

Client Acquisition Sprint

I was recently asked how to find clients by a new photographer making the leap into professional work during this crazed pandemic. It's tough any time, but at this time it is even harder.

Here is what I told her expanded for those of you trying to get going in these weird and strange times:

Finding clients has always been one of the hardest things to do as a freelance artist, in fact, I have written and produced an entire course on just that process.

And no, I am not going to send you that link and I am not going to try to sell it to you. You asked for advice, not a sales letter so here we go.

To start out, I will say congratulations to you for being brave enough to enter this crazy field. There are more than a few nay-sayers out there that will lecture you for your recklessness, and berate you with stories of failure, impossibilities, and challenges no mere mortal could possibly overcome.

That's them. They have already decided that the path is too hard and they don't want you to head up and make them feel bad for not trying. Forget 'em.

As a coach, I will often ask photographers who they are shooting for, or where would they get their clients and they shrug and say they don't know. I ask them who would use their work, and again they have no answer.

We're going to fix that.

Finding clients is a sort of a process, a deliberate and never-ending adventure that can be as difficult or as easy as you want it to be. Depends on work ethic, good decisions, and your appetite for pain. (Just kidding... sorta.)

What you must do is embrace the process, keep focused on working the plan, and never ever compare where you are to anyone else or – even worse – where you THINK you should be. Expectations can become like giant anchors tied around feet, dragging you slowly into the deep and murky abyss of self ... sorry, my bad.

Leave expectations in the dust and just do the work.

I am going to give you a basic outline to build upon to find clients in your area.

First we must define your work with your portfolio. It's not just a bunch of pretty photographs, it is YOU; your style, your aesthetic, your purpose. A collection of images won't cut it, you want to have a "body of work". What that means is that the work you show defines your vision, your aesthetic, and your visual approach and has congruity and cohesion in those areas. A random collection of images is just that, where a portfolio – a body of work – shows the artist's output in a more refined way.

Make sure the work is up to the best technical and creative standards. Ask yourself about each and every image:

Could anyone, I mean "anyone" have taken the shot you are about to take? I mean, your neighbor got a cool entry level DSLR for their birthday last week and they are standing right next to you and getting ready to make the same shot. Can they make it?

If the answer is yes, you got some work to do. Nobody wants to see the same ol' same ol' stuff that complete newbies can do.

You have to infuse your work with YOU. Your POV, your aesthetic, your attention to detail, your push for the absolute highest production values possible. You are putting yourself into the middle of an industry that has incredible talent with incredible passions and you got to bring it. Bring it hard!

Your subject matter matters. What do you shoot?

The subject matter you choose is one of the most important criteria for finding out who may be potential clients for your work.

Are you shooting food, or still life? Are you shooting portraits or 'fashion'? Do you spend time on the road making travel photographs and capturing the lifestyles of people all over the world? Do you trek through the wilderness carrying a heavy view camera searching for a tiny sliver of magic (hey Ben ☺)

The next question, and it is a logical one, is what do the clients want to see? Unfortunately, it is NOT the correct question.

The correct question is how do I make images that other people want to see? What do I bring to the process, the image, the presentation that would set my work apart and make it something that would inspire, surprise, or entertain the viewer... no matter who the viewer is.

Never ask yourself what "they" want to see because there is no 'they'... only individuals. One art director may gush over your portrait work, while another simply yawns. An editor at one publication thinks your approach to minimalism works perfectly for their publication where another editor at a different publication will not even be interested enough to open your emails.

There is no "they" think. There is no 'right way' to get a client to love your work. There is only YOUR WORK. It must be authentic and bring something unexpected and new, or at least be interesting enough to garner attention. Not from everyone, but from someone.

Shoot what you love, shoot what matters to you. Shoot YOUR portfolio, not theirs. Of course you must be aware of what is happening in the industry, trends, fashions and such, but that can only have a small bearing on what YOU want to make.

Make sure you have a well designed website. I prefer to use Wordpress, but then I have been a code tinkerer for 30+ years. If you do not want to mess with the plugins, updates and the other things that come with Wordpress, grab a website from Fotofolio, Square Space, or Format and upload your images.

Just make sure you show those images big.

Choose a design that is clean, modern and without a bunch of frilly stuff. The goal is to show the images to the prospective buyer. If the site is clean, easy to navigate, and full of EXCELLENT photos, you make your statement.

Once you have it loaded up get other eyes on your portfolio.

Edit your portfolio savagely. Take no prisoners and do not let the 'baggage' of what you went through to shoot it influence whether or not it is exactly the shot you want to show. If you do, you let in images that need explanation, context, and even spin. Great if you are there to discuss it, sucks when you are not there, and bottom line... no one gives a damn.

The portfolio must represent your best work, with the highest possible production quality you can deliver. Don't worry if it is not as high as someone else's, we all have to start somewhere and constantly work on it. As long as the highest possible is your goal, you're good.

Look, I get it. Other photographers are the easiest people to get to look at your portfolio. Other photographers are the LAST people I would get a critique from. For oh, so many reasons.

Find an art director, creative director, or portfolio coach and PAY them for a complete review. That may run between a few hundred bucks to a grand, but it is absolutely worth it. A sharp (non-competing) eye can help discover where you need help, what may be tripping you up, and how you can create work to fill the gaps that may exist.

Other photographers see photographs, AD's, CD's, editors, and consultants see results and possibilities, not thinking about how they would have made that shot. Ya know.

Advertising agencies have focus groups. CEO's have consultants. Be professional and get some help from people who have only your best interest at heart.

Your portfolio should now show what you want to do, and how you want to do it.

Now we have to identify who in the world would want the work you are putting out.

We must focus on those potential clients who could or would possibly use your work. Think traditionally, and think outside the box. Far outside in some situations.

Let's say you have a portfolio of food, foodie lifestyle, and interior design. (I am only interested in three categories and you should be too. If you have more, you look like you are either desperate or not very focused. Neither is going to make you a great hire, are they?)

Let's use the example of food.

We begin to identify what I call channels, you can call them what you want.

Channels who use food photography:

- Restaurants
- Restaurant supply companies
- Restaurant remodelers
- Health practitioners
- Hospitals
- Nutritionists
- Food Importers
- Farms (farm to table)
- Cooks (cookbooks/blogs)
- Food Wholesalers
- Magazines (food, lifestyle, home, health, adventure)
- Graphic Designers (they can have multiple clients drawn from the above list as well)

I am sure you can come up with another half dozen if you put your mind to it.

Stop now and write down two more. Think way outside of the box if you wish.

These are the kinds of companies, businesses, and clients who would use food photography.

Already we have some clarity... we can see a list of possible clients.

But we gotta get real nitty-gritty now. Of course these channels make sense, but we do not sell to channels, we sell to individuals.

Finding the individual clients.

Go to Google Maps and put your company or studio in the middle and make the map cover about a 20 mile radius. Or your town in quarters... whatever manageable area you want to work with.

Enter "graphic designer" in the search. (You will eventually do all of your channels, so this is just an example of one.)

What comes back is a lot of designers in your area. To be sure, these are not ALL the designers in your area, just the ones registered with Google. You will have some more digging to do at the library, your business news like "the book of lists" and others. We are only looking at one research arena.

Click on each designer's link and visit their website. Do they use photography or are they mostly logos? If they use photography, you have just found a possible client.

Hit their contact page:

Address for direct mail.

Email for sending them an emailer (usually).

Phone number for calling them for a meet.

Many times companies will list their staff and you can get the names of art directors, editors, creative directors, directors of marketing and more. (BTW, do not hesitate to call them and ask who to send your mailers to. They are always looking for new talent.)

You can take their names over to LinkedIn and Facebook and find out more about their company, what they are personally interested in and lots more.

From not knowing who would buy your work to a name of a person who would.

Empowering?

You betcha.

Do this with every channel.

It isn't always easy, and it isn't always fun. In fact it is rarely fun, but it is necessary.

Build your marketing list with your blood, sweat, and tears so you can appreciate the work that goes into creating a dynamic small business.

(Hey Don... dude, I can buy a list. Why would I do this much work when for only a few bucks I can have access to a ton of names?)

Good question, squints.

Yes you can buy a list.

Anybody can buy a list. That list gets hit a lot.

A lot lot.

You are just another emailer from the list company slamming them with stuff.

When you build your list, and compare it to the ones you can buy you may find (will find) that you have a heck of a lot more names on yours in your area than does the purchased list.

There is nothing wrong with buying a list, but just beware that thousands of photographers have access to those same names.

I am not saying to not, I am telling you some facts so you can make up your mind which way may make more sense for you starting out.

Once you have your list - at least 30 names – you can begin to market out your work.

E-mailers: One per month at the most, one per quarter at the least.

One to three images per email. A 'tag line' and a 'call to action' as well as all contact info.

You want to drive them to your website.

Direct mail: postcards, brochures, cool little visual items: Once per quarter.

Double sided, 2 – 4 images total.

Packaging (envelope) can be the difference between being seen and being tossed.

Tag line, call to action, contact info (website/email/phone)

Direct mail: big piece – 24 page magazine and such: One per year.

Must have a theme or something to connect the images. Random 'portfolio' shots do not get as much play or interest. "Portraits of Commuters" gets more interest than random shots you have done over the last 4 years.

Contextual copy, tag line, contact info. Tell them a bit about what they are looking at and then invite them to your site to see more.

You do have more, right?

Your goal is to get to about 250 to 300 good solid leads to market to. If you are in a rural area, you will probably want to have about 400 names. More of a regional reach.

You never stop building the list, but you will be pulling ones out that are not responsive and adding in new in order to keep it manageable.

Now create a campaign* and stick to it. I have a lot of information on creating a clean and easy to manage campaign here: <https://www.lighting-essentials.com/email-campaigns-and-templates/>

WHAT ELSE DO YOU DO?

Are you also a writer?

Designer?

Digital Artist?

Art Director?

Food Stylist?

Expert Retoucher?

Do you do motion?

(NOTE: you'd better. If you are not into motion now, make that a priority. NOW!)

Do you do anything special? If so, let them know.

Clients want to work with people who do MORE with less.

As you market deliberately (three touches per day...

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=InbNtMXn_2A&t=1s

) you will begin to track who is responding, who got what email and which mailer and how are they responding. Are they clicking through? Are they looking at your portfolio? Which images are being viewed? (Google Analytics is going to be a great friend for you as you take control of finding clients. If you do not know how to use it, take a class at Lynda

(<https://www.lynda.com/search?q=google+analytics>) or where ever you can find a good tutorial.)

With this system, you can begin to develop a strong list of potential clients. It is not magic, it is not a secret, and it is not something that no one has ever done before.

But it sure as heck works.

Additionally, here are a few additional ideas to build your business fast.

1. Once you get to 100 names on your list, set a date 6 months out. Between now and that date you are going to take every job that comes your way. With the exception of being taken advantage of, you are going to shoot small, medium, and large budgets and do them as if they were \$10,000 gigs. (By the time you get to the 6 months mark you will already be doing fairly well – IF you follow the system.)
2. Be aware of trends. Visit the best rep sites and make notes. What is happening in the big markets, and what are you seeing in the way of style, subject, and treatments? I recommend workbook.com, at-edge.com, and heatherelder.com for getting a handle on the best work out there. Or at least getting a start on finding it.

3. Initiate gigs. Be proactive.

Tell clients what you think they need. Pitch an Instagram library shoot, let them know you are ready to redo their corporate brochure. Show them an example of what you have in mind. STOP sitting by the phone hoping and waiting and wishing... get up and get it started.

4. Help other small business.

Being in service to someone who needs help can define us as people. There are a lot of companies and small businesses out there hurting due to the covid pandemic. If you can be helpful, create something for them that can help get them going again, I recommend you do it. With a smile and a wave.

At this point in time, we need to be as deliberate as we possibly can be. Wasted time is worse than wasted money. A true system that can help you find clients is one that makes sense, can be repeatable, and doesn't blow through your resources like a hard wind.

I hope you take this system, tweak it a bit to work for you, and find some folks who need the work you do.

Good luck and good hunting.

Additional Resources

MINIMAL VIABLE BRAND for Photographers

This is a free workshop to help you put together the materials you must have to market yourself in any region. <https://www.lighting-essentials.com/mvb-1-minimal-viable-brand-overview/>

"In The Frame"

A weekly newsletter for emerging photographers. I try to get them out each Sunday and fill it with real, actionable information to help creatives manage their crazy.

<https://mailchi.mp/steelid/intheframe>

I am a creative coach and mentor. If you are interested in jumpstarting your business, or finding out why you may have stagnated a bit, check out what I offer here.

<https://dongiannatti.com/>

I have shot in major markets on both coasts, as well as my hometown of Phoenix, AZ. In 1992 I started an ad agency and by 2000 we were the third largest agency in Arizona. After having spent a lot of time on both side of the desk – as creative director and a photographer, I bring a unique view of the business we call professional photography. I have worked with many photographers both in the USA and Europe, and have helped them build their brand and their business. I have only one goal and that is to watch them succeed beyond their expectations. I currently teach, write, and make images in the great US southwest. You may occasionally find me on a motorcycle somewhere in Wyoming.