

RANGEFINDER®

\$5.00/JUNE 2007 ■ THE MAGAZINE FOR PROFESSIONAL PHOTOGRAPHERS

Digital
Issues



PHOTOS THIS PAGE © PETER THOMPSON

avoiding *digital disease*

BY MARK ZUCKER

Mid-year can be a good time to give your business a checkup—a digital checkup, that is. If your sales are stagnant or declining, you might be suffering from what I call “digital disease.” See if any of the following symptoms sound familiar.

Stage 1: Overshooting

In the old days (only five years ago), the average photographer shot 300 wedding images and put 60 images in an album.

Photographers likely sold 20% of what they photographed. Now the average album has 80 images, while the average number photographed is 1000! If you sell only 8% of what you shoot, you waste a tremendous amount of time reviewing, editing and correcting the other 920 images. Your valuable time is best spent on activities that boost your bottom line—acquiring clients, creating images and selling your good work.

Sterling Cecil Hoffman, of Sterling Portraits in Silver Spring, MD, points out that the digital revolution has expanded the



PHOTOS THIS PAGE © PETER THOMPSON

potential membership for OSA—Over-Shooters Anonymous! “With no hard cost of film, processing and proofing, the tendency is to take significantly more exposures than we did with film cameras,” says Sterling.

“Digital can make you a sloppy photographer,” warns Sterling. “Too many digital photographers fail to strive to make each exposure perfect as they would have with a 4x5 film camera. It is easy to take a lot of images, figuring that one of them will be good. The option of ‘FIPS-ing’ the image (fixing it in Photoshop) is leading to a new generation of photographers who do not pay appropriate attention to white balance, exposure, expressions and extraneous things in the image that should have been removed.”

Peter Thompson, of Peter Thompson Photography, shot 155 weddings in Hawaii and California last year. He calls overshooting the “shotgun approach”—taking a lot of photos with the hope of getting some good ones.

Peter likens his photography approach to that of a bar musician. “I’ve practiced, and know the standards by heart. I have a repertoire of photos that I know I must get in the time that I have. By knowing these photos so well, it leaves me with the space to be creative when the moment strikes me,” says Peter. “Get the standards down so they are second nature, and you can free yourself to be creative or do some improv.”

Stage 2: Over-designing Albums

It used to take a few hours to design a nice matted album. Now I hear horror stories about digital albums taking 15–18 hours to design. I’ve compared albums designed in three hours to albums designed in eight hours, and frankly, I don’t see much of a difference. And I don’t think your clients see a difference either. More design time just means more razzle-dazzle, which doesn’t necessarily add any value.

“We use outside professional graphic designers for all our storybook album design,” says Peter. “Even though I studied graphic design in art school, I find that a good professional album designer can add so much more than I could by doing the design myself. My designers see things in my work that I never saw, and the layouts have a quality and dimension that you could never get from template software. Further, I typically pay \$10–20 per page for





PHOTOS THIS PAGE © STERLING CECIL HOFFMAN

it's easy to forget that it's supposed to help you work faster, easier and smarter. As I see it, the photographers who have been the most successful financially—pre-digital, mid-digital or post-digital—are those who are business owners first and digital creative technicians second. They look at digital photography as a business.

"Photoshop is a saint and a devil wrapped up in one really expensive piece of software," says Sterling. "I know it is the Holy Grail for many photographers, enabling them to correct, augment, modify, enhance, blur, soften, slim, enlarge and a bunch of other really cool stuff. I run a portrait business generating more than \$1 million a year, and I don't know how to do the first thing in Photoshop! I have a staff person who is quite good with it, but my business would be the same without her knowledge of the program. Just because you can do something doesn't mean you should. There are smarter ways to work; sometimes it requires letting the professionals do what they do professionally."

Resolve to focus on giving clients what they want without indulging in digital technology. You'll find that avoiding digital disease will make you and your bottom line a lot healthier.



this service, and there is no way I could do it in-house for that kind of price."

Sterling adds, "Special effects and wacky design might be considered new and fresh to some, but to me they are trendy and soon to be dated. Remember the 'trend-setting' wedding images of the bride and groom looking down over their ceremony and the bride and groom in the champagne glass? Ugh. Your albums need to be clean, uncluttered and simple so they look expensive and stand the test of time."

Sterling has an outside designer do all of his page layouts. "Yes, you have less control," he says, "but if the designer is good and experienced, it is less aggravating, probably done better and quicker, and ultimately more cost-effective than doing it yourself. The most valuable use of your time is photographing and selling your work, not designing albums."

Stage 3: Over-buying the Latest and Greatest Equipment

It's easy to get sucked into a buying frenzy. Purveyors of photographic equipment will improve speed and functionality every few months. But unless something is going to dramatically improve your business, don't buy it. Sure, you need a faster computer at some point, but do you need one every six months? Of course not. Be aware that the lure of faster computers and larger monitors encourages overshooting, whereas old technology forces restraint!

"Enough is enough," says Sterling. "I

think it took me an entire career to break the habit of having the latest and greatest of everything out there. If what you have does the job 75% as well as the latest model promises to do, keep the old and move on. If you can honestly say to yourself that the purchase of the coveted new item is going to add significantly to your bank account, your efficiency or your peace of mind, then go for it!"

Stage 4: Overworking Your Digital Workflow

If you're spending more time trying to improve your digital workflow than thinking about how to grow your business, you're suffering from digital disease. Digital has become so all-consuming that

Mark Zucker is the founder and president of Zookbinders Inc., a Chicago-based photo album company that serves the professional photography trade. Zookbinders is a leading manufacturer of mounted albums and image display boxes. Mark is a frequent speaker who shares his insights on running a profitable business and succeeding in professional photography. Contact him via email at markz@zookbinders.com.

