

Photographing buttons calls for some care, but following a few simple guidelines for close-up photography will help you to get pleasing pictures either for your own use or for publication here in 'Button Lines' magazine. This guide is intended for use with compact digital cameras.

Preparation

Whilst digital photography is often seen as an instant medium, taking your time, especially in the preparation stage, will pay dividends. Nobody wants to see pictures spoiled by dust and stray fibres so prepare both your buttons and the work area carefully. Clean the work area before you begin and dust the buttons immediately before placing them for photographing. A hand operated 'puffer' or blower is usually the safest duster.

Skills

The most important skill of all is 'Learn to Look'. When you are ready to photograph, 'Look' very carefully at the image in the viewfinder or display screen. Forget that it's a button; is it in the right position, is it properly lit, are the shadows too dark or in the wrong place, are there bad reflections, is the background suitable? Take a test shot, check the result and if it's not right, make adjustments and take another shot.

Work space

I normally use a tripod above a flat work surface. The camera looks straight down at the target button which is usually surrounded by a diffusing screen (a folding cake cover in my case). This set-up allows good control of lighting for most buttons. Extra precautions are needed to prevent, or at least minimize, unwanted reflections in shiny reflective buttons, particularly domed ones.

It is possible to photograph buttons with the camera looking horizontally at the button. I have seen this done using buttons firmly mounted on card and resting on a stand or held by the shank in a small clamp. The camera should be mounted on a mini-tripod for stability. Adjust the camera to face the button head-on; not at an angle. Reflectors to even out the lighting will probably be essential (see 'item 2: Lighting' below).

Camera selection

'Button Lines' can only use digital images. Few members are likely to buy a digital camera solely for the purpose of photographing buttons but if the opportunity arises look for a camera with a 'macro' or 'close-up' mode. An articulated LCD viewing screen can also be a great advantage when working at difficult angles.

Camera settings

Select 'highest quality' image mode. Select 'macro' or 'close-up' mode if available. Set sensitivity (ISO speed) from 100 up to 400 max. if ISO is manually adjustable; higher ISO will give you faster shutter speeds and help to reduce 'shake' but tend to degrade the image quality. Select 'flash off' mode if available.

Camera use

Here are five important topics to concentrate on in order to get good images:

1: Background

When recording your own collection you can use whatever background you prefer but when making images for 'Button Lines' please select a contrasting background.

Set dark buttons against a light background and vice versa; this makes it easier to delete the background so that the published image 'floats' on the page with no background. This makes compiling the magazine much easier.

Avoid vibrantly coloured, shiny and reflective background materials, especially if photographing polished metal buttons and domed, shiny plastics or pearls – all of these make excellent reflectors, picking up all sorts of colours and shapes from their surroundings.

Avoid wearing brightly coloured clothes. You're likely to be quite close to the button when you take the shot and it's all too easy to find yourself reflected in the button when you view the image.

2: Lighting

Soft, even lighting of a single type is best. Much advice on close-up work suggests that a simple reading lamp is all that's needed whilst others say natural daylight is the best. There are two problems with using electric light; firstly it tends to be harsh, causing 'hot spots' in the image and secondly it has a 'warmer' colour temperature than natural daylight causing the camera to make errors in the 'white balance' setting. Put simply, daylight is much bluer than tungsten lamps. Quartz iodine or LED lamps are closer to daylight but still not the same. Try to stick to just one type of light as far as possible.

Daylight tends to be directional – from a window for example – so the use of diffusers and reflectors can make a big improvement in results. Reflectors are easy; a piece of white card or silver cooking foil placed on the shaded side of the button will reflect light back into the shadows and give more even illumination. Adjust the position of the reflector for best results, not forgetting to give the camera an unrestricted view of the button. The simplest diffuser for window lighting is the curtain or blind which can moderate the direct light but watch out for patterns or colour reflections on the button.

Avoid the use of flash wherever possible; the camera will be too close to the subject and the results are often poor.

3: Focus

Out-of-focus pictures look blurred and there is no way to correct this problem. This is where the compact digital camera has an advantage. Most such cameras use a small sensor which delivers greater depth of field than larger digital cameras. This means more of your button will be kept in focus from front to back. Nevertheless, accurate focussing is critical for best results. If your camera has a 'manual focus' option use this in preference to auto-focus. If manual focus is not available find out if your camera allows you to select one particular focus aiming point – this is often the one in the centre of the frame. You may then be able to select and lock focus on your target point before taking the shot.

If your camera has a 'macro' or 'close-up' mode read the manual carefully to understand exactly how it works and how to get the best out of it. This mode optimises the camera for close-ups.

4: Exposure

Setting the exposure is almost certain to be automated in most compact cameras. Don't worry, exposure errors can usually be corrected during computer processing.

5: Be still

The other main cause of image blurring is 'camera shake', more properly known as 'photographer shake'. Hand-holding the camera isn't a good choice for close up work, especially with compact cameras that have no direct viewfinder but only the LCD viewing screen on the back of the camera. In this case the camera must be held out in front of you so your eyes can focus on the screen rather than being held close against your face which helps to steady the camera.

The best advice is always to use a tripod or camera clamp. Almost anything will be better than hand-holding the camera; even resting the camera on a small cushion or pad.

If you can mount your camera securely and your camera has a self-timer you can use this to further minimize camera vibration. Set everything up then release the self-timer which will postpone shutter action for between two and ten seconds. This delay will allow the camera to settle before the shot is taken.

A final trick

If you use the 'camera looking down' method you can avoid problems with buttons tilting on their shanks by supporting the button on a hollow tube or ring, preferably of transparent material. This will also have the benefit of spacing the button away from the background, making the button stand out more clearly.

The support should be of a smaller diameter than the button. Care is needed when taking shots of clear glass or plastic buttons to avoid the support being visible in the final image. I use various oddments ranging from small plastic rings and caps to plastic tubes.