

Lisa Pritchard

Running a Successful Photography Business

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Running a successful photography business

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Setting Up a Successful Photography Business

Running a successful photography business

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Preface

Running a Successful Photography Business is the definitive business bible for every professional photographer – a one-stop resource covering everything you need to know to make your business a success.

This handy book contains guidance on the key areas of running your business: fine-tuning your brand, attracting new clients and keeping existing ones, costing and producing shoots, professional ethics and codes of practice, contracts, preparing a business plan, operating your business effectively, legal obligations, working with agents and agencies and how to evolve and prosper in this ever changing industry. Everything a working photographer needs to know in order for their business to flourish.

Written from the unique point of view of a leading photographers' agent, the author knows from first hand experience what it takes to survive and succeed as a professional photographer. Authoritative and encouraging, she also provides an invaluable insight into the customer's expectations and needs. Having represented and advised hundreds of photographers over the last two decades, she draws on her extensive network of contacts and experiences, and also includes numerous sound bites and advice from working photographers from all niches of the industry.

The book also contains a goldmine of resources including several invaluable business templates and checklists, an address book and, of course, superb photography.

Following on from the success of her first book *Setting Up a Successful Photography Business*, Lisa Pritchard's *Running a Successful Photography Business* shows you how to raise your game, compete at the top level and get the edge on your competitors. This is the one book no ambitious photographer can afford to be without!



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Introduction

What does it mean to run a successful photography business?

Pinning down the definition of success can be tricky in any creative industry, let alone one with as many niches as photography. Can you compare the success of a fine art photographer to someone who shoots actors' headshots for a living? Does a war photographer think of a wedding photographer as being more successful in business? Or is it the other way round?

Do most photographers even look at what they do as 'running a business'?

In my opinion, the business of a photographer can definitely be compared to pretty much any other business. Whether you work on your own, or have a team of people behind you, I bet you have just the same 'departments' as most other businesses: the factory floor or production department, sales and marketing, research and development, customer services, IT, legal, human resources, accounts. As a professional photographer you need to create and deliver a product that is marketable, price it and sell it, be able to respond to customer enquiries, keep on top of technological developments and the financial side of things, and know enough about business contracts, legal obligations, insurance and shoot logistics so as not to put your business at risk. You might even need to hire and train staff. And to survive you need to consistently offer something that is at least as good as your competitors, with a level of customer service second to none.

Some photographers love the business side of things just as much as taking the pictures; others may see it as a necessary evil.

I have interviewed several photographers for this book whom you will hear from in the coming pages. When I asked them whether or not they thought of their work as running a business, the answers were as fascinating and as varied as the images they capture.

“A new bank manager once asked me for a cash flow projection. To his surprise I told him I could let him have it instantly: “I’m shooting next Tuesday and after that I don’t have another job for the rest of my life.” He suddenly understood the reality of being self-employed! I let him dwell on it for a few moments before reassuring him with:

A business plan is nothing more than a chart, map or plan that one takes when setting off from Southampton for New York in a sailing boat! Of course the route is a straight line. Winds, weather and tides change. The straight line route is a reference or benchmark to see how far you have been blown off course in order to make appropriate modifications.

Preparation, passion, tenacity, determination, skill and experience equipped with a good compass is what gets the sailor across the Atlantic.”

RAY MASSEY, ADVERTISING STILL LIFE PHOTOGRAPHER.

I should probably add that Ray did admit that he does plan for the future, as he always invests any spare money back into the business for equipment, repairs and marketing.

“I spent a lot of time defining my brand and then built my business plan around it but that is just the start; I constantly review my plan and try to develop it further on a quarterly basis trying new ideas to develop it further.”

MALCOLM SNELGROVE, EQUESTRIAN AND ADVENTURE PHOTOGRAPHER.

“No, I never really had a business plan and I don’t really think of what I do as a business. Yes, I realize it’s a very illogical approach! I had always wanted to take pictures even as a child. I believe in doing what you love, doing it to the best of your ability and learning and evolving along the way. I don’t think grand plans work. One has to feel his way. The market is constantly changing. Clients’ demands are a continually moving target.”

GANDEE VASAN, ANIMAL AND PEOPLE PHOTOGRAPHER.

And how did they define success?

“I think ultimately, the only measure that means anything to me is feeling great and authentic about what I do – enjoying every day, and having a business that not only keeps a roof over my head, but is actually sustainable in the long term.”

PAUL CLARKE, EVENTS PHOTOGRAPHER.

“It’s an interesting question because it has changed over the years as my business has grown and developed. In the early days the prospect of having one image published by a photography magazine would have equalled success. But as each goal is reached you change your definition. Now I have two very different audiences – my clients and the industry. Within the industry you need to be recognized by

established brands and for me the Nikon Ambassadorship is the most I would ever hope to achieve. It is different for my clients – I view a successful relationship based on their happiness with the product and the subsequent word of mouth referrals.’

KATE HOPEWELL-SMITH, WEDDING AND LIFESTYLE PHOTOGRAPHER.

‘Bob Dylan said it best: “A man can define himself as a success if he gets up in the morning, goes to bed at night and in between does as he pleases.”

Photographically, to be doing work that is inspiring, enjoyable and which also provides a living is enough for me. I've done extremely well paid work that was a tedious chore, I've done extremely well paid work that was incredibly inspiring and I've done badly paid work that was also inspiring. I just try to avoid tedious chores like work that is badly paid.’

CHRIS FLOYD, PORTRAIT PHOTOGRAPHER.



SIR DAVID ATTENBOROUGH. © CHRIS FLOYD.



I How's business? *A business health check*

How's business?

As a photographer I bet you probably get asked this question a lot. And I'm sure a lot of the time the answer is along the lines of...

‘Not bad, ticking along’

‘All good, pretty busy.’

But how often do you ask yourself, really, honestly, how is your business doing?

The yardstick of success isn't necessarily just being busy, as we've touched on in the preface. You might feel busy, but in reality, you might not feel creatively fulfilled if you don't find your work stimulating anymore. You might love taking the pictures but feel you are running around like a headless chicken dealing with peripheral red tape and administrative chores that goes hand-in-hand with earning a living from your photography. Maybe you are even feeling stressed and that you aren't managing things properly. So just because you feel 'busy', that doesn't necessarily mean you feel, or even are, successful.

In this business it's all too easy to become reactive rather than proactive. You may find yourself dealing with day-to-day tasks without planning for the future. Maybe you have even lost sight of why you became a photographer in the first place. For the majority of photographers I've met, making money isn't the number one priority, although it's obviously a bonus. It could be worth having a look at how you might be able to improve things, giving yourself a bit of a business health check. As well as adding to you enjoyment and fulfillment, it might even lead to a more profitable business.

I've prepared twenty questions to help you get focused, spot any weak areas and enable you to capitalise on your strengths.

1) What is my business?

This seems like a fairly straightforward question but it's amazing how many photographers aren't quite sure. Be clear about what you are offering and who wants to buy it, because if you're not, neither will your customers be.

Family portrait photographer Helen Bartlett has certainly nailed this one.

‘My style of photography has always been clearly defined – I only shoot on location in black and white; I'm not a studio photographer. This began with my father, who took a lot of black and white photographs of my brothers and I growing up: pictures with real memories attached, of the parks we played at, my home and garden, and all of us having fun. I really value the joy they give me as an adult, and I noticed that they didn't seem to date. The fads and fashions which can be common in family photography didn't show up in these images; they stood out as real moments in my childhood. In my own work, I try to give my clients the same thing – natural images that capture their families' different personalities, as well as their homes and the places they enjoy visiting together. It's all about recording children and families as they are.’



‘My style of photography has always been clearly defined – I only shoot on location in black and white; I'm not a studio photographer.’

© HELEN BARTLETT.

Another photographer said to me recently, 'If someone wants a plumber, they aren't going to hire someone who calls themselves a plumber and a plasterer!' It's very important to have a finely tuned brand (see Chapter 3: Fine-tuning your brand).

2) What are my strengths?

This could be related to the type of photography you do or some other skill. It could be something as simple as recognizing you are great with gathering the right crew of people and always create a great atmosphere on set; if so, why not spread the word with some behind the scenes shots on social media?

If you are good at public speaking maybe you are missing a trick and should do a bit more of this. For example, many photographers guest lecture at universities as a sideline. Any public speaking at events – paid or non-paid – can be great publicity.

3) What are my weaknesses?

Recognise your limitations.

Maybe it's time to get a bookkeeper if you are struggling to keep your accounts in order. Are you a bit intimidated by legal jargon and haven't got a set of watertight terms and conditions in place? Maybe it's time to devote some attention to that area (see Chapter 7: Please read the small print: business terms and photography contracts).

Do feel you are stuck in a rut and quoting fees too low? It's rarely a good idea to undersell yourself (see Chapter 5: Pricing).

4) Could I improve my working environment?

I have met several photographers who have stopped working at home and rented a studio or workspace instead. Just going somewhere each day with fewer domestic distractions and mixing with like-minded people can do wonders for your motivation. Or would it suit you to combine your home with a set up that suits your business too – a studio or big enough home office for example?

5) Am I working with the right people?

The people you surround yourself with are crucial to your business, whether you employ them on a full time or freelance basis, work with them as a team or just share an office with them. If, for example, you employ someone to help with office administration and they have an unhelpful attitude when they answer the phone this will not be good for business, so this is another key area to get right (see Chapter 12: Getting help).

‘I have a wonderful PA who helps me so much with the administrative side of things. In the early days, ensuring invoices and money flow as they should can be quite manageable by yourself, but when there are several diaries to coordinate, several hundred invoices a year to track, and dozens of jobs in the sales pipeline at any one time, you definitely need someone to keep an eye on that side of things.’

PAUL CLARKE.

6) Am I making enough money?

Do you know how much money are you making? There are many photographers for whom money isn't the main motivation. However, if you earn your living from photography, you need to get control of your finances if your business is to survive (see Chapter 2: The photographer's business plan).

7) Am I spending too much money?

Should you reduce your overheads? Cash flow, or lack of it, is the number one reason why businesses cease to trade. Are you spending too much on office rent, staff, marketing, new equipment or even on your lifestyle?

8) Am I investing enough money back into my business?

Maybe you aren't buying enough new equipment to remain competitive to your peers or investing enough in your marketing. Probably the best time to have a good think about this and the previous two questions is when you do your annual tax return, as you'll need to work your figures out then.

9) Am I getting new clients?

It's easy to be complacent and just stick with the clients you regularly work with if they are 'paying the rent'. I met a photographer recently whose work was perfect for design agencies but he had only ever worked for PR companies and magazines – this was the work he seemed to get by word of mouth. We tweaked his website, edited an appealing set of images to show design agencies and (obviously with his own efforts) started picking up work from a completely different market.

You don't necessarily have to take such a radical approach as seeking new clients in a completely different area; you could just cast your net into other areas of the country or the world, or just to different businesses. To get new clients it's important to promote yourself in the right way to the right people. If you have something people want to pay for, you just need to let them know about it (see Chapter 3: Fine-tuning your brand, and Chapter 4: Twenty ways to get noticed).

10) Am I keeping old clients?

This is just as important, maybe more so, than the previous question. Even in wedding photography, whilst you'd hope not to be shooting the bride or groom more than once(!), to get repeat business from a venue or a wedding planner gives your business stability. As a photographers' agent I work with several photographers and am in a good position to pin point why some get repeat business more than others. There's usually a fairly obvious answer. Why do you go back and use the same service or recommend it to others, whether a restaurant or an airline or any type of business? Usually because you have got not only what you paid for and had a pleasant experience, but got a bit of extra value for money. As a photographer this could be simply because you are a joy to work with, shoot some fabulous images and always go that extra mile.



‘It shouldn’t ever be about the photographer or their ego, it’s about looking after everyone else and making them shine.’

© PATRICK HARRISON.

Commercial photographer Patrick Harrison appreciates and demonstrates the importance of this, and it has really paid off for him.

‘You’ve just got to be good at what you do, make it look effortless, be confident yet easy to get along with and obviously make a good picture that’s on brief. If you’re photographing people it’s the main part of what you do. It shouldn’t ever be about the photographer or their ego, it’s about looking after everyone else and making them shine. Be yourself.’

Do you make an effort to stay in touch with the clients you have worked for? Most photographers are successful because they nurture relationships (see Chapter 11: Keeping clients).

11) Am I working with clients I don't want to work with?

Might seem like a strange question, but what's the point of working with clients that pay below the industry going rate, ask you to sign unreasonable contracts, take ages to pay, are a pain to work with and don't even give you particularly inspiring briefs. Unless you can address these issues, improve the situation or find one-off justifiable reasons, you've got to ask yourself why you're working with them. Better to invest your time attracting new, better clients.

12) Is my price structure right?

A good indication of this is how many estimates you are converting to jobs. It could be that you are undercharging or overcharging – both are as bad as each other. Undercutting the competition isn't going to do you any favours in the long run. It's much better to acknowledge your value and charge accordingly, as most clients respect that you get what you pay for. You could be giving out a message that you are in a lower league if you are significantly cheaper than your competition. Likewise, if you are quoting higher fees than others, you not only have to have a very good reason for this, but also be confident that your client can see the benefit and justify the extra expense if you are to work with them again or even at all.

Getting your pricing structure right is not just about how much your fee is. It's also how you present your whole pricing package, including your expenses (see Chapter 5: Pricing).

13) Can I improve my customer service?

As is true of any business, customer service is paramount. It's directly proportionate in most cases to how successful a business is. Every form of communication you have with your client is customer service, from how easy your estimates are to understand to how efficiently you deliver final files and everything in between. I once represented a photographer who, before he had an agent to