

Mark's Remarks



By Mark Zucker, CEO/President, Zookbinders Inc.

Your Business Needs to Lose 1,000 Pounds

Last quarter I spent Tuesday and Thursday afternoons hosting a program called "Lunch & Learn." Clients in the Chicago area had an opportunity to voice their biggest business obstacles and learn how Zookbinders can help to grow their sales. Russell Lowe, a professional photographer with nearly 20 years of experience, summed up the major concern: "combating the low prices offered by the new range of 'low-end' newbie photographers." Russell referenced the challenges presented by what I call "shoot & burn" photographers – weekend warriors who are cheap and attractive. For a few hundred dollars they shoot the event and give away the image files; no album is delivered.

The Sobering Statistics

These days approximately 55-60% of all weddings are shoot & burn jobs – this includes some that are shot by full-service photographers. The popularity is no mystery. These vendors can charge next to nothing because they run bare bones operations and they give a new generation of clients exactly what they want – the images! If full-service business models don't adapt to this reality, I estimate that the shoot & burn market-share will reach 75% by the end of 2010 – a scary thought for the full-service pro. Going head-to-head with the shoot & burn competition means tackling the hard truths of pricing, production and policy. Let me explain...

Pricing & Production: Lose 1,000 Pounds

The average starting price for full-service wedding coverage in the United States is approximately \$2,500. Shoot & burn photographers charge as little as \$500. That's a big price disparity. The full-service photographer who wants to stay busy and profitable needs to go on a serious "diet" and shed \$1,000 of waste from operations. Strip the non-valued-added functions from your workflow and you can lower prices by \$1,000 *while maintaining comparable profits*. My "less is more" fitness program entails less shooting, less editing, less designing, less overhead and more time behind the camera and in front of clients.

Too many photographers shoot themselves in the foot with excessive habits. It takes discipline and courage to limit digital capture to a few hundred shots, delegate workflow to those who are most efficient, and move from expensive storefronts to home offices. You price yourself out of the market when inefficiencies and expenses inflate the cost of doing business.

Policy: Release the Grip on Digital Files

With any kind of "weight loss" program comes major lifestyle changes. Higher efficiency and lower prices are only half the battle of the bulge. Shoot & burn photographers are so popular because they make owning the digital files affordable. Parting with the image files is a hard pill to swallow, but holding out hope for reprint orders is unrealistic. The key is to repackage your services to include image files with a basic album order at a competitive price of \$1,500 and make the same profit as you did at \$2,500. Now that we're offering the PB+, you can shave \$200 off of your album costs by substituting them in place of a more expensive Zook Book. When a client is able to spend more for a "full meal" (album and ancillary products like photo books and frames), give them the images AND a disc of the entire album design as a bonus.

When you overcome the obstacle of including the images in exchange for non-valued-added services you turn a negative into a positive. Not only is the client happy and likely to generate repeat business, but you get wider exposure and better endorsements via social media like Facebook than via paid advertising. So talk to your lawyer about a simple agreement that allows you to license images to clients for personal use while retaining your copyrighted ownership.

Full-Service Isn't Dead

Not every client is looking for the low-price option. For discerning clients, sell the benefits of full-service photography and assemble collections of products with different price points (see Pages 16 & 17 of our *2010 Catalog*). As our friend Russell Lowe articulated so well at Lunch & Learn, "Coming up with creative ways to present a product has always been key to [my] success and having the right ammunition like knowing how a product is made, gives me more authority in making that presentation." Clients are unwilling to pay for inefficiency and excess, but they will pay for enduring quality and value-added services if they understand the difference.

Our goal at Zookbinders is to help clients stay viable with resources like Lunch & Learn, compatible products that increase sales, online tools at zookbinders.com, and the periodic kick in the pants from this column. We're here to help you strip out the excess workflow, distinguish how our products outshine the competition, and develop marketing strategies that price you back in the game. The reward is emerging as a healthier company that is "lean and mean" and poised for growth!

Mark

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