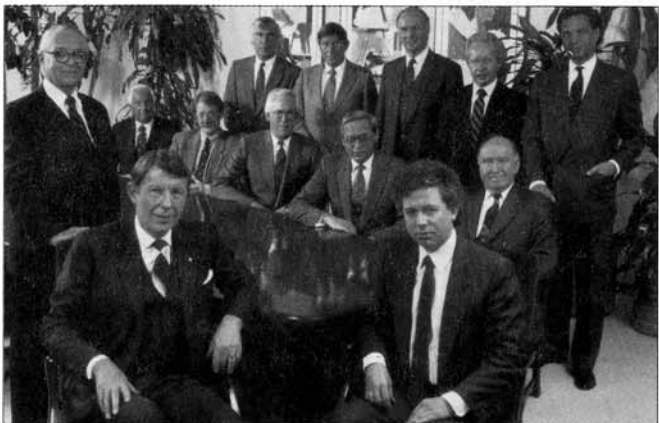


## Geometry and drama — photographing groups

*In setting up a group shot, think of yourself as an architect of visual space and as a stage director of the cast of characters assembled before you*



The geometry of a group picture may be as important as the group itself, says photographer Pete Byron. In the photograph above, taken by Mark Borchelt for Sentinel Care 2000 (4300 Evergreen Ln., Annandale, VA 22003), the triangular arrangement of the group creates a strong composition.



Photographer Mark Borchelt orchestrated an inverted triangle in the photo above. Too often, organizational publications show groups of people lined up straight across the picture. Borchelt lines people up, but the lines form diagonals within the picture. Political considerations no doubt helped determine Borchelt's arrangement of the members of Ameribanc Investors Group's Board of Trustees.

"I absolutely refuse to line 'em up and shoot 'em down," says photographer Pete Byron (75 Mill Road, Morris Plains, NJ 07950). Group shots do not need to be the commonly seen straight-on shots of parallel rows of people. You can create depth in your group photos by building a variety of compositional lines and by shooting from different vantage points.

Composition is to photos what layout is to a page: You arrange the visual content to keep the reader's eye engaged. "When you're dealing with groups, especially groups of more than three people," says Byron, "the geometry of the picture becomes just as important as the group itself."

The triangle is a standard for composing a group, says Mark Borchelt (Studio D, 4938-D Eisenhower Ave., Alexandria, VA 22304), whose photograph at left illustrates this classic arrangement. "I always watch for people's hands," he says. In this photo, the placement of hands on the table builds the base of the triangle.

In larger groups, as seen in photographs on the next page, Borchelt asks people to keep their hands at their sides. He'll let a couple of people cross their hands in front of them, but if too many do, they'll be chided, "Okay, I thought I told you not to cross your hands in front of you."

"You have to have a good voice when you're working



Photographer Pete Byron calibrates the visual depth of the photo above by placing members of this research team in visual niches along the library stacks. The photo appeared in The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation's *Advances* (College Rd., P.O. Box 2316, Princeton, NJ 08543).



Stairways work in the photos at left and above to organize groups. Getting above the group's eye level will allow you to see over the first row and more of the people at back.

with a group," Borchelt says. You want people to hear your directions. Ask people on the outside to turn toward the inside, he says. Get people to move apart so you can see each one. In the shot taken on the steps of the Capitol, shown above, Borchelt says he asked the front row to take two steps forward. The result was two tiny steps. His answer was to animatedly make an example of somebody to illustrate where people needed to move to. "It's fun, people start chuckling and having a good time."

The hardest thing, Borchelt says, is getting everyone to look at the camera. He tells the group, "Count three, two, one, and then I'm going to take the picture." He says, "You get people talking loud in unison, and it makes them feel a little silly so they smile. But they'll all be looking at the camera, and chances are most of the eyes will be open because they're involved in the process."

Borchelt recommends either a neutral background or one that dramatically provides an environment for the group. Distracting backgrounds should be avoided. When Borchelt plans a group shot, he finds out how many people will be in the shot, and then he locates an open space to take the picture. When space is confined, sometimes a vantage point from above — shooting down at a group arranged on a stairway, for example — will open up the view. Another approach is to position the camera low and shoot up. A moderate wideangle lens, like a 35mm, can help when constrained by space.

Borchelt is sensitive to political considerations. He always asks his contact, "Who's most important here? Who are the bosses?" He then weaves people around them.

"A group is like a shoreline," says Borchelt. The photographer pounds at it until it takes the shape he or she envisions. — **Catherine Lange**



The members of the group above, pictured in *The New England's Wheel* (501 Boylston St., Boston, MA 02117), stand far enough apart from each other so as not to block the view of those around them. The photographer has built two groups within one — a pyramid of three at left and a square of four at right. The groups are turned inward. Steps provide platforms on which to build different levels of view.