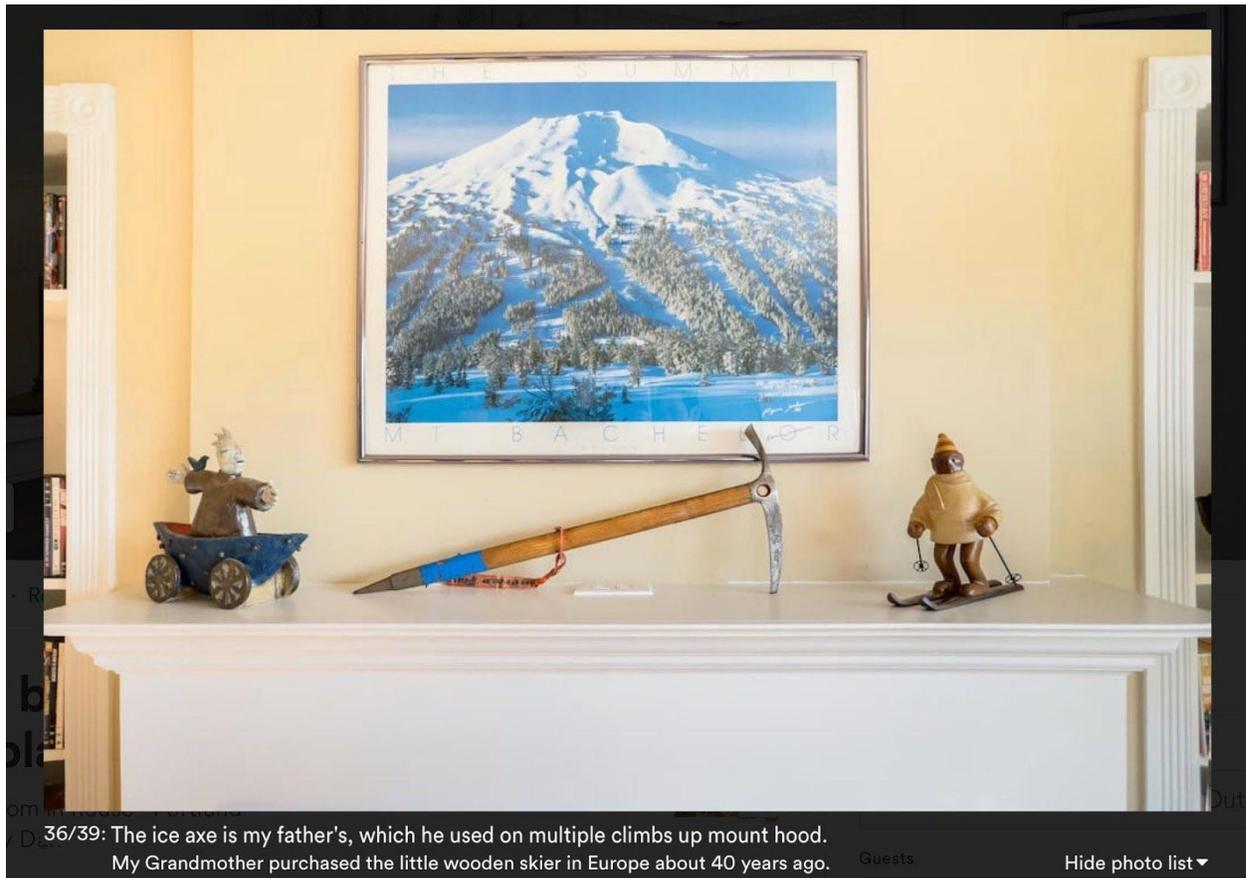
arrangement that needs to be made and paid for once, with perhaps the occasional update images and pays for itself typically in 1-2 nights worth of reservations.

I encourage all of my clients to consider increasing their nightly rates when they upload their new professional images. For my clients who are first publishing their listing with professional photos at launch, I've noted several benefits. They are less compelled to launch with an underpriced nightly rate just to attract those coveted first few reservations. They are more confident in their starting nightly rate and tend to attract higher quality bookings from the get go. On average my clients who had existing listings but previously did not use professional images are able to successfully increase their nightly rates 10-15%. Here I consider a successful client story when one of the following occurs after using professional images:

1. **Increased nightly rate and increased bookings**
 - this is best case scenario, owners experience increased revenue and a full calendar, maximizing their profit potential
2. **Increased nightly rates while maintaining average booking rates**
 - owners achieve increased revenue without any additional effort or operating cost
3. **Increased nightly rate, resulting in a slight decrease in reservations**
 - though revenue does not directly increase, this can translate to reduced time and labor involved to support similar total revenue. This also results in decreased operating costs such as cleaning (turning) between reservations, and overall wear and tear in the space. For hosts who self-manage and clean their listings, this is often a welcome change of pace. I've yet to meet a host who did not welcome the potential of making the same amount of money while reducing the effort required to do so.

more...

If elements of your listing have a history, or if there are quirky features in and around your



vacation rental, be sure to add them to your shot list. These can help you build a narrative or story in your image captions.

One of many great perks of vacation rentals, and to me what originally drew me to travel using Airbnb is the potential to stay in unique rooms, homes, and spaces. As a guest, it's really exciting to stay in a place where the dining chairs were handcrafted by someone's grandfather, or a piece of decor was part of a collection representing someone's travels across Europe. In new construction, perhaps the space was the vision of years of effort and design in collaboration between spouses and a local architects.

One of my favorite client experiences was with a gentleman named Dan. He had put all his effort into preparing his home as a vacation rental. He had neighbors in the area he could see doing well. But when he launched he just wasn't getting *any* traction. It was incredibly disheartening. When he contacted me and I had the chance to photograph his home, I was intrigued by so much of the decor and furnishings. For example, he had an ice axe on his fireplace mantel that appeared antiquesly weathered. Turns out it was his grandfather's ice axe. His grandfather had used it on several winter adventures to the summit of Mount Hood. He also had an upright piano that wasn't just any piano in the dining room, it was the very piano he's kept since learning to play as a child. He had several other elements of his space that had a history or story behind them and after photographing them I encouraged him to include

pieces of those stories in the captions of the images when he uploaded them. I was thrilled to hear back from him months later. Combined with professional photos, storied captions, a revamped listing description, and some help from local consultants at Turnkeyed, Dan achieved “Superhost” status on AirBnB in just a few short weeks from implementation!

“Make them Dream” & Why Vacation Rentals ≠ Real Estate

That may sound entirely obvious. But I wholeheartedly believe that vacation rental photos are not the same as real estate photos. It is an entirely different audience and very different intention behind the images. Real estate photos typically serve to demonstrate the entirety of a home to entice buyers and are often characterized by ultra wide angle perspectives. However, ultra wide perspective is infrequently ideal for vacation rentals and risks misrepresenting the scale and size of a space.

As a photographer I can absolutely make a 350 square foot backyard unit look larger but as a guest I would be entirely disheartened if the images make the space look vastly larger compared to when I arrive. Furthermore real estate photography is typically devoid of any narrative or story. This isn't to say you shouldn't hire a real estate photographer, but seeking a photographer with some experience showcasing vacation rentals may help. If you do hire a real estate photographer, seek out someone who might be willing to collaborate with you to perhaps take slightly modified approach to their typical shoot.

One of my favorite vacation rental and lifestyle photographers once told me “Make them dream.” For me, vacation rental photos should incite some sort of excitement to look forward to visiting. The images should seek to make guests dream of visiting, be it for the location, the uniqueness, or perhaps the personality of your vacation rental.

When you hire a professional photographer, regardless of experience, I encourage vacation rental owners to make a couple considerations.

Have you seen *full* sets of images from a photographers book of work? Not just a portfolio of their best images. I often display entire sets of images from my shoots in effort to show prospective clients how I photograph an entire space not just my favorite images.

Secondly, don't be afraid to have your own shot list. Ask your photographer to capture certain amenities or features. Experienced hosts can take into consideration any feedback from guests. Perhaps guests have mentioned they particularly appreciate certain features of your listing. Talk with your photographer about your vacation rental, and hopefully they'll work with you to capture those. And hopefully, this article will help guide you in which images you might request.

Many times vacation rental owners just trust me to capture how I see fit, and I appreciate that confidence and autonomy. But I truly love to engage with hosts and vacation rental owners. I love to learn about the stories behind how spaces, furnishings, and features came together. Why was this piece of decor chosen? Are some products, decor or art from local companies or artists? These are perks of working with vacation rental owners that I don't get very often from photographing real estate listings and empty homes.

Host Marketing Journal

This small revelation comes from the marketer in me. I'm all about testing and recording. I encourage my clients to test and rotate what they use as their cover photo when they first receive their new images. This became a habit I encourage to simply try to identify if a certain lead image over another led to increased visitor traffic or reservations. There's a million and one variables at play but as your journey develops, I always encourage keeping track of any changes you might make to your listing and noting the effects in visitor traffic, impressions, bookings, etc. Anything. You may eventually notice patterns that will help you identify what changes might help you further optimize your listing as your experience grows. There may not be any clear correlations to begin with, but noting the potential effects can be remarkable insight if you notice any patterns as you make big or even minor changes to your listing.

"Didn't think of that!" & Final Tips

Don't be afraid to keep it fresh. Consider seasonal changes and don't be afraid to schedule an "update" shoot. Rotate the set of photos you use in your listing and the occasional update to your photographs so your listing doesn't always appear exactly the same. If guests come to rebook or revisit, it can be even more exciting to know the space they enjoyed has evolved, has improved features or even just new seasonal decor depending on time of year or booking. Many host clients have seasonal bedding and decor but only have photos of 1 set from a few years ago. Shake it up a bit!

Light bulbs and color temperature! This is both for the sake of photos and guests and something very few hosts have consciously considered. Everything we see around us is a reflection of light - be it natural or artificial light. If the light we experience in a space is of vastly different color temperature it creates a subconscious feeling of visual tension. Furthermore, different color temperature bulbs in the same space can be incredibly difficult to color-correct in the editing process. Whatever type of bulb you choose to use, I encourage hosts and home owners to use bulbs of at least similar color temperatures, especially lights in the same rooms.

Note this example of 3 different color temperature bulbs in nearby shared spaces. The warm ceiling lights, the cool white lamp to the right, and the slightly green/blue hue of the lamp behind the couch. This creates subconscious visual tension when walking through the space in person as well as in photos.

more...



Lastly, the following guide is a great reference for general recommendations where each color



SOFT WHITE/WARM WHITE:

Best for bedrooms and living rooms; providing a traditional warm, cozy feel to them

BRIGHT WHITE/COOL WHITE:

Best in kitchens, bathrooms or garages; giving rooms a whiter, more energetic feel

DAYLIGHT:

Best in bathrooms, kitchens and basements; good for reading, intricate projects, or applying makeup – provides the greatest contrast among colors

temperature may be best suited.