
Your Bottom Line

By Dr. Henry J. Oles, Cr.Photos.

Murphy's Law

Mr. Murphy is alive and well, and if you don't continually take steps to protect yourself, he will cause you a great deal of grief. Who is Mr. Murphy? He's the legendary philosopher who said if something can go wrong, it probably will.

I was reminded of Murphy's Law a few days after publication of my recent column on the importance of saying "thank you" to customers. One of my best customers wrote to me to complain that he never received the thank you note I discussed in the column. After checking with the staff, I learned that the system I set up to show customer appreciation wasn't working as expected. It was off track.

Fortunately, photography is not a business where misjudgment results in catastrophic consequences. Recently, an airliner went down in central Texas, killing all aboard. An investigation uncovered that approximately 100 screws were missing in the tail section, which a mechanic forgot to replace after a routine maintenance check.

In photography, the biggest disaster may be nothing more than a blank roll of film. Although this is relatively minor compared with other misfortunes, nevertheless, photographers should be alert to potential problems BEFORE they happen. It's a matter of continually working to keep all systems on track, all the time.

How do airlines, hospitals, and other large organizations protect themselves against Murphy's Law? They have established exceptionally tight procedures that are followed diligently every day. Some procedures may seem so obvious, they appear foolish. The first time I flew in a private plane, I became highly suspicious of the pilot's abilities when he removed a printed card from his pocket and read aloud safety steps that seemed so pathetically obvious. Later, I learned this is standard operating procedure for private pilots so they can be absolutely certain that they've taken each step.

How do these examples apply to professional photography? Guarding against catastrophes is critical if you're shooting a non-repeatable event, such as a wedding. Not only can this type of disaster

damage your reputation, it can lead to a lawsuit charging incompetence. As professionals, we have an obligation to perform as professionals. Making foolish mistakes and not taking ordinary precautions is unprofessional behavior.

Now is the time to set up procedures to minimize the risk of an accident. Start with double checking all appointments. I once arrived at a wedding only to find the bride en route down the aisle. She switched the ceremony time and informed everyone except the photographer. I could have avoided this problem if I double checked the wedding schedule with the bride just prior to the big day.

No camera should ever be used for an event without a thorough equipment check, including flash synchronization. For assignments such as weddings or those that involve many subjects, I periodically check the flash sync. All settings should be checked and rechecked for accuracy. Real professionals know their equipment so well they can often detect a problem just from sound and feel.

According to Murphy's Law, things that work will break sooner or later. Therefore, always carry extra equipment with you, including a second camera, one or two spare flash units, and several additional sync cords. The peace of mind that results from knowing you are adequately covered is well worth the extra expense and effort. Similarly, if you hire other professional photographers to help you handle wedding assignments, create a back-up plan in case of an accident or illness. At some point during your career, it will happen.

If you continually take precautions to guard against Murphy's Law, you will have better odds of avoiding accidents. The efforts you take to minimize mishaps can be promoted as part of your professional service. Your customers know that sometimes things go wrong no matter how you protect yourself against calamity. Customers also want to know what you do to lessen the chance of it happening. Keeping Mr. Murphy out of your studio is one way to insure the continuing success of your bottom line. 