

Operating a Sustainable, Profitable, and Successful
Photography Business

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Owning and operating a photography business is as diverse as the art of photography itself. There are so many styles, concepts, mediums and genres of photography that there truly is no limit. However, I believe in order to maintain a profitable, sustainable and satisfying business in a creative field, there are some key elements that will keep business owners on track to success.

These tried and true concepts have proven themselves over time and the small businesses that choose to create and sell photography have found them to be the path they needed to meet their personal, business and financial goals. We all know roads have curves and hills and valleys during the ride, however, if small creative business owners stay dedicated to these concepts, their journey will be a much smoother ride with less of the trials and tribulations that can come their way.

This does not mean that there will not be challenges that business owners will confront. Let's face it, shift happens, and we often find ourselves in a situation that we need to modify, simplify or amplify an existing business plan or practice. But that does not mean that the key concepts should be thrown out. It simply means that the key concepts need to be looked over and redesigned to address trends, new technology, and business opportunities.

As I said, "shift happens," so mainstream portrait, wedding and event photographers had to embrace digital photography many years ago in order to maintain a viable business. Most small business owners have to modify their entire advertising plan every few years to attract the next generation of potential new clients. For example, in order to stay relevant in the marketplace and attract the Generation X clients, small businesses had to create websites, blogs and understand the importance of Search

Engine Optimization (SEO). As soon as they mastered that, or at least started to understand it, then along came the Millennials, and it became crucial to understand Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Pinterest, YouTube, Vimeo, SnapChat and every other social media platform that came along. Every single one of these generations usually needs a completely unique marketing and sales concept, however, what they have in common is that there needs to be a concept or brand for them to embrace and desire.

The elements in a small, creative business that do not change should be considered the virtual foundation of the business itself. When a business is built upon these key concepts, it gives the business room to grow with some flexibility and creativity but ensures a base strong and stable enough to create a sustainable business and livelihood in the realm of professional photography.

Moving forward, I will discuss the importance of four key elements that I believe are the mainstays to any successful small creative business, such as a photography business. I will define each concept and explain what each brings to the business and how they assist the business owner to maintain a more profitable, sustainable and successful business. The following key elements are: the importance of branding, creating and implementing a sales plan, photographing for the sale, and excellence in customer service and care.

All successful businesses must have an established brand name with a substantial consumer reach. The businesses need to strive to give platinum customer service 100% of the time and offer unique and custom products. All of this has to be done in the simplest of systems. In today's climate, most of our clients are extremely busy, and, while we need to stay true to the foundation of our business, we need to be

flexible enough to accommodate our clients' busy lives. We need them to believe that we can give them exactly what they do not even know they want, and photograph it to perfection and beyond. Then, it must be delivered with all of the excitement and approval they could ever dream of.

The Importance of Branding Your Small Business

“The definition of branding is the marketing practice of creating a name, symbol or design that identifies and differentiates a product from other products.” (Entrepreneur - Small Business Encyclopedia 2017)

Beyond having a memorable logo, business card, website or social media platform, good branding increases the value of the business giving you, your staff and your clients the exact direction in which you want them to go. Your brand should and will be a roadmap leading your clients and potential clients to the product lines and services you want to sell and offer.

A brand name has been defined as “the symbolic embodiment of all the information connected with a company, product or service. It also encompasses the set of expectations associated with a product or service which typically arise in the minds of people.” (Aggarwal 2018) With this in mind, one can come to the conclusion that you, as the artist, business owner, studio employee, etc. become a big part of the brand and will be identified as the brand itself as your business grows and finds more success. So, your brand is not just a pretty logo. It is everything that you share, create and use to promote your business. This could certainly be your portrait work, your social media or

website blogs, and it is most certainly the partnerships you develop with local charities and like-minded businesses in your market area. Your brand can and will set the tone for so many preconceived ideas right out of the gate. It might be sharing exactly what you would like for them to think about your business, but it might not.

For example, if you want to sell fine art black and white wall installations and your brand is earth tones, giving potential buyers the impression that you are an environmental portrait artist, right out of the gate your brand has caused confusion. Unfortunately, confusion does not usually lead to sales. You have to make sure it is exactly what you want to do and who you are as a creative small business owner.

In today's world, your target client buys a brand first and quality second. Quality is simply not enough. It is so easy for us, as professional photographers, to take for granted that we are creating quality images. We are selling ourselves short if we do not capitalize on the things that set us apart from the competition around us. It is important to establish a unique look or style that makes your images recognizable as a product of your studio business. This will become your studio's brand name.

“If you give consumers a reason to care and feel something about your brand, they have a reason to buy. Most people make purchasing decisions based on emotions, not logic, so create an emotion in your prospects every time they see your brand.”

(Bruce 2016)

The five reasons to turn your product into a Brand Name:

1. A successful brand name demands a premium price and garners greater name recognition. A Louis Vuitton handbag is not necessarily better than any other leather

handbag, but the perception of quality and elegance allows them to be sold at a much greater price.

2. Your client reach becomes greater. As your brand name develops and grows, so will your market area. Clients from outside your area will be more likely to use your services if you have a brand name which has proven desirable to others, and they would be willing to drive greater distances to have access to you and your services.

3. You will stand out amongst your competition. A distinctive photography style and image will be recognizable to those who see your work. This is, of course, your **BRAND!**

4. You will reduce your advertising costs. When you have secured a brand name in your market area, clients will come to you to own the brand name product. This will allow you to forego more traditional forms of advertising, such as direct mail, print advertising, etc. and rely on more word of mouth, charitable marketing or other partnership plans.

5. You will streamline your business. As your brand grows, so will the top products and services that you truly want to sell. This usually means that you are able to shift your sales and camera room focus to only selling those products and move away from selling the lower margin, higher production items that are usually not as profitable, more time-consuming and higher cost items. This allows you to concentrate fully on the products and services you want to sell and eventually cut out all of the leaner products that you no longer want to offer.

“No matter what size they are, the most successful businesses are the ones that have established themselves as a leader in their industry by creating a strong brand.

And, when these businesses focus on building valuable customer experiences, they easily transform customers into brand ambassadors.” (Bruce 2016)

Creating and Implementing a Sales Plan

“A sales plan is an essential tool of any business that functions as a roadmap for your sales team over a set period of time...” (dourated.com 2017) A quality and successful sales plan has two very important components: sales strategies and sales tactics. “A sales strategy consists of a plan that positions a company's brand or product to gain a competitive advantage.” (Gluck 2017) “A sales tactic is any action you take to put your sales strategy into action. It is how you deliver your message to consumers.” (Thibodeaux 2017)

I believe that one of the best ways to start working on a sales plan for a photography studio is to actually start with the products that you are going to sell. First, you want to make sure that your product offerings are in line with the studio brand that you have worked so hard to develop and market. When you look at your product lines, do you offer: a basic, a better, an awesome and a WOW option? This is, in my opinion, one of the most important parts of a successful sales plan. According to Dr. Paul Rodway, “It’s common in commerce to present customers with choices... Most people choose the middle choice.” (Dr. Rodway 2011) So when reviewing your creation fees, products, collections, packages, etc. it is very important to make sure that what you want for your clients to buy is in the middle. Those products need to be in that Better-to-Awesome range. Assuming that you understand your cost of goods and all of your

offerings are priced correctly, these Better and Awesome options should ensure that you hit your average sales with the majority of your sessions.

Of course, you will have some that hit below that average/middle and surprise, surprise you will have some that invest above it as well. However, as a general rule, you should meet your projections and meet your sales goals if you just make sure to have the products you want to sell priced and placed in the middle of your product range. This works with a la carte portrait studios, as well as wedding collections, school packages and even senior portrait collections and commercial work. Whatever it is, make sure you offer them in at least a three-tiered option. I truly believe in that extra or fourth WOW option because there is always the possibility of selling it and it actually makes your middle products seem like less of an investment and they appear to have more value.

The next piece of the sales plan puzzle is to share these products and your brand with your ideal client. You have to first define your ideal client. "An Ideal Client is someone who finds the perfect solution to their problems or needs in the services or products that your company provides. The Ideal Client will be loyal to your company, frequently uses or buys your products or services, and is likely to recommend you to their friends and colleagues." (Sanz 2015) For a small, creative business, the best way to connect with your ideal client and share your brand is to partner with associations, businesses, services, etc. that they patronize. If you can partner with like-minded businesses, charities or organizations that you know your ideal client uses, then you are more than likely to communicate both your products and your brand with that group of consumers in a more authentic and simple way. For example, if you partner with a

realtor that sells homes in an area that you know is a good fit for your family portrait business, you then have a brand ambassador telling their clients that you are the right choice for their next portrait session. Perhaps they gift every new homeowner with a complimentary session to your studio for a family portrait. Hopefully, they can show off their own family portrait in their office that you created. These types of partnerships are golden when they are found. It is very important to make sure that you choose to partner with ones that definitely cater to your target client.

The next part of a solid sales plan is the process and procedure of turning a prospect into a client. This process usually starts with a phone call or email and it is our job to ask some key questions and then truly listen to the answers. We need to understand who they want to have photographed and what they want their finished product to be. Assuming they have a budget that fits within your product lines then you can start developing a photography plan for this potential client. The very next step would be to invite them in for an in person meeting or telephone design session.

Hopefully, we have successfully arranged a convenient time for the potential client to come by and visit the studio. If not, we will arrange a time to chat over the phone and follow up with an email booklet explaining everything. The portrait consultation is one of the most important parts of this entire process. I am a firm believer that communication is the vital element to any relationship. The client/studio relationship is no exception to this rule. We intend to listen and educate the client at this consultation to the best of our ability. This consultation allows the client to explain to me what types of portraiture he/she is interested in. We also ask that the client bring in,

email or text us pictures of their family (if they are not attending the consultation), and any areas in their home where they are considering displaying artwork.

By viewing pictures of the children prior to the sitting, we automatically know whether there are any body issues, facial irregularities, hair and skin color types that we need to take into consideration in the camera room. We always want to be prepared so that there are no surprises on the portrait day. The pictures of their home tell us everything else. We need to know the color schemes that are of interest to them, whether they currently have any other large portraiture or artwork on their walls, the direction of sunlight in their rooms and their overall taste in home décor. During the consultation, we can refer to these facts and design the actual session to complement their space. For example, if they have a very neutral family room with rich brown leather sofas and taupe walls, we would recommend a beach or garden portrait with neutral clothing versus a low-key studio setting. This really lets the client know that we are custom-designing specifically for them and their home.

At the consultation, we also explain to the client that we will do all of the sales and decision-making in person. We discuss general sizes for a portrait or a portrait grouping depending on the spaces in their home and measurements that they will supply. This allows us to quote their creation fee as well as the pricing of the portrait(s) they may purchase. At this time, we may also choose some framing corners that would both complement their home and the portrait that we are planning. The consultation concludes with a very dedicated and well-informed client. They leave our studio with full knowledge of where the portrait will be created, the clothing that should be worn, the approximate size(s) of the portrait(s), the general pricing and several framing options.

The great news for us is that we have practically pre-sold the portrait(s) and frame(s) before they have even been photographed. Also, if the ballpark price is not a comfortable level for them, we give the opportunity right then and there for them to go home and think about what we have discussed. If they are okay with the pricing and excited to get started, they will schedule their session on the spot. If they are feeling uncomfortable with the investment level, they can gracefully leave and decide whether to call and schedule the appointment at a later date.

Very few clients cancel their scheduled sessions, and our portrait averages are exactly where we want them to be. I believe that educating and including your client as much as possible creates a much more willing and committed client. The end result is a happy client and a successful studio.

Photograph for the Sale

Photographing for the sale is one of the toughest concepts for small business owners that are also in a creative field to grasp. At heart, being a photographer and taking beautiful images is why most people open a photography business. Quite often, photographers will go into a session without a true direction. They photograph a little bit of this, a lot of that, and everything they can think of because they are creating art. There is a common misnomer that if you can show your clients a plethora of beautiful images then you will sell more.

However, the point of the session should be to understand what the client wants, photograph those images, and then have some additional poses for them to add-on to

their sale. We need to pick a lane for the session and truly stick with it, meaning listen to what they want and stay on course to create that for them. I am not saying that it is not okay to take some creativity time and create some additional options but I have found when we go too far off the desired path it generally leads to being lost or confused and without direction.

As discussed earlier, a pre-design consultation is essential, as it determines the direction for the photography session. Just because you are photographing for the sale does not mean you have to sacrifice the art or creativity. You can actually do both! The difference with this mindset is just fine-tuning the process and keeping your business on track to sustainability and profitability.

It is very important that all of the notes created during the consultation are reviewed and followed on the day of the portrait. The portrait pose or poses should be taken care of first, and then take some creative liberties. Take a little extra time and create other poses, groupings or looks. This extra 15 or 20 minutes of work will make the sale more profitable. It is crucial to go into the salesroom with several awesome portrait choices as well as other options (up to twenty) for add-on sale products. But the most important piece of all is to share and show what the client asked for first, narrow that down to the top pose(s) and then move on to some of those add-on images and suggestions for purchasing them. Do not start with your favorites, start with what they asked for to avoid the sale getting off track very quickly and confusing the client.

By following this concept, it truly streamlines the sales process. When we ask the client what they want, and give it to them, there is so much less confusion and indecision in the sales process. If there are too many options, the client loses focus in

the sales room and quite often cannot make a decision. Please note that if you give them all of your styles or looks in one session (for example: studio, environmental, color, black & white, etc.) you have eliminated the need to come back to you? It is a much better option to stick to one style or product line per session, and then discuss future opportunities to work together again. Leave them wanting more!

Excellence in Customer Care and Service

Be Authentic. Be Transparent. And Be Nice. This sounds totally elementary, but it is important. Let's face it; most of us do not live in communities that have just too few photographers. Competition is everywhere, and I do mean everywhere. So, we have to mind our customer service practices to the ultimate degree.

Be authentic to who you truly are. Clients will choose you because of YOU, so make sure the person and work that you are sharing is truly a reflection of who you are as a person and an artist. There is not one single person in your community or anywhere for that matter than can do what you do, you are uniquely YOU! There may be others that do the same thing as you but your mind's eye captures their portraits and images as only you can, and only you can work with your clients and give them your own special care and service. So take this USP (unique selling proposition) and run with it, it will truly reinforce with your client that they have made the right decision in choosing you and will certainly share their experience with others.

Make sure that all of your "rules and requirements" are clear and upfront. Do not try to "pull something over on a client." I promise you that this will not fare well for you in

the future. A company's best standards of procedures is to be honest and upfront from the very beginning. You are a small business owner and it is perfectly within your rights to have guidelines and restrictions, as long as your client understands them from the beginning then your experience together will be a lot smoother with very few to any unintended consequences.

And, lastly just be NICE. Say thank you, return phone calls and emails promptly. Take time to write a real thank you note, send a text or make a friendly phone call. Just be nice. It's free, and it goes a long way. In a world full of automated, drive through, drone deliveries, on line ordering we offer one of the most custom and personal products and services around. Take advantage of this opportunity to shake their hand and smile and say, "Thank you!". I promise this will lead to future referrals and business because people want to work with good people, it is part of basic human nature.

In Conclusion

These business concepts might seem extremely obvious and maybe even basic to you, but I find all too often that small businesses choose to not follow some or all of them. I know that they work but I also know that they work to their full ability when all of them are followed together. It is not ever going to be as successful if one picks and chooses when to follow some and when they do not feel like following others. I understand that life gets in the way, we get busy, we "have a feeling" about a certain client, etc., etc., but 9 times out of 10 if I do not meet my expected average sale it is because one or more of these steps was skipped. It really never fails. If I get a little

careless or even lazy and miss something, I will know immediately in the sales room why I need to remain consistent with our plan.

The proper handling of the business brand, the sales plan, the photography session and overall care of your clients are all key elements to creating a successful experience for your customer(s) go together like a recipe. These are the ingredients for a very successful recipe, and if you leave out an ingredient or two, the finished product never turns out the way you expected. So, to protect your finished product or sale, you need to remember to include all of the ingredients each and every time.

Our businesses are as diverse as our photography styles, so everyone has different needs when creating plans for their studio. However, I do believe that taking the time to implement procedures like this will create a profitable and sustainable business. These business building elements will certainly give you the foundation needed to grow a business that can grow and stretch into your vision while staying rooted in success and sound business practices.

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