

# **Ten Pricing Strategies for Photographers**

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# Ten Pricing Strategies for Photographers

Knowing how to charge for a photo shoot is as important as what to charge.

There are many questions that must be answered before a number is thrown out there on paper.

1. Who is it for?
2. What is it for?
3. Where will it be used?
4. Are there liability issues?
5. Who is in charge of the creative?
6. Will there be client representation at the shoot.
7. Who makes the final decision?
8. What is the expected budget?
9. Will there be ancillary uses of the image?
10. How many images are expected?
11. What are the payment terms?
12. Are usage rights in consideration?
13. Who will approve the talent, location, and other choices that must be made?
14. When is the job to be executed?
15. When are the final images to be delivered?
16. Will the work be embargoed, and for how long?
17. Who will be in charge of the talent?

And so many more.

Knowing this, and seeing the brief (their idea of what they want, when they want it, and how it is to be delivered), can help you make intelligent bids.

And intelligent bids are the ones that win.

Let's start with a universal truth. A digital photograph costs nothing. Nothing to make, nothing to store, nothing to transfer, and nothing to see. Before you hit the computer and spit out your soda, I am obviously not talking about the gear and lenses and lights and more... just the making, storage, and presentation of the image.

In the days of film, there were costs involved in the very creation of the image. Film, processing may have been a little per image, but it added up pretty quickly with a roll of film, taking it to the lab, and picking it up... there were costs to making that image... and the tools, gear, and lights still had to be included.

But, we all know that it isn't that simple either. In film days we took the film to the lab, ran a snip test, gave the lab instructions, and then picked up the processed film. Done. All of those things were a cost item. Dinero, mi amigo. Hard, cold cash.

These days we shoot the images, take them off the cards, archive them on two different drives, make additional backups, process the images from RAW to some sort of raster image, clean the images, set the white point and black point, color correct, sharpen and add contrast to the flat digital file. (Frankly, I sorta miss the old days sometimes and not miss them at all on others... ya know.)

So in reality, while the click of the shutter isn't a cost item, all the peripheral time knowledge, equipment, and constant updating of skills do have a cost to it.

Most sophisticated clients know that. A few don't. And that can lead to problems when establishing a budget or defining a job.

Another problem with establishing a more professional working environment is the fact that a photograph can be purchased for about \$3... if you don't want to get the free stuff available everywhere.

Places like Shutterstock and iStockPhotos offer images for very cheap rates. And the royalty-free images available for a few bucks each can range from OK to some pretty impressive photos. I know a designer who killed a 2K photo assignment when she found an image she was looking for on a royalty-free site for \$5. Run it through Photoshop and she was good. It was a really good cover too. She saved her clients \$1500 and was a hero. Yeah, think about it.

So with some clients, an image should cost about nothing or maybe a few bucks.

Other challenges can be with unsophisticated clients, unrealistic expectations, false assumptions, post-project 'surprises', lack of paperwork, lack of business skills, the desire to simply make photographs, and the dearth of bad information so readily available.

Let's look at 10 ways to deal with the challenges, and develop some strategies for working through them.

#### #1 Pricing Rates

The client doesn't want to pay the price you want to charge. That is fair, you know. No problem. You have to make a choice at this point. Take the lower fee or let the

client walk away. In negotiations, there always has to be the option to walk away - and feel good about it.

One thing to remember is that not everyone is your client. If you are doing day rates for product at the midlevel point of \$2500 and meet someone who wants to pay \$400 you know they aren't your client. Let them find a photographer who will do it for \$400. Wish them well and mean it. Not everyone can afford \$2500 for their product for a lot of reasons. I have no animosity toward them.

I want a Toyota Sequoia. If I walk in and tell them that \$85K is way out of my budget, but I can do \$15,567 would they negotiate or look at me with a simple smile and show me the door. We shouldn't be any different.

I hear some professionals complaining about "Craigslist Photographers" or amateurs stealing their business and shake my head. Sorry, they are not stealing any work from professional photographers... not the pros I know anyway. People looking for "CL" photographers are not looking for pros who charge pro rates... they are NOT the pro's clients.

Negotiations for pricing may be a part of our work day to day. I can always negotiate some things, but I do it from a power position and I won't negotiate away my fees without getting something in return from the client. I feel that when I give a price, it should be the price I need to get. Not a guess or a whim, my best price that came with consideration of the clients needs and what it would cost to produce that image. I don't "make it up" and see what the client says...

Client: "How much for 3 shots of a dancing cow? I'm sending layouts."

Me: "Do you have any sketches or idea boards for what you want?"

Client: "Yes, we have the idea boards for you to look over."

Me: "Cool, I specialize in waltzing bovines. I will look at your creative and get back to you."

Two days later: You have spent a couple of hours and figured out what you need to do the layouts correctly with the right amount of excellence.

Then I carefully put the bid together with all of the needs to make it a great shot.

Client: "Got your bid for \$3500, and it seems quite thorough. But we only have \$1500 in the budget. Can you do it for that?"

Me: "Sure... that \$3500 thing was just some smoke I was blowing up your... well, anyway, I don't really have a clue so yeah, sure, \$1200 is great."

Nope. Don't ever, ever, ever do that.

Ever.

Me: "\$1500 is not enough for what you want with these layouts. There is no way to get those shots to really rock with that level of budget. Let's see what we can trim out to get to your price."

Then trim out stuff from the brief that may allow you to charge less for those line items. If they cannot trim, and you know that the image cannot be done for under

\$3500 with the costs involved with you making money... then you have to walk away.

There is no other option if you want to build your business and brand.

Every top shooter I know knows how to walk away when they cannot do their best work.

And know that someone will probably do it for \$1200. That has no reflection on you. They found a way to do it, or they did a bad job of it. But you cannot look back at those projects and second guess.

## #2 Line Item Bidding

Line-by-line project bids give you the option to negotiate. Single-price bids make it seem like the price was arbitrary and is all your profit. Line by line is easier to defend and negotiate with.

Shooting Fee: \$1200

Usage Rights: \$500 (Based on the additional usage on a music CD called "Cows Rap Broadway")

Assistant 2 days: \$250

Location Rental 2 days: \$250

Trained cows 2 days: \$600 (\$150 per day per cow)

Stylist: \$200

Props: \$200

Food: \$200

Incidentals: \$100

Total is \$3500.

And there are many layers in that bid to negotiate down - with client concessions.

Except #1... the first one. Your fee.

That number is cast in stone.

The only way that number changes is if the brief changes to correlate.

For instance, the client decided they only need two shots instead of four.

I rarely discount my fee, but sometimes there are conditional circumstances that warrant it. Those times are personal for each of us.

## #3 Challenge of Image Quality

I read a book back in the day. It has stayed with me. "Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance" which concerns itself with the term "Quality". I won't even try to synopsis it here, but take a day or so to read it.

Quality means something different to different people. Some people will look at an Avedon and think that it is simply a black-and-white picture of some old dude, and

others will see a masterful image created by an artist.

If your client is one of the former, no amount of 'educating' or arguing will convince them differently. If the client cannot tell good work from bad, walk away... you will have no relationship with this client. You will be only the price point that brings them pics. And that price point will diminish over time.

#4 Client Can Always Get Good Images Cheap

Yes.

Yes they can. Clients can get just about anything cheap.

But not from you. Got it.

Good.

And there's nothing you can do about it. So keep your eyes on your prize, not theirs.

Remove the whining, now. Just accept this and be done with it.

Bid according to your value proposition, not to your clients.

Thanks for reading In The Frame! This post is public so feel free to share it.

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#5 Small Jobs Pay At the Shoot and All Jobs Get an Advance

You are not in the banking business.

You are not in the credit business.

You are a photographer. You have bills to pay, and expenses to take care of. These days, credit is a lot harder to get. You are not able to float too many of these before you end up with a cash flow problem.

In my studio, \$800 or less is never billed with a deferred payment (like 30 days or 45 days or... 90 - 120 days... hey Ad agencies... yeah, talkin' about you guys.) They are paid at the shoot or in advance.

And speaking of advances... I get one on every job I do unless it is with a client who has a great track record with me. Most of the clients I work with expect it and are ready to pay the advance.

#6 No Surprises at Shoot or After Shoot

Going along with the above, surprises are never good. And there are two forms of surprises... the ones that clients pull on you and the ones you pull on them.

Both suck. For you and for the client.

Clients can surprise you with the old "By the way, since you are here already, could

you go ahead and get a couple of shots of . . .” Happens all the time. And now you have to be either accommodating or a jerk... neither of which will help you put money in your pocket.

Clients don't like surprises either. “Sure, I'll shoot those for you...” and then billing them for it later is not the correct way to do it either. They thought they were getting something they had paid for and you assumed that they knew they had to pay for the additional images.

There's an old saying about assuming anything. Ya know.

I have paperwork that details everything that will be expected, so when I hear the question, “Can you do this since you are here already...?” I pull out the change of work order with a smile and ask if the person is authorized to make the changes to the work order, project, or job and we make the changes.

I add additional fees extra for the extra shot.

They sign.

Or, uh, they don't because they don't have the authorization.

Either way, it is OK with me.

The key is knowing on both sides what is expected from both sides. My paperwork includes the shot schedule, peripherals needed, a line-by-line itemization of fees, what will be delivered, and what the images can be used for. It is that easy. I do it with paperwork and agreement.

Both sides agree to the deliverables.

#### #7 Shooting for Free

Well, that seems strange for a post on pricing, but sometimes shooting for 'free' can get you access to clients you may not have access to, provide a powerful image for your portfolio, or get a lot of publicity for your studio.

Pro-bono work for children's charities is something I do. And I do photography and design for causes I believe in and will do some good in the world.

I will say that I don't shoot for 'free' in the strictest sense of the word. I shoot for me. If I am shooting without compensation or money, then I get full creative control.

If I am shooting what they want me to shoot, then that is a job. And it is a take-it-or-leave-it thing for me. I will either get something I want for my book, or I will not do it. Simply the way I work.

I had way too many pro-bono's go south creatively because the concept or the execution was not up to par. I have only rarely had someone pass, but that again is OK with me.

Some pro-bono clients have led to some pretty big jobs for me. Make-a-Wish's Annual Report led me to three others that paid very well. I got to shoot Ali on a pro-bono for St. Vincent DePaul and that was like a dream come true. Twice actually. I have met astronauts, authors and heroes because I was doing something for charities. I wouldn't trade it.

But even on pro-bono shoots, I have my paperwork in place.

#### #8 Brand Strategies for Photographers

Being well known means charging more. Fame can help get the fees up. And, no, I am not talking about rock-star fame... or top-of-the-heap-everyone-knows-him fame... just some branding.

And that brand comes from style, marketing, promotion, word of mouth and referrals. It is elusive and provocative. It can be something that one struggles with or something that just seems to flow easily. For some, personal marketing seems icky, and others think that it means being someone they really aren't.

If you get known for shooting bands, and you shoot them in a creative, personal sort of way, that can start to lead you to your style. Branding that style means that everyone in the whole universe knows you did those shots. Marketing means getting the word out.

And that takes application and commitment. Work on a marketing plan to get that information out. Keep your rates at the position of your work. Shooting small local bands for \$200 will brand you as a \$200 shooter. Charging more and shooting less may brand you as a \$1000 dollar band shooter.

Who will the band choose to shoot their work when the chips are really hitting the fan, and they need an image for a very important appointment with a recording company. The guy who shoots all the bands for a couple of hundred or the guy who charges more because the work is WORTH more.

If you don't value your work, no one else will. Expensive attorneys must be better than cheap attorneys. The most expensive and difficult hospitals to get into are where you want your bypass done. Brand.

Personally, I would rather shoot a band for nothing... MY WAY, for ME and them, than shoot it their way for a couple of hundred bucks. I get nothing from the latter and a lot from the former.

Brand can also mean capabilities. Do you do something special? Special gear that allows you to do something kinda miraculous? Exploit it. And charge for it.

Brand is a pricing strategy.

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#### #9 How to Charge for Your Work



By the hour? Project? Day Rate?

Photographers use all of that and sometimes variations mixing it up.

To do that, you need to know what you need to charge. To be in business that is.

And that means you have to know what the costs of business are for you.

Figure your costs in equipment, computers, insurance, overhead, marketing, and anything you need to have to do your work. Remember the portfolio, lunches in town while showing the book, gas, car, home... it adds up pretty quickly.

Then figure out how many projects you can do a week. Figure in the time for shooting, editing, and post-processing. When you get that number, you can divide the number of hours you can work into the amount you need to make per shoot to be profitable.

You did add the profit to it, right? You have to be able to make money... in other words, more coming in than going out.

Let's say your total amount of costs monthly, including rent, equipment, phone, insurance and everything you need to write a check for, comes to \$2650 for a month.

How much do you need to make over that to be profitable? Lots of people have different amounts they need to make. Be honest with yourself.

Let's say you need to make \$4K per month to be happy. That is a total of \$6650 in billables coming in per month.

And if you figured that you can do two small shoots per week, that means 8 shoots per month - roughly \$750 per shoot. \$750 to you... that means you have to add 30% for taxes on top of that and make sure all of your expenses per job are covered. YOU need to end up with \$750 AFTER all the expenses for the job are paid.

As far as shooting by the hour or the project. These are strategies as well.

Some jobs simply pay by the hour. Events for instance, 'grip-n-grins' and some types of corporate work have restrictions and pay by the hour. I don't have a problem with paying by the hour, I just want to make sure that the hourly rate covers my travel and editing work.

Bidding by project will involve figuring out how many hours it will take to complete the job... and that may not include all shooting hours. For instance, a calendar shoot in Mexico would probably involve early - mid-morning and late afternoon to dusk. Mid-day is not going to be good light, so unless there are interior shots, those hours may be spent editing a Corona... heh.

I do a mixture of project work and hourly when I am working with my clients. I haven't used a day rate in a couple of decades, but it still seems to be relatively alive in editorial work.

When it comes to figuring out what you need to charge, it's really as simple as "do the math." Do the research, find out what the high market and low marks for gigs in your area. Find out how this sort of work is billed.

It takes a bit of time, it take a bit of research, and it takes some commitment to do this. AI tools like Perplexity can help you, but you must be the one who puts boots on the ground and gets it done.

Other sites can help you with this as well, but on a personal note... if you cannot make a living, and take care of your family with your business, it isn't really a business.

#10 Business Skills are a Must.

They truly are. And being organized and businesslike will actually make you money by saving you money. Money wasted in time dealing with things that are time eaters that should be easily handled with a form that was approved or a bill that was paid.

Understanding the business you are in is critical. The many ways photography is produced, billed, valued, and ultimately used can widely vary the level of payment.

Finding out everything you can about the business of photography can sometimes take the fun out of what you do. I have seen some people melt down when they realized that they were charging so little and delivering so much that it wasn't sustainable.

So there you have it... a short look at a tall question.

You should understand all of this before you venture too far out into the world of professional commercial and editorial photography.

It will make it a much smoother roller coaster.

Cause, yeah, it's gonna still be a roller coaster, this one will just not be as rough.

:-)

I would love to hear your thoughts and any special ways you value your work.

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(I am a photographer, designer, and author based in the American Southwest.

I have written 5 books, taught online for over 15 years, and taught at CreativeLIVE twice. I was the owner and creative director of OCEAN Integrated Media Group, the third largest advertising agency in Phoenix, Arizona, and have been mentoring photographers wanting to jump start their business.

This is one of my deep dive white papers that I share with photographers.)