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Written by Zookbinders President, Mark Zucker
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Why People Skills Are More Important Than Technical Skills

BY MARK ZUCKER

Sterling Hoffman has nearly 30 years of professional photography experience under his belt, yet it wasn't until he enrolled in sales training seminars that he immediately doubled his sales. He recognizes that being a successful portrait photographer takes more than technical skill. The owner of Sterling Portraits knows that making a good first impression, handling objections and working with a client's budget are factors that make his business click. "Clients buy services from people they like and people they feel are like them," says Sterling.

Sterling admits there aren't a lot of awards, certifications or advanced degrees on his gallery walls—achievements to which many

photographers aspire and think are necessary for career success. Sterling's most striking achievement is his "off the charts" average sale of \$8000 per portrait package. And while he has a passion for photographing people, he finds it much more enjoyable when they pay top dollar for it.

Could it be that too many photographers eke out a living with poor or no sales skills, opting for technical skill building (posing and lighting) over people skill building? It's a given that emerging photographers need to work at honing their craft. However, once a professional reaches a level of "marketability" (the time when clients will pay for those images), the next step is to

immediately work on sales and marketing skills that attract ongoing business.

The typical consumer would be hard-pressed to differentiate between above-average technical skills and superior technical skills. The reality of the profession is that an average photographer with a superior personality will be more successful than a superior photographer with a so-so personality. Whether one specializes in portrait, wedding or other types of "people photography," the ability to help the subject feel relaxed comes down to the photographer's people skills.

Bill Buchelt, owner of Élan Photography, admits his work may not be technically



perfect, but it doesn't have to be. "Our customer experience goal is to make our clients feel like kings and queens," says Bill. "Award-winning photography with a bad experience is like a train wreck. I want every customer to feel they got great value and were treated as if they were Élan Photography's only customer."

A photographer's interaction with potential clients is no different than the everyday encounters between teachers and students, business owners and employees, or waiters and restaurant patrons. Extraordinary personalities are what set one experience apart from another.

Remember the best teachers throughout your schooling? They were exceptional because they related to you, as well as 20 other students in the class on 20 different levels. This is no different than the photographer who captures a child's smile in a way that makes the parents cry or gets the guys in the wedding party to smile in a manner that makes Mom want to place a big order.

Great people skills not only help in building client relationships, but also help attract great employees. When someone takes a job at your company, they're saying, "I want to work with you." Look at any successful business and you'll see a leader with above-average people skills. A business owner's most important job is to attract and hire top talent, and having great people skills is essential in building a quality business. On the flip side, business owners with poor people skills seldom attract great talent, and can never understand why their staff is second rate and always turning over.

So how do you improve your people skills? For starters, think about the people and companies you like to work with. Aside from the value they bring, I bet the attraction has something to do with the friendly way they treat you. Every person, whether they are a client, employee or vendor, wears an invisible sign on their head that says, "Make me feel important." Now, think about the last few clients who inquired about your services: were they made to feel important, or were they an interruption to your busy day?

How does Sterling Hoffman make his clients feel important? He starts by encouraging location photography—because clients feel more comfortable and invest more when the session occurs at a place of their choosing. In addition to shooting formal family portraits, he brings an associate photographer who shoots "behind-the-scenes" images of all the preparation that takes



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"Every person... wears an invisible sign on Their head That says, 'Make me feel important.'"



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place before and during his photo session. Essentially, he's applying a wedding technique of two photographers—one portrait and one photojournalistic—to family sessions. What's so startling is that the candid black-and-white images, which are taken by a more junior photographer, account for 70 percent of his sales!

Bill Buchelt makes his clients feel important by getting everyone's name right. As part of his company's planning session, they ask for a listing of all family members in advance. His photographers must memorize all names by the day of the wedding. This prevents his staff from ever impersonally calling the bride's parents "mother of the bride" and "father of the bride"—something the wedding party remembers months later when purchasing photos from the event.

Making people feel important is critical to anyone in sales.

How do photographers like Sterling and Bill find time for sales and marketing train-

ing? They determined that the best use of their time is creating and selling quality images. "Just because you can print, mount and frame, doesn't mean you should," says Sterling. "Many photographers are losing their families staying up half the night downloading, rotating, color correcting and cropping images." Strike a better balance between your artistic and business skills by hiring staff and vendors to handle the tasks that eat up your time.

Many photographers think of "selling" in a less than favorable light. If you're one of those people, think of selling as giving people what they want. Selling is offering clients great customer service. A waiter's recommendation for a certain entrée can be thought of as "selling" or it can be interpreted as "service." With a good recommendation, everyone's happy.

The next time you're at a photography convention, spend as much time at the sales and marketing seminars as you would at the posing and lighting sessions. After all, when you get paid more for posing and lighting, work is a lot more fun!



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