

The Business End Of Wedding Photography

Big Changes In Style And Technology, And How Social Media Changes The Game



With new technology and more savvy consumers, the wedding photography business has seen some big changes in the last few years. The photojournalistic “fad” has turned into an established style. The proliferation of digital cameras has turned everyone’s “Cousin Bill” into a photographer and has pushed the professional to create more and better services for their clients. And

social media has created an entirely new marketing channel.

We interviewed four wedding photography professionals to get their views on these changes and how they market their services today: **Evan Baines** of Evan Baines Photography (www.evanbaines.com) of Nashville, **Katie Clark** (www.kathleenclarkphotography.com) of Laguna Beach (CA), **R. J. Kern** (www.kern-photo.com) of Denver, and

Fritz Liedtke (www.fritzphoto.com) of Portland.

Shutterbug: *What are the biggest industry changes you have seen in the wedding photography business in the last few years?*

Evan Baines: As technology has improved, it has become easier for even a novice to achieve a baseline level of technical mastery with photography. Back in the film era, it took extensive



training and skill just to get proper focus and exposure under wedding conditions, but now these qualities are within the reach of neophytes with point-and-shoot cameras. This has destroyed a barrier to entry into the industry, and as such we have seen a huge influx of new photographers just starting out with their craft and business. Simultaneously, the severely damaged magazine and newspaper industries combined with a challenging commercial market have also led to an influx of experienced photographers from other disciplines looking to diversify revenue streams.

This means that, on the one hand, the numbers and diversity of wedding photographers have created a sort of renaissance in quality, where wedding photography has achieved a level of quality (and respect in the photographic world) that it has never had on such a broad scale. The downside of this is that major increases in the supply of photographers have made it a tremendously challenging market in which to differentiate one's art and business.

Katie Clark: I see changes in the quality of photography, graphic design, branding, and social media. Adobe's Photoshop Lightroom alone has revolutionized the look of photography and the editing process. My photography



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keeps getting better and better, which allows me to keep my edge in the market. Experience is more important now, especially with high-end clients as they want to work with someone who's reliable, is able to work under pressure, and is capable of delivering a stellar final product with good customer service.

Due to digital and the software programs available, wedding albums have become more of a graphic design project than the days of pasting photos in albums. There is much more time spent

doing albums and enhancing photos, which means either more computer time for the photographer or more expense for employees or outsourcing. Business is much more expensive to sustain due to the amount of postproduction needed.

Branding your wedding photography business has become essential for marketing and needs to always be fresh, due to the fast-paced changes in consumer trends. I see more professional logos, websites, and blogs than ever before. Small businesses can appear

larger and more successful with this use of graphic design and branding.

Clients are savvier, largely due to social networking. They see limitless examples of possibilities for photographic style and finished products. They compare, shop around *in minutes* (emphasis added by author) and have very high expectations. They post their photos and album designs on Facebook and get feedback from all of their family and friends. Sometimes this makes it more challenging to please them. On the positive side, praise and recommendations travel quickly, which can spread the word about your business like no other method of advertising can.

R. J. Kern: Photographers who will be the big names in three years might be picking up a camera for the first time today. That's exciting! The technical learning curve has become easier, but differentiating your marketing has become even more difficult. Complacency in a particular mind-set or style will make you a dinosaur. Reinvent yourself each year by exploring new lighting techniques and shooting styles. Either you are getting better, or worse. There's no such thing as hitting a plateau.

SB: Regarding marketing tactics, what works best for finding wedding photo clients, given the different marketing tools available?

Fritz Liedtke: Having tried most methods, I can say that print ads, e-mail, and direct mail have never worked well for us. As a result, I've spent probably \$100 per year on paid advertising the past several years, and done quite well with that. Perhaps 80 percent of our work comes from web searches, most of them from Google. So the Google ranking of our website is clearly #1. Second for us is referrals from other vendors, so networking is key. Third for us are referrals from past clients. Facebook has actually garnered us a number of jobs, but probably ranks fourth most productive as a marketing tool.

Katie Clark: Websites, e-mail, social media, and phone calls are at the top of my list. We get the most inquiries via e-mail and our website and the phone rings every day with new business. Getting back to people immediately is essential as many now expect answers





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within a few hours even if you are off work or on vacation. At this point in my business, I think print ads are a little too expensive for a questionable return. I do think the magazines that have online ads are a better deal.

Personally, I have not had much luck with direct mail either. Building relationships is what is most important for me. You should not underestimate word of mouth. Referrals account for more than half my business. Prior to the Internet, it was the only method I used for business and this worked great for years. I am a preferred vendor for many of the hotels and venues in Orange County, which keeps the phones busy and gets our brand in front of prospective brides every day.

I also network with wedding planners and coordinators, but find that these relationships have become harder to maintain now than they were five years ago. These planners and coordinators have more photographers to choose from and the clients are also doing their own research.

Only in the past five years have I had to do more marketing. This is due to the influx of many new photographers and the infinite online availability of new work out there.

Evan Baines: I think that word of mouth is almost always the most effective marketing, but in terms of paid advertising I think that some of the more targeted marketing strategies like Facebook's ad program are an exciting way to use "smart bomb" ads to target very specific types of clients for wedding photography.

R. J. Kern: I find marketing is best done when you humanize yourself and share who you are on your website blog. Be authentic. No one else can be you and that's *your biggest asset in this business* (emphasis added by author). Hands down, this is the single most effective marketing strategy for me.

Share and help others in your industry by writing tutorials to benefit others. Not only will that make you the expert, but there's sustaining value that helps others. Be generous with your talents to help develop sustaining relationships. Participating in fundraisers or charity benefit events, for example, can help



open doors and you never know what will come back to you in work.

The temptation at the beginning is to not specialize and take on any job that comes your way. Realize you are not the perfect photographer for everyone. Also, if you receive an inquiry for a date which you are booked, call on another photographer friend who you trust does good work. Ask them if they are available first, and then get back to the client quickly. You become the expert and you never know if one of their friends ends up booking you for another date simply because you helped out the previous client.

Know who your competition is and be genuine friends with them. About 25 percent of my bookings come from referrals from my wedding photographer friends, my competition. I focus on weddings, but if a potential client comes to me looking for maternity or senior portraits I will generally refer to a friend who specializes in this kind of work. Happy clients are the best form of referrals.

Finally, learn how to use your Facebook page to its maximum effectiveness. For example, “tagging” your clients on Facebook creates viral marketing that people love!

SB: What recommendations would you make to a photographer looking to make a career move into this field?

Katie Clark: Learn traditional etiquette: how to dress, how to present yourself in a refined setting. It’s okay to do some shoots for barter or a little less money in the beginning to help build your portfolio and relationships, but when you are ready to charge full price stand your ground and create value around what you do. Learn good office organization, money management, and keep your overhead as low as possible. Get out there on Facebook and social media, create a great website, and keep the same contact information for as long as you can. I have had the same phone number for 15 years!

Fritz Liedtke: My answer will sound jaded, but it is honest: *don’t do it without a business plan.* With

the advent of digital, everybody is now a photographer, and the number of photographers vying for business is nearly astronomical. Even before the economic crash, many established photographers were struggling to keep their heads above water. We at FritzPhoto continue to thrive, for which we are grateful, but if you are looking to move into the crowded field of wedding photography, consider very carefully the business you are getting into.

I get at least an e-mail or two a month from a photographer who just moved to Portland. Unless someone has an excellent plan, and can wear all the hats necessary for running their own successful business, then most likely these people will be dabbling in photography and starving, or looking elsewhere for a real source of income. There are a lot of ways to make a living as a creative; jumping into the most crowded field without a plan or a lifeline probably isn’t the most prudent business plan.

R. J. Kern: Keep a day job until you’ve



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reached the point where you can no longer afford not to move into full-time, meaning the extra time limits your ability to build the photography business and get your work done effectively. Learn to do what you do best and delegate the rest. Most wedding photographers excel at shooting, but fall short in bookkeeping, postproduction image editing, taxes, print fulfillment, or album design.

Attend at least one smaller conference in your first year of business and focus on understanding the work of at least 10 other photographers. Pick and choose

what they might do which is most suitable for your style. Do not take a solo workshop from someone you just admire, which might have a tendency to influence a copycat style, one that does not reflect who you really are and the art you are meant to create.

Adopt a solid workflow that allows you to shoot more and spend less time in front of the computer. I strongly suggest taking a daylong workshop covering an efficient workflow, which seems to be the bottleneck for most photographers. Jared Platt's "Lightroom Workshop" taught me how to complete postproduction on a

wedding in six hours.

Evan Baines: Photography is a hard career and it's only getting harder. The fact of the matter is that you're going to have to make sacrifices in your lifestyle in order to have a career in photography. If it's what you love, then you'll find a way to make it work, sacrifices and all. But if you are considering entering this industry, enter it with open eyes and a willingness to do whatever it takes. I'd also strongly encourage anyone considering a career in photography to take some business classes as well. Most photographers fail at the business more than at the photography. 🌀