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STUDIO



FIELD GUIDE / 2026 EDITION

Photography or CGI: The Honest Comparison

Where a camera genuinely wins, where a rendered model wins, and the single question — how many variants exist — that usually settles it either way.

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Begin with the case for the camera

We are a CGI studio and this page argues for photography, because for a large share of briefs it is simply the right answer. Pretending otherwise wastes a client's money and our time, and it is usually obvious within one phone call.

01 **It already exists**

If the product is in your hand today, a photographer can shoot it this week. Nothing has to be built, modelled, textured or lit from scratch. For one product in one finish, that is frequently the fastest and cheapest route there is.

02 **Real material behaviour comes for free**

Worn leather, brushed steel, hand-thrown ceramic, textile pile, food. Surfaces with genuine irregularity remain slow and difficult to model convincingly. A camera captures them without being asked.

03 **Authenticity the audience can feel**

Hands, skin, weather, a room that is genuinely lived in. Documentary credibility is a real commercial asset, and it is expensive to manufacture.

04 **Exploration is cheap on a shoot**

You can try something, look at it, and try the opposite ten minutes later. In CGI the equivalent costs render time and a revision cycle.

05 **There is no asset to maintain**

No file, no format question, no licence on geometry, no conversation about who holds the scene in two years. Simpler to own and simpler to hand to an agency.

When photography is plainly right

One existing product. One finish. One or two angles. A brand whose look depends on real people and real places. Nothing coming to market that is not yet manufactured. If that describes the brief, book a photographer — a single CGI image of a single existing object is often the more expensive of the two.

THE OTHER SIDE

Where the model earns its place

01	**It is not manufactured yet**	The decisive one. You cannot photograph tooling that does not exist. A model lets packaging, trade, pre-orders and launch marketing run **alongside** production rather than behind it.
02	**Variants and colourways**	Once the model exists, a finish is a material swap. The tenth colourway costs a fraction of the first image. In photography, the tenth colourway is a tenth set-up.
03	**Views a camera cannot take**	Section cuts, exploded assemblies, the inside of a mechanism, a scale or distance no lens reaches.
04	**A consistent library over years**	Same camera, same light, every product in the range, this season and next. A range shot by three photographers over three years never quite matches, and on a product grid that shows immediately.
05	**Reshoots become edits**	“Move the logo 4mm.” “Make the cap matte.” “The handle supplier changed.” In CGI these are revisions to a file. In photography they are another day, another sample and another crew.
06	**Scenes you cannot build or book**	A kitchen you do not own, a landscape, a suite, a season that is not this one. Set building and location hire are genuine costs that a model removes.
07	**The asset outlives the campaign**	The model can carry a configurator, AR, an animation or a trade stand later. A photograph remains a photograph.

Note what is not on this list: **cheaper**. CGI does not win on the first image. It wins on the second, and it wins decisively by the tenth — which is why the count of images, not their quality, is what the decision actually turns on.



Maverick Frame production render.

THE DECISION

Which one, for which brief

Find your rows. Read the right-hand column and count. A clean sweep is rare; a split result means you are a hybrid case, which most brands turn out to be.

YOUR SITUATION	PHOTOGRAPHY	CGI	USUALLY
One existing product, one finish, one or two angles	Strong	Weak on cost	**Photograph it**
Product still in development	Impossible	Strong	**CGI**
Three or more finishes or colourways	Multiplies	Strong	**CGI**
Heavily irregular materials — worn leather, food, textiles	Strong	Possible, slower	**Photograph it**
Lifestyle with real people	Strong	Costly	**Photograph it**
An interior or location you cannot access	Needs hire	Strong	**CGI**
Range consistency held across years	Drifts	Strong	**CGI**
Cutaways, exploded views, internals	Destroys samples	Strong	**CGI**
Packaging visuals before anything is printed	Dummies needed	Strong	**CGI**
Frequent small revisions expected	Expensive	Cheap	**CGI**
One-off, fast, small budget	Strong	Weak	**Photograph it**
A configurator, AR or animation is coming later	Dead end	Strong	**CGI**

“Strong” here means fit for the job, not superior in general. Both methods can produce an image nobody can fault. The columns describe what each one costs you to get there for **your** particular situation.

STEP 03

The question that actually decides it

Not which one looks better — both can look right. The question is how many versions of this product will need an image over the next two years.

One

Photograph it. A model built for a single image and never touched again is money spent on flexibility you have already decided not to use.

A handful

Genuinely close. Let the materials decide: irregular and tactile leans to the camera, engineered and repeatable leans to the model.

Many, or not yet made

Build the model. The point where it becomes the cheaper option arrives early, and nearly everything after it is close to free.

How the hybrid works in practice

Photograph the hero: the real product, in real hands, in a real place, with the texture only a camera gives you. Render the range: every finish, every size, every angle, on a consistent neutral, produced from one scene so the grid matches. Most brands we work with end up here without having planned to, because it is simply where the two cost curves cross.

Four questions to answer before you commission either

- [ ] How many finishes, sizes or variants will exist in two years?
- [ ] Does the product exist today, in its final specification?
- [ ] Will we need this exact shot again in another ratio, language or colour?
- [ ] Does anything downstream — configurator, AR, animation — need a model anyway?

If the answer to the last one is yes, the comparison is already over. You are paying for the model regardless, and the images become the cheap part of it.

WORKING WITH A STUDIO

Cost, and how to brief it

Two things people ask us before anything else. Both answers are short.

COMMISSIONED WORK	FREELANCER	STUDIO
Single exterior still	$100 – 300	$250 – 600
Single interior still	$120 – 350	$300 – 700
Package, 5–8 views	$600 – 1,500	$1,500 – 4,000
Animation, per minute	$1,000 – 3,000	$3,000 – 8,000

Market ranges we are willing to publish. Turnaround and revision-round figures are deliberately not in this table: ours vary too much by project type to state as a benchmark, and an invented number here would be worse than none.

How to brief it — shorter is better

This is the opposite of what most people assume. Four things:

- What you need — **how many images, and of what**
- The plans and elevations, as they are
- A few reference images for mood and light
- One clear line on what the images are *for*

Inflating a small job into a fifty-page specification backfires: taken literally it comes out ugly, and it misleads the people doing the work. Tell them the intent and let the team that does this daily handle the detail.

The mistake that costs the most

The biggest failure we see is not choosing the wrong vendor. It is **timing**. People start looking only after the first supplier has already failed and the deadline is on fire, then choose in a panic.

Line up and vet rendering partners **before** you need one. One, ideally a few, briefed and ready to take work. It costs an afternoon now and saves a project later.

10+
YEARS RENDERING VISUAL STORYTELLING

350+
BRANDS & AGENCIES EMPOWERED GLOBALLY

95%
CLIENT SATISFACTION RATE

40%+
OF OUR COMMISSIONS NOW INCLUDE MOTION OR 360

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When the image has to hold up, talk to us

We are a CGI studio: architectural and product rendering, 3D modelling, animation, 360 tours and VR. Ten years, 350+ brands and agencies, and the kind of work that still looks right when somebody counts the windows.

Send us the plans and a line on what the images are for. You get a scope and a price, and no obligation to use either.

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SEE THE WORK

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Maverick Frame production render. · Cost ranges are market ranges as of 2026 and are not a quotation.