

How to silhouette an image in Photoshop

Getting rid of the background adds power and drama to a photo

By Dan Antonelli

Download the files:

You can download the Photoshop files Dan used in this article by going to www.signcraft.com, clicking on *Features*, then on "Download files for How to Silhouette an Image in Photoshop" under the How To heading.

Software:

Adobe Photoshop 7.0
EyeCandy 5: Impact
Photoshop Plug-In
(Alien Skin Software)
Macromedia Freehand 10

Platform/OS:

Macintosh G5 1.8 GHZ
Dual Processor
OS X Version 10.3.6
3 GB Ram

Photoshop includes many features for sophisticated photo editing and image manipulation techniques. But the program is so advanced that it's easy to feel overwhelmed by all the available tools and options it has to offer.

Once you start using some of these techniques, it really does become less overwhelming. The effects get easier to execute, and, each becomes one more trick you've got up your sleeve to use down the road.

In this step-by-step, we'll explore a simple technique to enhance the photography of your signs and vehicles. In this article, and my next one, I'll illustrate some helpful techniques that are often employed by ad agencies and graphic designers to improve their product advertisements.

These techniques force the viewer to focus on your product, without distracting backgrounds. They help you showcase your signs and vehicles in a much more polished way.

Then you can use these images on your Web site and promotional marketing materials. If you're designing signs for digital printing, you can use this same effect to isolate an image to make it more powerful. You can take the hamburger off the plate and sit it right on the restaurant's banner, or take the girl off the beach and put her on the tanning salon's van. Getting rid of noisy, busy backgrounds can really increase the effectiveness of an image—especially when viewing time is limited as it so often is on signs. •



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1. Let's begin by opening an image from your digital camera or a scanned image in Photoshop. Here's a photo of a van we did a few months ago. It's not a terrible photo as is, but clearly it would have more drama if we could have it standing by itself without a distracting background.

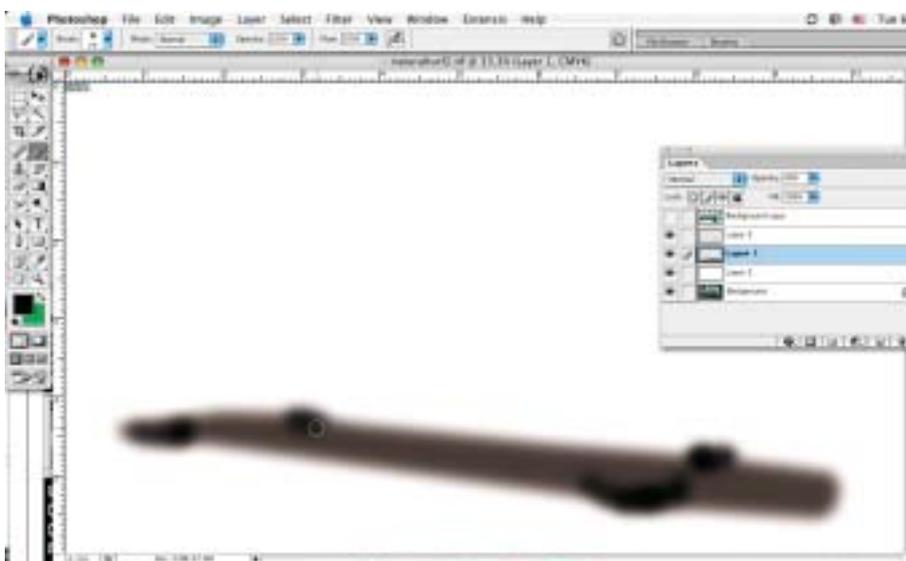


2. Duplicate the layer called *Background*, then turn off that layer so that only the layer *Background Copy* is visible. Select the Polygonal Lasso tool (hidden under the Lasso tool) and work your way around the outline of the van, deleting the background. Once you've completely deleted the background, you're ready to add some realism to the photo, as if it might have been shot in a photo studio.

I'm assuming you're somewhat familiar with Photoshop, but if you're not, don't worry. You can use Photoshop's Help menu to learn how to do some of the basic steps (like opening a file or duplicating a layer) that I don't have room to describe here.



3. Turn on the *Background* layer again so you can view the original shadow underneath the vehicle. Turn off the *Background Copy* layer, then create a new layer. Using the Polygonal Lasso tool again, draw a box approximately over the original shadow, as it appeared in the photo. This will create a soft shadow under the van. To give the selection a softer edge, select Feather and choose approximately 30 to 50 pixels. Then choose Fill and select 100% black. You can always adjust the opacity later. We changed it to 49 percent in the layer palette.



4. To add more realism around the wheels, create a new layer to darken the shadows around the wheels, and where they meet the ground. Using the Brush tool, dab in a few darker airbrushed areas. Here's the shadow with the darker areas of the wheel wells. We also added a white layer so that we could see how the truck looks on a white background. Instead of white background, you could have added walls and a foreground. This art is for a brochure, though, so white is more appropriate.

5. Here's the finished photo. It has a much more sophisticated look than simply using the rectangular photo with all that background clutter.



This is a spread from our company's new brochure. The image on the left, was also done with the same technique. We, of course, added that wild background, and then also reflected the lettering off the "floor." If you'd like to view the entire 12-page corporate marketing brochure, a PDF is available to download at www.graphicd-signs.com.



In this ad, a "floor" was added with a reflection of the vehicle. We also added a subtle halo to accentuate the van. In the next issue, we'll see how that effect can also be used on signs.



We used the same technique in a Web site we designed for CustomAutoWrap.com. We silhouetted many of the trucks featured, and then used the background color to place them in the layout. We then added the soft shadows underneath. This gave a much cleaner presentation, and avoided having the background compete for the viewer's attention.