



Ignite: Build the Foundation of Your Photography Business

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Chapter 1: The Shift: From Artist to Visual Problem Solver

Most photographers start with a passion to create. They love the light, the joy of creating, the thrill of capturing something beautiful. But passion, while certainly vital, is not a business model.

The shift from amateur or hobbyist to a real commercial photographer begins when you stop thinking like an artist waiting to be discovered and start thinking like a creative professional.

Someone hired to solve problem and provide solutions, not ‘take pictures’.

This chapter lays the groundwork for everything that follows. Not just changing who you are, but expanding your role.

From photographer to visual strategist.

From artist to trusted asset.

From make it this way to collaborator.

Understand the Client’s Perspective

Know this: businesses don’t hire you because you take “nice photos.” They can get nice photos for free all over the web.

They hire you because you help them:

- Sell a product
- Tell a story
- Build a brand
- Solve a communication problem

Your camera is your main tool. But your strongest value is in understanding what the client needs and delivering it with clarity and a good deal of creativity.

Ask yourself:

- What is this image *for*?
- What does the client need the audience to *feel*?
- What action should the image *inspire*?

And then rethink Your Role

You are not just a photographer. You are a *visual problem solver*.

- A bakery doesn’t need “art”; they need images that make people hungry.
- A skincare brand doesn’t need “mood”; they need clean visuals that elevate trust.

- A design agency doesn't need "portfolio fillers"; they need consistent collaborators who understand the mission, engage with the goals, and deliver consistent results.

When you shift your mindset to serve the *purpose* of the image, everything gets easier; your pitch, your process, your pricing.

Act Like a Business

Don't pretend to be bigger than you are.

Just act professional

- Show up on time
- Meet deadlines
- Follow through
- Communicate clearly
- Present solutions... and options

Clients don't care how many followers you have, what kind of gear you use, or if you use Photoshop or Affinity. They care whether you can deliver what they need. Consistently.

Stop Waiting for Permission

Too many talented photographers wait for someone to tell them it's OK to go pro.

But that moment doesn't come from someone outside. It doesn't come from parents, or loved ones, or family, or the folks you work with everyday.

You *decide*.

You create work that aligns with what you want to be hired for.

You build systems.

You reach out.

You follow up.

You don't have to fake confidence, or do affirmations all day while listening to sitar music and meditating.

You just have to act with intention.

That Means Showing Work That Reflects Your Goals

If you want to shoot for food brands, shoot food.

If you want to work with product and still life, style and light the products you purchase.

If it's portrait work you want to do, then photograph every person you know.

Build the body of work that attracts the kind of clients you want.

Make sure the technique is as high a quality as possible, the style yours, and the presentation something that a client would be excited to see.

It doesn't matter if it's spec, personal, or unpaid.

Show the kind of images you want to do more of.

That is beyond important.

Talk Like a Creative Partner

Start using language that positions you on equal footing:

- “Here’s what I’d recommend...”
- “Based on your audience, we might want to...”
- “Let’s talk through the best way to showcase this feature.”

We all this shaping a message.

Your expertise is in shaping an image, so shaping a message, a visual message, is exactly what you focus on. Tightly.

When I started out as a pro, I still had not grasped this idea and it cost me dearly. I thought being a photographer meant being Ansel Adams or Edward Weston and making great photos of mountains and rivers and peppers and stuff.

I hadn't been tossed into the arena of professional commercial photography and after showing my “portfolio” to a neighbor who asked to see it, I was schooled.

He was an art director from a major agency (and I wasn't even sure what that meant) and for some reason he saw something in my wild collection of ‘everything photos.’ He made a few calls and got me into see some shooters he had worked with. We talked, I toured the studios, and came away feeling I needed to rethink my entire life... heh.

I did.

A Final Thought

The shift from artist to visual problem solver won't require abandoning your creativity. Your creativity is the whole point of your venture. We are going to take that creativity and anchor it in purpose. When you align your vision with client goals, you stop seeking outside permission and start building a career based on you.

This first chapter is your mindset reset.

The work you do matters, so be a stickler for detail.

The service you provide is valuable, so treat it as such.

Because the moment you start showing up like a business, the market starts treating you like one.

Next up: let's get crystal clear on what you shoot, who it's for, and how to define your commercial focus.

Chapter 2: Finding Your Focus: Clarifying What You Shoot and Why

It's so tempting to be a generalist when you're starting out. You want to keep options open, say yes to any opportunity, and be useful to everyone.

But there's a dark truth: when you try to appeal to everyone, you often get ignored by the clients you want most.

In commercial photography, clarity beats versatility every time.

Clients hire specialists, people who understand their world and speak their visual language. This chapter will walk you through the process of narrowing your focus in a way that feels empowering, and not restrictive.

Start With What You Love, Then Validate It

Ask yourself:

- What types of shoots light you up?
- What kinds of clients or industries excite you?
- What's the work you'd do for free (but want to get paid for)?

Then ask:

- Who's paying for this kind of work?
- Is there demand in your region or niche?
- Are there brands, agencies, or content creators who consistently need this type of photography?

Find the overlap between passion and market demand.

Choose a Core Niche (and Supporting Sub-Niches)

Start with one strong niche—for example, tabletop photography for artisan product brands. Then define 1–2 sub-niches you also enjoy or want to explore, such as food editorial or packaging design.

You're not closing doors—you're building a clear identity that helps clients understand when to call you.

Craft Your Positioning Statement

This is your one-liner that sums up what you do and who it's for. It becomes your homepage intro, your LinkedIn headline, your Instagram bio.

“I create bold, clean product photography for natural skincare brands.”

“I help small food businesses build crave-worthy visuals that grow their audience.”

Simple. Direct. Memorable.

Audit Your Portfolio for Focus

Look at your current work through a commercial lens. Ask:

- Does this image reflect the type of work I want more of?
- Would a brand in my niche want to license this?
- Is my style consistent across categories? Should it be?

Remove anything that’s off-brand or doesn’t serve your current direction. Every image in your portfolio should be a “yes, I want more of this.”

Create Work That Attracts Aligned Clients

If your dream is to shoot for boutique coffee roasters, but you only have fashion portraits on your site, you’re sending mixed signals.

Build 2–3 personal projects that mirror the type of assignments you want. Show clients that you understand their visual needs, even if you haven’t worked with them yet.

This makes your future portfolio a magnet for the right inquiries.

Say No Strategically

You’ll be tempted to take every gig that comes your way. But if a project:

- Doesn’t align with your niche
- Won’t move your business forward
- Will consume energy you could spend creating strategic work

...it’s OK to pass or refer it out. Saying no to what doesn’t serve you is how you create room for what does.

Can You Be Too Narrow?

Yes. A niche cannot be a trap, or a walled garden so protected nothing else of interest is allowed in to be examined.

I don’t want you to become *too narrow*.

Imagine a food photographer who only shoots natural light, fresh food flatlays with natural light on 8x10 film.

I think that may be very narrow. Perhaps a photographer in a huge market like NYC or Chicago may be able to eke out a living, if you are in Phoenix, Salt Lake City, or Tampa, it is going to be impossible.

So think of your niche as an approach to the world that has consistency of purpose, a direct line of vision.

Food, Lifestyle, Interior Design... three tabs on your website that show a niche. A niche of people and things orientation. All of it is lifestyle, so that becomes your niche.

Portraiture, Fashion, Beauty... these say people oriented, but in buckets that are clearly defined.

Architecture, Landscape, Automobiles can all be seen as a viable block of imagery.

But consider...

Food, Aeronautics, Children's Fashion.

Does that sound like someone you would consider hiring, or does it instantly confuse you as to what they actually do?

Consider this:

I tell my mentees that three tabs is the max. If your navigation looks like a table of contents for a photo magazine, you are too scattered to be of any value. Three portfolios... and a projects tab that contains everything else you like to do.

If you are a food/tabletop photographer who also likes motocross, include that track adventure as a 'personal project.'

A Final Thought

Your niche shouldn't box you in, it should act as a beacon for your vision. It tells the right clients you're here, you understand their needs, and you're the right person to help. The more focused your message, the easier it is for the right people to say yes.

In the next chapter, we'll build a portfolio that reinforces that focus—and shows your value like a pro.

Chapter 3: Making a Portfolio That Is Ready for the Market

Your portfolio isn't a collection of your best images. That is what we call a "collection of your best images."

A portfolio is a tool for business. It's your resume, your sales pitch, and often the first thing people see. This chapter helps you prove what you shoot and who it's for through carefully chosen, strategic work if Chapter 2 helped you figure that out.

If you do it right, your portfolio not only gets people interested, it also builds trust.

Curate With Purpose

Pick 20 to 30 strong images that fit with your niche to start. Not just the "most beautiful" pictures, but also those that show how valuable you are:

- Can the viewer tell right away what you do?
- Do the pictures look like they were taken by the same person?
- Would a potential client want to hire or license work like this?

Don't include anything that doesn't make sense, is not relevant, or is confusing. We are not making a scrapbook.

Plan how you group your work

Put together your portfolio based on the kinds of jobs you want to get. That could mean:

- Product: Setups that are on-white, for e-commerce, styled, from multiple viewpoints.
- Food: shots from above, setups in the environment, and plated dishes
- Lifestyle: scenes that fit with the brand and usage that fits the situation
- Editorial—Visuals that tell stories for print or digital features

This makes it easier for clients to find their way around your site and choose what they want. It also shows that you know how they are thinking about the categories.

Show off your versatility while staying focused.

Clients want specialists, but they also love to see a range of:

- Daylight vs. artificial light
- Clean vs. styled spaces
- Scenes that are big or small
- Packaging, using the product, and laying it flat

The most important thing is that everything still speaks your visual language.

Start with your best and end with your second best.

If you have a PDF or website gallery, start with your best picture. Then show them around with pictures.

- Put the most important pieces at the front
- Plan the order of the pieces (build rhythm, keep attention)
- End with a close second-best to leave a lasting impression

Add context when it helps

Whenever you can, add a caption or project summary, like "Photographed for the launch of a local bakery's seasonal menu." Used in campaigns on the web, in print, and on social media.

Clients like to know how the work was used, what it accomplished, and the story behind it.

Do Personal Work to Fill Gaps

If you haven't shot for a particular genre you wish to, make one. Make small shoots with a specific goal in mind that are similar to what a client might hire you to do.

- Make a fake campaign
- Style and shoot a product with your ideal brand in mind
- Write editorial-style content for a fake feature

Personal projects can be just as important as client work if you do them with purpose.

Think about the format and how it will be delivered.

You will need more than one copy of your portfolio:

- Website gallery: The main showcase, updated every three months
- PDF portfolio: Great for emails or direct outreach
- Case studies: Perfect for blog posts or behind-the-scenes breakdowns
- Instagram: A more laid-back, lighter stream of current work

Each one has a different job, but they should all have the same voice and quality.

Keep Up to Date

Your portfolio is never "finished." Set up a review every three months. • What should be added?

- What is no longer in line?
- Are the pictures still up-to-date and competitive?

Clients will judge you by your worst image, so make sure they are all good.

Last Thought

Of course your portfolio should wow people. But it also should connect with them.

It should say to the client, "This is exactly what you need."

In this chapter, you learned how to be both visible and hireable by combining focus (Chapter 2) with presentation.

Next, we'll talk about the website that shows off this portfolio to the world.

Chapter 4: Website Essentials: Crafting a Digital Presence That Converts

Your website is more than just a gallery of your work—it’s your storefront, your pitch deck, and your digital assistant. Done right, it should speak to the right people, showcase your value, and make it easy for clients to take the next step.

Think of it like this: your portfolio shows *what* you can do, and your website shows *why* someone should hire you.

Structure Like a Business, Not a Blog

The most effective photographer websites have clear, simple navigation. Here are the core pages you need:

- **Home:** A strong intro with your positioning statement and a few signature images
- **Portfolio:** Curated by category (see Chapter 3)
- **Projects:** Shoots that may not fit in the portfolio categories
- **About:** Short bio, headshot, and why you’re the right fit for your client
- **Services / Info:** Clear description of what you offer and how you work
- **Contact:** Form, email address, and links to social platforms

Optional: case studies, testimonials, FAQs

Blog. You must have some sort of blog. The algorithms demand it. SEO demands it. AI Search demands it. Visibility demands it. It doesn’t have to be a daily journal, but it should be a part of your overall strategy.

Keep menus clean.

Make sure every page has a call-to-action (CTA), like “Book a call” or “See my work.” This should be part of your template or framework.

Write Like a Human (and a Pro)

Photographers often skip or rush their website copy.

That’s a big mistake. Words matter. Here’s how to write like a pro:

- Use a clear, conversational tone
- Focus on what your client needs, not just what you love
- Keep it short, skimmable, and helpful

Example:

“I help independent food brands create bold, modern visuals for packaging, social, and web.”

Speak directly to the reader. Show them you understand their world.

Here's a tip. I was struggling with this when I went into business. We called it an "elevator pitch" back then. And it was so hard to come up with without sounding like a 'suit' going to a corporate meeting.

I used a small tape recorder, and kept talking to an imaginary person until I finally felt comfortable with what I was saying. It was conversational. And it morphed over time, which was fine and perfectly ideal as I morphed along with it.

Optimize for Speed and Mobile

Over half of all website visits happen on mobile. If your site is slow, clunky, or hard to read on a phone, you're losing clients.

Checklist:

- Use a clean theme or template (like Wordpress, Squarespace, Format, or Webflow)
*Squarespace and Format are the easiest and require little coding experience.
Wordpress requires some knowledge of HTML, CSS rules, and code. I use DIVI
Webflow requires a high level of knowledge for building a website.
If you like tinkering, fine... but if you just want to get it up with a clean site, SquareSpace and Format deserve a look.*
- Compress images without losing quality (Photoshop>Save for Web>60)
- Avoid video auto-play and heavy animations
- No slideshow on home page
- No "cover" page, get right to the portfolios
- Test on multiple devices

A fast, friction-free experience builds trust.

Integrate Your Brand

Your website should look and feel like your work:

- Choose fonts and colors that reflect your aesthetic
Ask GPT or Gemini to help with font pairings if you have no idea what that means.
- Use consistent image treatment (color grading, tone)
- Include a few behind-the-scenes images or short videos
Becoming far more important in these days of AI search

Think of your website as an extension of your shoot style—it should feel like *you*.

Add Testimonials or Trust Signals

If you have happy clients, ask for 1–2 sentence quotes you can add throughout your site.

- Keep them casual, real, and results-focused
- Include client names or businesses (with permission)

These small signals can make a big difference in someone deciding to contact you.

Use Calls-to-Action (CTAs)

Every page should guide the visitor toward action:

- “Let’s work together”
- “View recent projects”
- “Book a discovery call”

Use buttons, bold links, and repeat the CTA a few times on longer pages. Even better, fit them into your template or framework. Think a universal footer or sidebar.

SEO Basics So You Get Found

Even basic SEO can boost visibility:

- Use keywords in headlines (e.g. “Arizona Product Photographer”)
- Add alt text to every image (describe what’s shown)
- Write meta descriptions for each page
- Include your location and service area

Also: create blog content or case studies (see Chapter 10) to improve organic reach over time.

A Final Thought

Your website shouldn’t resemble a stoic art gallery frozen in time.

It should be more like a conversational tool with your current and possible clients.

It should make your value clear, your style obvious, and your process feel effortless. When built right, your site becomes a silent closer, working while you sleep.

Next up: how to research and connect with your most valuable prospects, the **Dream 50** clients.

Chapter 5: The Power of the Dream 50 List

Marketing doesn't have to mean shouting into the void or crossing your fingers that someone will stumble onto your site. When done with intention, marketing becomes personal, strategic, and effective.

One of the simplest and smartest tools you can use to direct your outreach is the Dream 50 list.

Your Dream 50 is a curated, researched, and realistic list of potential clients, businesses, agencies, and individuals, who would benefit from your work, align with your style, and are within reach.

What Makes a Dream Client?

A dream client is not always the biggest name or highest budget. It's someone who:

- Values visual storytelling
- Creates content frequently (or wants to)
- Is aligned with your aesthetic
- Treats creatives with respect
- Is realistic about timelines and budgets

Think about:

- Local food producers
- Skincare startups
- Marketing agencies
- Editorial magazines
- Boutique product brands

These are all clients who need your skillset—and who are often actively looking for reliable talent.

Build the List With Intention

Aim for 50 prospects. Start with 10, then build weekly. For each one, list:

- Business name
- Website + social handles
- Decision-maker's name + email
- Why they're a good fit (1–2 notes)

Use LinkedIn, Instagram, your local chamber of commerce, vendor lists, past collaborators, and word of mouth to find prospects.

Don't overthink it. This is a living list.

Tier Your List

Sort them into three tiers:

- **Tier 1:** Ready to pitch now (portfolio aligned, reachable)
- **Tier 2:** Almost ready (may need a new portfolio piece to match)
- **Tier 3:** Aspirational (a little further off, but worth nurturing)

This helps prioritize your outreach and lets you build strategic personal projects that attract Tier 2 and Tier 3 over time.

Prepare Your Outreach

Outreach doesn't mean hard selling. It's about starting a relationship.

- Follow them on social media
- Engage thoughtfully with their posts
- Send a short, friendly email that introduces you and your work
- Share a mini portfolio or recent project that aligns with what they do

Example email:

“Hi [Name], I've been following your brand and love your approach to product design. I'm a commercial photographer specializing in tabletop and packaging photography. I'd love to connect and share work if you ever need fresh visuals.”

Use a CRM to Track Progress

Don't try to manage outreach from your inbox or memory. Use a CRM (even a spreadsheet) to track:

- Who you contacted
- When
- What you sent
- What the reply was
- When to follow up

Consistency wins.

Follow Up With Value

A no now doesn't mean no forever. Keep in touch:

- Send a recent blog post or project

- Comment meaningfully on a launch
- Congratulate them on a feature or new product

The goal is to stay top-of-mind without being pushy. You're planting seeds.

Convert Connections Into Clients

When the moment is right, send a specific pitch:

- A proposal for a seasonal shoot
- A content package idea
- A time-limited offer for retainer work

Confidence counts. You've done the work to make this a warm connection—now lead with a solution.

Final Thought

You don't need to chase every client. You just need to connect with the right ones. The Dream 50 list helps you focus your energy, track your efforts, and build the kind of relationships that lead to steady, aligned work.

In the next chapter, we'll talk about how to stay visible and relevant with those clients through email marketing that's useful, non-spammy, and totally doable.

Chapter 6: Email Marketing for Photographers

Email marketing is one of the most effective, underutilized tools in a photographer’s client-building toolkit. When done right, it keeps your name in front of potential clients, nurtures relationships, and drives repeat business—all without fighting algorithms or buying ads.

This chapter will walk you through how to set up your email marketing system, write emails that get opened, and use segmentation to boost your effectiveness over time.

Choose Your Platform

You need a proper email marketing tool—not your personal Gmail. Start with:

- **MailerLite:** Free and simple for beginners
- **Flodesk:** Clean design and visual layout
- **ConvertKit:** Great for creators with multiple offers
- **Mailchimp:** A solid all-in-one choice

Pick one, get familiar with it, and commit to using it.

Build a Subscriber List

You don’t need thousands of subscribers. You need the *right* ones. Start with:

- Past and current clients
- People on your Dream 50 list
- Vendors and collaborators (stylists, designers, etc.)

Add a signup form to your website with a clear offer:

“Get behind-the-scenes tips, new work, and exclusive offers—straight to your inbox, once a month.”

No one wants “a newsletter.” Everyone wants useful, inspiring content.

Segment Your List

Early on, create two basic segments:

- **Warm leads** – People who’ve inquired, worked with you, or know you well
- **Cold leads** – People you’re still introducing yourself to

This lets you send more personalized emails based on the relationship.

Plan Your Content

Aim to send 1–2 emails per month. Each email should answer the question: “**Why should this person care about this right now?**”

Content ideas:

- A quick case study or recent shoot
- A behind-the-scenes breakdown
- A tip or insight about photography, styling, or planning
- A seasonal offer (“Let’s get your holiday product photos done early”)
- A soft promo with portfolio links

Use 1–2 images max. Keep the text short, human, and helpful.

Write Emails That Get Read

Follow this simple structure:

1. **Subject line:** Specific + curiosity (e.g., “This \$400 shoot helped my client double sales”)
2. **Opening hook:** A quick story or insight
3. **Value:** What they’ll take away
4. **Call to action:** “See the full gallery,” “Reply if you’d like details,” etc.

Talk to one person. Be helpful. Skip the jargon.

Use Automation to Save Time

Set up:

- **Welcome email:** Sent to new subscribers with a link to your portfolio
- **Follow-up sequences:** For warm leads or promo offers
- **Seasonal reminders:** For repeat clients (“Need new images for Q4?”)

Most platforms let you build these in an hour—and they work for you around the clock.

Track What’s Working

Watch your metrics:

- Open rates (aim for 25–40%)
- Click-throughs (5–10% is solid)
- Replies or bookings generated

Use the data to refine your approach. Try new subject lines. Resend to people who didn’t open.

Link It to Your Marketing System

Email should connect to everything else you're doing:

- Share blog posts and Instagram recaps
- Mention recent testimonials or projects
- Highlight promos or client mini-shoots

This isn't just email—it's relationship-building.

Final Thought

Email marketing doesn't need to be complicated, frequent, or salesy. It just needs to be consistent, personal, and focused on service. Every email is a touchpoint. A chance to remind your audience that you're active, professional, and ready to help.

In the next chapter, we'll build a habit that makes all of this easier: your Weekly Marketing Block.

Chapter 7: The Weekly Marketing Block: A Non-Negotiable Habit

Marketing isn't something you do "when you have time." If you want consistent clients, consistent visibility, and consistent growth, you need a system. That system starts with your Weekly Marketing Block—a sacred, recurring window of time when you *work on the business*, not just in it.

Choose a Consistent Time Slot

Pick a time when you have energy, space, and limited distractions. Ideally:

- Same day and time every week (e.g., Tuesdays 9–11 AM)
- Scheduled on your calendar as a meeting with yourself
- Treated with the same priority as a paid shoot

If you wait until you "have time," it won't happen.

Know What to Work On

Your Marketing Block should always have a plan. Use a rotating mix of high-leverage tasks:

Outreach & Visibility

- Send 3–5 cold emails to Dream 50 prospects
- Follow up with warm leads
- Comment or DM on ideal clients' recent posts
- Research new businesses that match your niche

Content & Presence

- Draft and schedule 1–2 Instagram posts
- Write or outline a blog post or case study
- Send your email newsletter
- Update your website or online portfolio

Relationship Building

- Ask for testimonials
- Check in with past clients
- Thank vendors or collaborators with a quick note

Batch and Simplify

Don't reinvent the wheel. Use templates:

- Outreach emails
- Social captions
- Blog post outlines
- Testimonial requests

The more you batch similar tasks, the faster and easier marketing becomes.

Use a Simple Tracker

Keep a Google Sheet, Notion board, or journal to log:

- What you did this week
- Who you contacted
- What results came in

Tracking helps you stay focused, measure results, and avoid repeating yourself.

Evaluate Every Month

At the end of each month, use part of your Marketing Block to review:

- What strategies led to engagement or responses?
- What felt easy? What felt draining?
- What do you want to double down on or ditch next month?

Adjust your block to keep it working for *you*.

Protect the Time

People will try to book over it. You'll be tempted to skip it when you're busy. Don't.

- You can't grow your business without marketing.
- You won't stay visible if you're silent.
- You won't get referrals if you disappear between projects.

This one habit makes everything else easier.

Personal Experience

I always tried to do this in my head. I would set a goal of contacting 15 people a week. I would write my scripts, plan my attack, and wait for that perfect time to sit down and call 15 people. Today it would be the same as finding the time to write and email 15 people.

That perfect time... when nothing was needed, I wasn't in the middle of a project, the studio didn't need tidying up, there were no prints to be made, and no one had dropped by the studio to hang out and talk.

Those times.

Which never came, and then on Friday afternoon I would beat myself up for not getting it done and promise to do better the following week.

A friend told me something I will never forget: If it is not on the calendar it doesn't get done.

I began making a time to do the work. For me it was 10 AM. Sit at the desk, call three people. I had to tell myself that I couldn't do anything else if I didn't do that.

Of course there were days when I was shooting, days when the deadlines were too unforgiving, and the days I forgot or just rebelled... but I got in about 10 a month. And it changed my business in a short time.

Today there is no excuse since we can send email at anytime of the day or night.

I developed a system for going after my most valued targets. The agencies that were doing the kind of work that I wanted to do. I didn't realize it, but it was my own "Dream 50"... although there was really more like Dream 37 or so.

Final Thought

The Weekly Marketing Block is your power hour. It's where the pitch emails go out, the blog posts get written, the leads get warmed, and the visibility gets built. Without it, you're guessing. With it, you're building.

Next, we'll look at how to manage and maintain your growing network of clients and leads using a CRM that fits your business and your style.

Chapter 8: Your CRM: The Nerve Center of Your Photo Business

As you grow your business, leads, clients, and collaborators begin to stack up. Some respond right away, others ghost. Some book this month, others circle back six months later. Without a system to manage all of this, it's easy to lose track, as well as opportunities.

That's where a CRM (Customer Relationship Management tool) comes in. It doesn't need to be fancy, expensive, or complicated. It just needs to help you stay organized, intentional, and responsive.

This chapter walks you through setting up a CRM that fits your style, and how to use it to maintain relationships, track leads, and stay top-of-mind without burning out.

Understand What a CRM Is (and Isn't)

A CRM is a tool to help you:

- Store contact details
- Track communication history
- Set reminders to follow up
- Monitor project progress and deal stages

It's *not* your inbox, your brain, or a stack of sticky notes.

Choose a CRM That Matches Your Workflow

Here are some options:

- **Airtable** or **Notion** – Customizable, visual, and free to start
- **Trello** – Great for pipeline-style cards
- **Google Sheets** – Simple, accessible, and low-tech
- **HoneyBook** / **Dubsado** – Designed for creatives (includes proposals, contracts, invoicing)
- **HubSpot CRM** – Free, scalable, and robust

Start with what you'll actually use. Complexity is the enemy of consistency.

Build a Simple Pipeline

Organize your contacts into stages such as:

- Lead Identified
- Initial Contact Sent
- Replied / In Discussion

- Proposal Sent
- Booked / Working
- Delivered / Follow-Up

This lets you quickly see who's where, what's happening, and what you need to do next.

Add Your Contacts

Start with:

- Your Dream 50 list
- Past and current clients
- Cold leads you've found online or through social
- Vendors, stylists, and collaborators

Include fields like:

- Name + Business Name
- Email + Phone
- Last contact date
- Notes (where you met, interests, key projects)
- Next action + follow-up date

Use It Weekly

During your Marketing Block:

- Check who needs a follow-up
- Review who you've contacted recently
- Add new leads from research or referrals

Set 1–3 reminders per week. That's all it takes to stay in the game.

Tag, Sort, and Segment

Once you build up your CRM, use tags to filter by:

- Industry (e.g., food, skincare, editorial)
- Location
- Lead type (cold, warm, booked)
- Referral source

This makes outreach more focused and future promos more targeted.

Make It a System

Use templates for:

- First-touch emails
- Follow-up messages
- Thank-you emails

Automate where possible (HoneyBook, Dubsado, MailerLite) but keep it personal.

Final Thought

Don't think of a CRM as a luxury. A good system is your safety net. It turns chaos into clarity, and turns connections into booked work. When you treat every contact like a future collaborator, you build a brand, and a system, that lasts.

In the next chapter, we'll talk about how to expand your visibility using two of the most important social platforms for commercial photographers: Instagram and LinkedIn.

Chapter 9: Leveraging Instagram and LinkedIn for Visibility

Social media can feel like a black hole. I'm not a fan. There is simply too much garbage, AI fakes, and absurd junk for my taste.

But when approached strategically, it can become one of the most valuable visibility tools in your commercial photography business. For photographers working in tabletop, product, food, and lifestyle niches, **Instagram** and **LinkedIn** are the most powerful platforms to prioritize. I also believe **Behance** is the best professional sharing site for your art.

These platforms work in tandem: Instagram shows your visual aesthetic and storytelling chops, while LinkedIn demonstrates professionalism, business savvy, and relationship potential.

Clarify Your Purpose on Each Platform

Ask yourself: What do I want this platform to do for me?

- **Instagram:** Showcase your style, consistency, and creativity
- **LinkedIn:** Connect with decision-makers, share insights, and start conversations
- **Behance:** Showing visual work that is seen by the professionals you want work with

You don't need to post daily or worry about going viral. You need to show up like a pro, consistently.

Optimize Your Bio and Profile

Instagram:

- Name and handle that reflect your business
- One-line positioning statement ("Food + Product Photographer | Based in [City]")
- Link to your site or Linktree (with portfolio, blog, and contact info)

LinkedIn:

- Headline with your specialty ("Helping food & skincare brands tell visual stories")
- About section that explains what you do, who you help, and how you work
- Profile image and banner that feel aligned with your brand

Behance:

- Complete profile
- A compelling work experience
- Links to all other platforms

Create a Simple Content Plan

Use 3–5 content types on repeat:

- Portfolio highlights
- Behind-the-scenes shots or videos
- Case studies or client stories
- Tips for preparing for shoots
- Personal or project insights

This list of content types keeps you from those random posts that seem out of place, and inconsistent with both your style and your offering.

Instagram: Post 2–3x/week, Stories/Reels when possible

LinkedIn: 1–2 quality posts/week (repurpose IG content with a different caption tone)

Behance: 1-2 quality projects per month. This is your most curated work.

Engage Strategically

Visibility isn't simply posting.

It's also about connecting.

Each week:

- Comment meaningfully on posts from brands or creatives you want to work with
- Share relevant posts and add your insight
- Tag clients or collaborators when you share projects

Start conversations. Build relationships.

Use Hashtags and Keywords Wisely

Instagram:

- Use 8–15 hashtags (some broad, some niche: #skincarephotographer, #packagingdesign)
- Use location hashtags if you work regionally

LinkedIn:

- Hashtags like #commercialphotography #branding #contentcreation
- Keywords in your headline and About section

Behance:

- Project work; more than one single image, create a set of images per post

- Keep the information relevant to the work being shown, and use keywords to help the work be found

This improves discoverability.

Show the Process, Not Just the Result

Clients love seeing:

- Lighting setups
- Prop selection
- Moodboards or style tests
- What goes into making their final image

This builds trust and reinforces your professionalism.

Call to Action = More Engagement

Use soft calls to action like:

- “Want results like this? Let’s talk.”
- “Have a product launch coming up? DM me.”
- “Tell me your favorite from this set.”

Don’t be afraid to invite people to connect, respond, or collaborate.

Final Thought

Instagram, LinkedIn, and Behance are powerful when you treat them as tools and not dreaded tasks. Show up like the photographer you want to be known as. Your future clients are already watching.

Next, we’ll explore how long-form content like blog posts and case studies can deepen your authority, boost your SEO, and give clients the context they need to say yes.

Chapter 10: SEO and Storytelling: Blog Posts That Attract Clients

It's easy to overlook blogging in the age of social media, but your blog is one of the most powerful and underused tools in your business. It combines long-form storytelling, SEO (search engine optimization), and credibility all in one easily found place.

Think of it this way:

Your blog is where you show your thinking.

Your Instagram shows your taste.

And your portfolio shows your talent.

Why Blog at All?

- Google loves written content. Blogs help people *find you*.
- You get to explain the *why* behind your work, not just the what.
- It positions you as an expert, not just a vendor.
- Clients want to see your *thought process* and *creative decisions*.

You don't need to blog every week. Once a month, or even once a quarter, can be enough if it's targeted and useful.

The adventure photographer *Michael Clark* creates a long form quarterly newsletter that gets sent out to prospective and current clients. It is highly respected and a great way for those who want to focus their efforts on larger forms instead of the 'update' model.

Know Who You're Writing For

Your blog isn't for other photographers. Don't write about how to make a white background, or the newest cool stuff in Lightroom. Clients simply do not care.

It's for:

- Marketing managers
- Small business owners
- Brand directors
- Designers and art buyers

Write posts that help them solve a problem or understand how to work with you.

What to Write About

- **Case Studies:** Walk through a recent shoot—what the client needed, what you created, how they used the images.
- **Behind-the-Scenes:** Talk about your process, prep, styling, lighting, editing, etc.

- **Client Prep Tips:** “5 Ways to Get the Most From Your Product Shoot”
- **Personal Projects:** Share the thought process behind them. Why you did it, what it taught you.
- **Comparisons:** “On-White vs. Styled Background: When to Use Which?”

The goal is always the same: educate, build trust, and show value.

Structure Matters

Keep your posts easy to read:

- Short paragraphs
- Subheadings every few sections
- Bold key ideas
- Use bullets and numbered lists

Use images to break up text and demonstrate what you’re saying.

SEO Basics Without the Jargon

Don’t get lost in technical SEO. Focus on:

- Using keywords your clients would search (“commercial food photographer Phoenix”)
- Writing descriptive titles and meta descriptions
- Adding alt text to images
- Linking to your services and contact page in every post

Use tools like Google’s Keyword Planner or Ubersuggest to get simple ideas. Ask GPT to help you with the keywords and meta text for your blog post.

Turn Blog Posts Into Marketing Fuel

Your blog doesn’t live in a vacuum. Repurpose it:

- Share snippets on Instagram as carousels or captions
- Turn quotes into LinkedIn posts
- Use it as part of your email marketing
- Link to it in outreach emails (“Thought you might enjoy this behind-the-scenes breakdown...”)

One blog post can support a full month of content.

Call to Action Every Time

Don’t end your post with a fade-out. Tell them what to do next:

- “Want a shoot like this for your brand? Let’s talk.”
- “Here’s a link to my full product gallery.”
- “Have questions? I’m always happy to chat.”

Make it feel natural—but always give them a next step.

Final Thought

Your blog doesn’t have to be perfect. It just has to be *useful*. A blog that explains your value, showcases your thought process, and answers client questions will do more for your business than any trending reel.

In the next chapter, we’ll talk about creating systems and boundaries that support your creative energy and help you avoid burnout as your business grows.

It’s easy to overlook blogging in the age of social media, but your blog is one of the most powerful and underused tools in your business. It combines long-form storytelling, SEO (search engine optimization), and credibility—all in one place.

Chapter 11: Packaging Yourself Like a Pro With Materials That Build Trust

You've done the work.
Your portfolio looks great.
Your outreach is thoughtful.

Now, it's time to make sure everything a client touches, from your rate sheet to your proposal, feels as polished and intentional as your images.

Your materials don't need to be flashy or funky.

But they must be clean, cohesive, and confidence-building.

Think Like a Brand

You are no longer “just a freelancer,” scrapping for every opportunity to make a buck with your camera.

You're a creative business.

Everything you send out, emails, pricing PDFs, proposals, onboarding kits, should reflect that.

Ask yourself:

- Does this match my visual style?
- Is it clear and easy to understand?
- Would I be confident receiving this as a client?

Build Your Client Toolkit

Here are five core materials every photographer should prepare:

1. Rate Sheet / Pricing Guide

- Short PDF or single webpage
- Overview of packages or service tiers (e.g., Basic, Signature, Premium)
- FAQs about licensing, turnaround, revisions, etc.

2. Capabilities Deck / Introduction PDF

- A 4–6 page document summarizing who you are, what you offer, industries served, and client results
- Include testimonials and 2–3 work samples

3. Proposal Template

- Customizable by project
- Scope of work, deliverables, timeline, licensing, total cost
- A clear, confident cover letter or note

4. Onboarding Guide

- What happens after the booking: timeline, expectations, required info, how to prep, what to expect
- Helpful checklists or style tips

5. Invoice Template

- Branded, professional
- Use tools like QuickBooks, FreshBooks, Wave, or HoneyBook
- Include payment terms (Net 15, Net 30), late fee policy

Use Consistent Design and Voice

- Same fonts, logo, and colors across all documents
- Consistent tone of voice (friendly, clear, confident)
- Make it scannable with bullet points, bold headers, and space to breathe

Your design should feel like your work: organized, modern, and thoughtful.

Make It Easy to Share

Send PDFs via Dropbox or Google Drive with clear names like:

- JaneDoe_PricingGuide_2024.pdf
- StudioName_ProjectProposal_ClientName.pdf

Include a short, personalized message every time:

“Hi Andrea, here’s the proposal we discussed. Let me know if you have questions, I’d love to work with you!”

Review and Update Quarterly

Your materials should evolve with your skills and confidence.

- Raise rates?
- Change your niche?
- Add new case studies or testimonials?

Put a 30-minute review on your calendar every quarter.

Final Thought

Polished materials signal that you're ready.

That you're reliable.

That you've thought this through.

But clients don't just hire based on images. They hire based on how those images are *presented*. Package your expertise like a pro, and you'll land better projects with clients who value what you bring.

Next up, we'll talk about creating systems and boundaries that support your creative energy and help you avoid burnout as your business grows.

Chapter 12: Systems and Boundaries That Protect Your Creativity

Running a creative business means you wear a lot of hats. You're the photographer, editor, marketer, project manager, and more. Without clear systems and strong boundaries, burnout is inevitable. And it can range from feeling like you are in a rut, to full blown creative blocks and terminal procrastination.

This chapter is about protecting your most valuable resource: your time and energy.

If you want to keep showing up with creativity, consistency, and focus, your business has to work *with* you, not against you.

Define Your Working Hours

First of all, some common sense: You're not a 24/7 operation.

Clients don't expect you to reply at midnight, and you shouldn't either.

- Choose your "office hours" (e.g., M–F, 9AM–5PM)
- Include this in your email signature, auto-replies, and onboarding docs
- Stick to it—respect your own time first
- There will be times that necessitate ignoring this schedule, but make them rare and make them worth it.

Clear boundaries help clients trust your process and respect your schedule.

Build Repeatable Workflows

Write down every step of your client journey:

- Inquiry → Discovery Call → Proposal → Booking → Prep → Shoot → Delivery → Follow-up

Then create templates, checklists, and scripts for each step.

Tools like Notion, Trello, or HoneyBook can turn your process into a repeatable system.

Bonus: workflows make it easier to outsource when you grow. And outsourcing makes it easier to grow since you can cover two tracks simultaneously.

Automate What You Can

You don't have to manually send every invoice, follow-up, or onboarding guide.

Automate:

- Inquiry replies
- Appointment scheduling (Calendly, TidyCal)
- Proposal and contract workflows
- Payment reminders

Automation = fewer tasks, more focus.

Schedule Admin and Creative Time

Don't let emails and admin take over your best energy.

- **Mornings** = creative work (shooting, planning, editing)
- **Afternoons** = admin (emails, invoices, meetings)

Block your calendar to protect creative time. Give your brain the space it needs.

Know When to Say No

Not every opportunity is worth taking. Listen to your gut. Remind yourself of your values and stated goals.

Use this checklist:

- Does it align with my niche and values?
- Will it help build my portfolio in the right direction?
- Does the timeline or budget make sense?

Saying *no* is how you protect the *yes* that matters.

Create a “Reset” Ritual

Every week or month, pause and reflect:

- What drained you?
- What energized you?
- What should change next week?

Creativity thrives in clarity. Make time to reset what may be burning you out, even if it's just a 30 minute recap.

Set Boundaries With Clients Politely

Use phrases like:

- “I’m available for calls Monday through Thursday, 10–3.”
- “Turnaround time is 5 business days unless otherwise agreed.”
- “We’ll begin once the signed contract and deposit are received.”

Boundaries aren’t rude. They’re professional.

Final Thought

Hustling harder is not the answer to the problem..

You need to hustle smarter, with a clear structure.

Systems save energy.

Boundaries protect focus.

Together, they give you the freedom to create with purpose, and show up for the clients who matter.

Chapter 13: Confidence Through Repetition: Practice That Pays Off

Confidence isn't always something we're born with.

For most of us, it's something we build.

And in photography, the fastest way to build it is through repetition. That's the way it is in most entrepreneurial adventures.

Repetition doesn't actually mean shooting the same thing over and over until you can do it in your sleep.

It means creating a rhythm of consistent action: showing up, making work, marketing, refining your materials, and communicating with clarity.

Every repetition of these points strengthens your skills, systems, and self-trust.

Recognize That Confidence Comes From Action

No course, book, or pep talk can replace the confidence you earn from doing the work.

Every time you:

- Send an outreach email
- Publish a blog post
- Share a new project
- Walk a client through your process

... you reinforce your identity as a professional.

Think of these as "reps."

The more you lift, the stronger you get.

Build Micro-Habits That Compound

Instead of waiting for long weekends or creative retreats, build tiny, repeatable habits:

- Write one caption a day
- Reach out to one new lead each week
- Update one section of your website each month
- Practice lighting one object in a new way every Friday

Small steps lead to massive momentum over time. Waiting for those long, quiet times to gently reflect and prepare is a fool's adventure. They never happen.

Track What You're Learning

Keep a simple log of:

- What you did (reached out, shot something, posted, pitched)
- What you learned (a new shortcut, a mistake, a new way to frame an idea)
- What you'll do differently next time
- *(Hey, these are all good ideas to write about for your blog. Cool, eh?)*

This turns trial-and-error into strategic growth.

Share Your Work in Progress

You don't have to wait for perfection to post something.

- Share behind-the-scenes setups
- Talk about what you're testing or exploring
- Be honest about the creative journey
- *(Hmm... more blog post subjects.)*

Clients appreciate transparency.

And peers respect process.

Sharing in-progress work positions you as an engaged, evolving creative, and not someone who's standing still waiting for inspiration to strike like lightning on the beach.

Make Personal Projects a Habit

Want to build confidence in a new niche?

Make the kind of work you want to be hired for.

- Schedule one personal shoot per month
- Treat it like a client job: moodboard, prep, deliverables
- Share the final product—and what you learned

Repetition turns aspiration into credibility.

Reflect Monthly on Progress

Set aside 30 minutes to review:

- What did I create this month?
- What am I proud of?

- What stretched me?
- What's next?

You'll start to see that you're making real strides, even when it doesn't feel like it day to day.

Reframe Mistakes as Data

Every missed shot, awkward call, or botched project is a rep that makes you better.

- What didn't work?
- Why?
- How will I adapt?

These short post-mortems will be huge as you move forward armed with what not to do next time.

The most confident creatives aren't perfect, they're just experienced.

Final Thought

Confidence is a side effect of consistency. It's not about ego or bravado. It's about showing up, again and again, with curiosity and commitment.

Repetition builds readiness. And readiness builds resilience. Keep putting in the reps—and you'll become the photographer (and professional) you've been working toward all along.

Next, we'll look at how to deal with the inevitable mindset monsters—comparison, imposter syndrome, perfectionism—and how to keep moving anyway.

Chapter 14: Taming the Mindset Monsters by Staying Grounded and Growing Anyway

Every creative faces them: the voices that occasionally whisper but often scream, “You’re not ready,” “They’re better than you,” “Don’t mess this up.”

These mindset monsters known as comparison, imposter syndrome, perfectionism, and fear, can derail your momentum faster than a flash flood in a usually dry gulch.

But you don’t have to silence them completely to succeed. You just need tools to quiet them, outsmart them, and keep moving.

Name the Monster

Awareness is your first weapon.

- **Imposter Syndrome:** “I don’t deserve to charge that much.”
- **Comparison:** “Everyone else is doing it better.”
- **Perfectionism:** “It’s not ready yet.”
- **Fear of Rejection:** “What if they say no?”

Once you name it, you can manage it.

Reframe the Narrative

What’s your mindset monster telling you? Flip the script:

- “I don’t know enough.” → “I’ve learned so much, and I’m still growing.”
- “They’re better than me.” → “They’re further along. I’m on my path.”
- “I’ll wait until it’s perfect.” → “Progress matters more than perfection.”

You don’t need to believe every thought you think.
You need to think every thought you want to believe.

Focus on Service, Not Self

When the inner critic is loud, shift focus to the client:

- What problem am I solving?
- What result can I help them create?
- How does my work support their goals?

Fear shrinks when your purpose gets bigger than your ego.

Use “Evidence Stacking”

Keep a file (digital or physical) of:

- Client wins
- Testimonials
- Kind DMs or comments
- Projects you’re proud of

Review it when doubt creeps in.

It’s proof that you’re not making this up, you’re actually making a difference.

Talk It Out

Find a creative buddy, coach, or community where you can say:

- “This is hard.”
- “I feel stuck.”
- “I’m scared of messing up.”

Speaking the fear often shrinks it. You’ll realize you’re not alone, and that most people you admire feel the same way sometimes.

Celebrate Tiny Wins

Confidence doesn’t just come from big wins. It comes from showing up.

- Sent that email? Win.
- Posted your work? Win.
- Asked for feedback? Win.

Each act of courage builds momentum.

Take Breaks Without Guilt

Sometimes the mindset monster is just your brain begging for rest.

Burnout exaggerates fear.

Step away.

Go outside.

Make something without a goal.

Creativity needs breathing room to thrive.

Final Thought

Mindset monsters aren't signs you're failing, or weren't cut out for this, or somehow not good enough.

They're just signs you're stretching.

Growing.

Leveling up.

Don't wait to feel fearless to move. Take action with the fear riding shotgun, and you'll prove to yourself (again and again) that you're capable, resilient, and ready.

Next: Let's talk about fully stepping into the role you've built—the creative professional who owns the work and leads the way forward.

Chapter 15: Owning It: Stepping Fully Into Your Role as a Creative Professional

You've put in the reps.
You've built the systems.
You've faced the mindset monsters and built momentum.

Now comes the final, and perhaps most important, shift: *owning it*.

Owning your business doesn't mean you know everything or that every shoot is perfect. It means you show up with clarity, confidence, and commitment.

You act like the pro you already are.
You stop downplaying your value.
You start leading like the expert your clients are looking for.

Drop the Apology

Stop minimizing your experience, skills, and goals.

- Don't say "I'm just getting started" when you've done the work.
- Don't cave on pricing just to feel liked.
- Don't undercut your time, your ideas, or your value.

Owning it starts with how you talk about yourself.

"I help brands create strong visual content that builds trust and drives sales."

"This is what I charge. Here's what that includes."

"I'm booking two months out, so let's find a time that works."

Some will say it is arrogance. I say it's clarity. I don't believe confidence is arrogance, in fact I believe the opposite; confident people are usually never arrogant.

Lead the Process

Pros don't wait for the client to figure it out. They:

- Set timelines
- Recommend creative direction
- Offer structure and solutions
- Deliver clean, clear communication
- Make sure they are heard and seen by being consistent

Leadership doesn't mean you have to do everything alone.

What it means is that you lead with intention and clarity.

Protect Your Energy Like a Pro

Owning it also means:

- Saying no to misaligned work
- Letting go of toxic clients
- Charging enough to do your best work
- Prioritizing long-term growth over short-term chaos

Sustainable confidence comes from strong, healthy boundaries.

Be Seen

Post the work.

Share your story.

Submit to publications.

Pitch the client you've admired from afar.

Stop waiting to be discovered.

Start acting like the professional you've already become.

You've done the hard part of *becoming*. Now, let people see it.

Final Thought

Owning your role as a creative professional doesn't happen all at once. It's a series of small, consistent acts:

- Choosing clarity over confusion
- Choosing leadership over waiting
- Choosing to believe in your value, especially on the hard days

You've built the foundation.

You've earned your seat at the table.

Now sit tall, speak clearly, and lead the work you were made to do.

Because you're no longer just a photographer.

You're a business.

You're a brand.

You're a creative problem-solver.

And you're ready.

Don Giannatti | www.dongiannatti.com

