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THRIVING as a Photo Marketer

By Mark Zucker

A professional photographer operating in the post-digital age already has 90 percent of what it takes to be wildly successful—a digital camera, a computer, Internet access, a client list and, of course, great images. The missing factor that differentiates mildly successful photographers from wildly successful photographers is the ability to think like a “photo marketer.”

Photo marketers have a keen understanding of how the cyclic nature of professional photography influences client purchases. What this means is that aside from special events that occur in a life cycle, there are also client emotions that follow a life cycle and marketing strategies that have a life cycle of their own. When all of these forces work in concert, they increase sales and client satisfaction with minimal selling involved.

Before we can capitalize on the cyclic nature of photo marketing, it's critical to understand the state of the industry and why your business approach has to adapt accordingly.

A Shrinking Industry

In some respects, professional photography is a recession-proof trade. Consumers will always plan dream weddings and experience

milestones that need to be photographed. Yet, the digital revolution has created new forms of competition for professional photographers, photo labs and album companies. Just look at the impact of “shoot-and-burn” photographers who deliver only image files at a much lower cost than full-service photographers who deliver finished albums. The industry also has to contend with online services that cheapen the value of photographs and “orphan brides” who don’t know what to do with a disc of thousands of images. We’re in a shrinking industry and, realistically, the outlook isn’t improving. As the number of potential wedding clientele decreases, full-service photographers have to find new ways to develop business.

Thinking Like a Photo Marketer

Surviving and thriving in a shrinking industry requires a new way of thinking about how business originates. Many photographers settle for one-shot deals—clients they photograph one time for a special occasion without any repeat business. In effect, you are firing a client when you don’t go back to them for more business. And the easiest way to obtain more business is from people who know you!

If the number of wedding clients is shrinking, it’s only logical that you have to forge enduring relationships with your bridal clients from the outset and turn them into life cycle clients. This is where



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a grasp of your client’s emotional life cycle is essential.

Getting Hired & the Emotional Purchase

Getting a bride to sign a photography contract is not a logical purchase like buying a new camera lens; it’s an emotional purchase. Brides are told from childhood that their wedding day is the most important day of their life. We have to understand that

brides want all vendors to play a part in this wedding fantasy. For guys, it takes longer for this to sink in. No one ever told us our wedding is the most important day in our lives!

Photo marketing needs to reflect the bridal fantasy. When you meet with a potential bride, resist the temptation to immediately show your samples and make a logical sales pitch. First have a conversation and let the bride talk while you listen. Let her tell you about her dream wedding; you’ll learn what is important and which benefits to promote.

For example, the bride’s sister may have hired someone two years ago and still has no album—here’s your opportunity to talk about the benefits of full-service photography versus “shoot-and-burn” and emphasize your efficiency and quick turnaround. All brides have the same problem; they want a good photography experience, but are completely unqualified to make that choice. Help solve the problem for them.

As your client eagerly anticipates the big day, you have a prime opportunity to get better acquainted with them. By proposing an engagement session you help them get comfortable with the photography experience and forge a bond that helps achieve spectacular wedding day results.

Up-selling & the Need for Speed

Immediately following the big event, the client basks in the glow of matrimony and the excitement is palpable. The honey-

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TOP 5 BENEFITS OF DELIVERING QUICKLY

- 1.** The customer will buy more photos, which makes the album design more interesting.
- 2.** The customer will buy more upgrades and ancillary items.
- 3.** You can add over \$1000 in gross sales to a job with a profit margin of over 50%.
- 4.** You move on to your next job sooner.
- 5.** You lower all of your costs while increasing customer satisfaction.

provide that service.

What drives your audience in the ensuing years is pride. There's pride in owning a home, caring for a pet and raising a family. Your job is to remind clients to preserve the joyful moments with enduring images. It's simply too costly to not turn a wedding client into a life cycle client. You invest far too much time getting the business, building rapport, capturing the images and managing the workflow to go without repeat business or referrals.

Marketing Through Life Cycles

One way to remind clients about capturing life's special moments as they occur is to implement a direct marketing

moon period is your best opportunity for up-selling—enticing a customer to purchase more expensive items, upgrades or other add-ons to make the sale more profitable. Parent albums, purse-sized photo books, display frames and fine art prints are all examples of up-sales.

One of the critical elements of successful up-selling is speed. Images are like perishable products with expiration dates—the longer you wait, the more value they lose. Every week that passes decreases the client's excitement about the photographs and the amount they will ultimately spend.

In order to maximize sales, you must produce finished designs and products quickly. Commit to furnishing completed albums within three months of the event and you'll differentiate your business from the competition. You'll be known as a photographer who delivers.

Here's how to incorporate speed: It's all about adhering to a strict production schedule. A few weeks before the event, schedule an appointment for the clients to see their images 1–2 weeks after the wedding. Before you present the images to the client, pre-sort them by category and highlight the ones you recommend. Show 300–400 images, not 2000 images. During the initial presentation, have them pick out the images they want right then and there. Once they select the images (with your help), set a date to view the album design two weeks later, which forces you stay on

schedule. Schedule final edits for a week later. Before you know it you're ready to print and bind.

A Wedding is a Commencement

When you deliver the wedding albums, say “thank you” to the client, but not “goodbye.” A wedding is a commencement ceremony; a lifetime of special moments remains to be captured and you are strategically positioned to



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campaign. An easy and effective strategy for photographers is to send meaningful messages in the form of electronic billboards or direct-mail color postcards. Every month send a visual reminder


featuring a recent image that is broad enough for a target category yet captivating enough to make the recipients take pause.

Sample categories of contacts who will

receive your customized marketing messages include:

- Brides who are prospects
- Brides who hired you pre-wedding
- Brides who hired you post-wedding
- Brides who hired a "shoot-and-burn" photographer
- Families

If you need help with mailing list development, database management, copywriting or layout, hire a professional to handle it. You are responsible for creating images that speak volumes; the logistics can be handled by others. The more personalized your marketing, the more likely you will create lasting bonds with your prospects.

In the post-digital world you are no longer who you think you are. Your business card may say "professional photographer," but to be wildly successful you need to be a professional photo marketer! 

Mark Zucker is the founder and president of Zookbinders Inc., a Chicago-based photo album company serving the professional photography trade. Mark is a frequent speaker who shares his insights on running a profitable business and succeeding in professional photography. For a complimentary copy of Mark's hands-on guide, "Solid Tips for Living in the Post-Digital World," email markz@zookbinders.com and mention this article.

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