

THE BUSINESS OF WEDDING PHOTOGRAPHY



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GET YOUR PRIORITIES



IN ORDER

Pye Jirsa wants you to
reverse your thinking
and put business first

By STEPHANIE BOOZER





I n 2008, Pye Jirsa surveyed the crowd at a photography conference and noted an important distinction between the speakers and the attendees. All were passionate about the artistry and craft of photography, but the speakers had an ace up their sleeves.

"I went to 20 different lectures, talked to people, looked at their photographs, and compiled a list of the differences between the people in the audience and the people on stage," Jirsa says. "The resounding difference was business."

At the time, Jirsa wasn't even a photographer. He and his eventual partners, brothers Christopher and Justin Lin, had left accounting jobs at Ernst & Young to lead an internet startup. But when the Great Recession struck, their investors withdrew, which led to a drastic change in career plans. Wedding photography hit Jirsa's radar at a friend's nuptials, where he quizzed the photographer about the field, and his analytical business brain kicked into high gear.

"The actual business of photography is one of the hardest things to learn," he says. "But I told the guys, 'We know that side. We need to learn photography.'"

Today, Lin and Jirsa Photography in Orange County, California, comprises a team of more than 50, including full-and part-time employees as well as contractors. It averages 350 destination and local weddings each year for a total of about 1,000 client commissions.

Despite these numbers, Jirsa and his team have created a boutique, personalized experience for their clients. For example, within an hour of receiving the initial lead, they're on the phone with a potential client.

They can do that today because they have the staff and the resources for it. The process wasn't always so easy. The early years were much less streamlined as the trio concentrated their efforts on learning photography. They had the business know-know. But giving clients images they would treasure? That was the learning curve.

Ten years in, Jirsa still sees that the biggest differentiator among professional photographers is business know-how. And he's happy to share his knowledge with others. Jirsa, Christopher, and Justin are co-creators of SLR Lounge, an online tutorial and business resource for photographers.

Through teaching and tutoring, Jirsa has observed three common pitfalls that sink





photography businesses: failure to set realistic expectations, not putting business first, and a lack of focus on learning.

SET EXPECTATIONS

Hard truth: Passion and good intentions don't pay the bills. Photographers get into the business because they love making pho-

the long-term, so they made adjustments along the way that would keep edging them forward.

Jirsa took the lead in developing the studio's product and style, how to light, how to shoot, the overall aesthetic. Justin tackled closing sales and management processes, and Christopher took on marketing and lead

BUSINESS FIRST

"It needs to be in your head to be a business person first and an artist second," says Jirsa. "I see photographers on a daily basis making very bad decisions from a business standpoint, just for the artistry."

Jirsa cites the jumping pose as an example. You know the one: The bridesmaids,



tographs; they get out of the business because they're bad at business.

"Most people approach the career and industry as, I like to take pictures, so I should start a business," says Jirsa. "We never really jump into any other area of our lives in that same manner. I would never say, I like my morning drive to work, so I'll be a race-car driver. It's completely different to enjoy something versus making it your business. Of the number of photographers that enter and leave the business, a huge chunk is due to lack of proper expectations."

When Jirsa and his partners first hung their shingle, they knew they would have to build slowly. They spent the first two to three years developing their photographic style and then incrementally increasing their pricing and offerings. They photographed about 50 weddings the first year and cleared about \$35,000 to \$45,000. Not a banner year, particularly when that had to be split three ways. But the partners were in this for

generation. That's where expectations came in. Each partner considered his interests and strengths, narrowed his focus, and then adjusted growth in his area accordingly.

This strategy works great for a three-partner studio, but Jirsa knows that's not the norm. For one-person shops, ask these questions to help set expectations: What are my strengths? What can I physically take on? What can I afford to outsource?

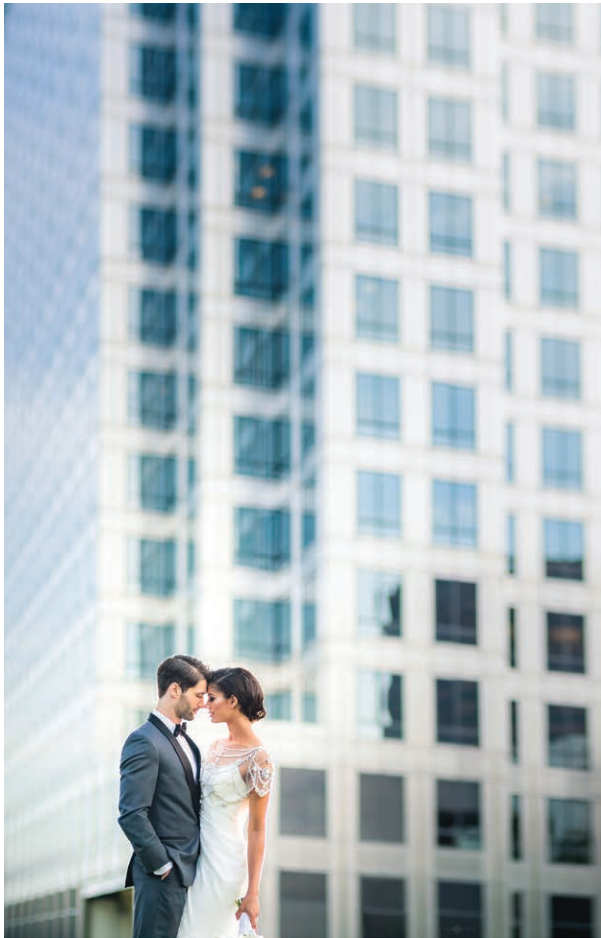
There's a quote from Bill Gates that Jirsa likes to repeat: "Most people overestimate what they can do in one year and underestimate what they can do in 10 years."

Have a plan and start out with the understanding that you won't turn a big profit for at least a couple of years. If you know you're laying the necessary groundwork for the coming years, you'll find it easier to stay on plan and keep working your strategy without running the risk of overextending yourself or becoming disenchanted early in the game.

wedding party, or family leap into the air simultaneously. You may not want to shoot it because it's not original, but your client wants it. Because although it's been done a million times, it hasn't been done for them.

"We have to understand that it's all new, it's all interesting to them," says Jirsa. "When your clients want something cliché, you have to love it and say you'll make it the best cliché ever. You don't have to put it on your website, but if it gets shared on Instagram that's OK. It's their image to do what they like with. Once they buy it, it's theirs. Move on."

One of Jirsa's clients requested a Godzilla bride and groom image. Jirsa wasn't excited about making that photo, but he didn't let the client know that. His approach was to conceptualize and present the cliché so well that it would go viral. And it did. "I'm a business person, and I'm in the business of making clients happy," he says. "But as an artist I also have the ability to make it better. That's the mentality to adopt. Photogra-



phers think a client is difficult when they simply know what they want. But those are the best clients because we know exactly how to make them happy.”

NEVER STOP LEARNING

Jirsa is still reading business books, productivity books, management books, self-improvement books. He averages one a week, he says, in addition to educational content he consumes online and elsewhere.

Continuous learning ties back to expectations: It encourages you to set new expectations, which keeps you on track for growth. It’s an ongoing process; there’s no magic formula that will enable a business—a photography business or otherwise—to thrive indefinitely. That’s what Jirsa wants passionate photographers to divert some of their energy toward: setting expectations, putting business first, and committing to continuous learning. It’s a time-consuming, career-long endeavor that’s absolutely worth the effort, he says. •

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POWER PRICING

By Amanda Arnold

There is no one-size-fits-all formula



Susan Stripling



“It seems fairly universal that when a photographer gets started, they’re afraid to ask a client for money, which is fascinating to me,” wedding photographer Susan Stripling says. “It seems like something you’d want to do. But everybody goes through a period of time where they’re shooting to build a portfolio and doing favors for friends. When they have to charge what they’re worth, artists seem to sort of pause because asking clients for money is something they have a hard time doing.”

In theory, it’s simple: A client requests your services, and you quote a price. But most photographers begin their careers by pricing themselves all wrong for far too long, says Stripling, who will deliver a session on pricing at Imaging USA 2017.

Stripling, who’s based in New York City, was no exception. In her first year as a pro she kept her prices low and built her portfolio. After about a year she felt tech her true worth, but she wasn’t sure what her pricing should be. Like many neophyte pros, she initially looked to her peers’ pricing to set her own—“a terrible thing to do,” she now admits, “because you have no idea why they’re pricing that way.” There are so many unknown factors that go into photographers’ pricing: They might have day jobs and do photography on the side, have spouses who are primary bread winners, or intentionally limit the number of sessions or weddings they do each year. Everybody’s business is unique so there’s no sense in trying to replicate a stranger’s pricing.

What to do instead? An in-depth cost analysis of your own business.



RUN THE NUMBERS

After three years in business, Stripling knew it was time to buckle down and analyze her costs so she could get her pricing right. She started by thinking about the number of weddings she wanted to shoot each year and how much money she would like to earn. In the New York market, because Friday and Sunday weddings are so common, Stripling projected that she could capture 20 to 50 weddings a year. She verified these were realistic numbers by looking at other photographers' blogs and websites to see how many weddings they were averaging a year.

Next she needed to determine her costs. For three months she entered every cost, no matter how small, into an Excel spreadsheet. And she logged every working hour—how long it took to cull photos for a wedding, how much time she spent on the phone with clients, how many hours she spent prepping images before sending them out

for post-processing, etc. By doing this tracking she discovered that she also spends a certain amount of time taking coffee breaks, checking Facebook, and wandering away from her computer, so a task that could take one hour might actually take an hour and a half. Though it was tough to admit, Stripling saw that was the reality. "There's no way to eliminate distraction," she says. So she'd build it into her rate.

After she calculated how much time she spent on each client from beginning to end, she established an hourly rate. "There is no one way to do that," she says. "That's something that's very unique for everybody. [Your rate] depends on how long you've been in business and your experience level."

In the end, after counting every penny and every hour, she determined that to make the income she wanted, her base sale would need a \$2,000 price increase—not a small sum. Instead of making



that increase outright, she tweaked her collections, removing some of the items in them so that her cost could come down.

MARKETING TO MATCH

Though she was happy to take the risk of adjusting prices to see her income grow, Stripling knew she would lose some referrals due to the increases. So she ramped up her marketing to attract a new, wealthier base of clientele.

The first thing she did was update her online portfolio so that photos from the most expensive venues in her area were front and center. Then she took on an even greater challenge—search engine optimization (SEO). She moved her website to a company with a more user-friendly platform for SEO. It took two months to overhaul her site with keywords. “There are now 135,000 words on my site,” she says. “Every image in my galleries has a caption. Every gallery page



SOLVE THEIR PROBLEM

"Clients are more willing to spend money when they feel like their money is going to solve a problem for them," says Stripling. That's why she offers advice that clients are likely to view as solving a problem they didn't know they had. For example, in her first consultation with a client, she asks whether they've selected a day-of planner. Many don't even realize yet that they need a day-of planner. Suddenly they have a problem, and Stripling has the solution, offering to refer them to a planner she recommends. It's outside the purview of photography yet it helps her sell herself as a wedding professional and as their photographer.

has a full description. It's just full of information for prospective clients, rich in keywords and helpful details."

The most important keywords for her are the names of the most expensive wedding venues in New York. "I figured that if clients were going to get married at those venues then they would have a decent budget for photography," she says. She wanted potential clients to stumble onto her site and her photographs when they Googled the names of those venues. Her plan worked. Three months after she began the SEO overhaul, traffic to her site spiked.

"People say that the only clients who are going to find you on Google are the cheap clients," she says. "But a solid 50 percent of my clients find me on Google. Do not discount the power of Google."

CLIENT CARE

With higher prices, Stripling knew she needed to elevate customer service. Initially she attracted a new base of clients via SEO. But

"People say that the only clients who are going to find you on Google are the cheap clients. But a solid 50 percent of my clients find me on Google. Do not discount the power of Google."





3 PRICING TIPS

1. Break out every cost that goes into every collection you create. There are lots of costs that people forget, like paying to park at the wedding venue.
2. Assess your market to see how many weddings your business can feasibly shoot in a year, then base your pricing around that.
3. Don't be afraid to admit when you've made a mistake. If your collections are not resonating with customers, you can revise.



after that, word-of-mouth referrals from these new clients would be her bread-and-butter. So she needed extremely happy clients—happy enough to think her prices were worth it and happy enough to tell their friends what a wonderful experience they’d had. “They can love your work all day long, but if they don’t like working with you, they’re not going to recommend you to their friends,” she says.

Attentive client care shows up in the little things. For example, Stripling worked to improve her response time to emails, and after the wedding, she sends handwritten notes to the bride and groom and to their parents thanking them for their business. She tells clients they will receive their images six weeks after the wedding, but she actually plans to deliver them in about four and a half weeks. When she delivers earlier than expected, clients perceive that she’s completed the job early and they’re thrilled. (This strategy also gives her a buffer should she need more time.)

EVER VIGILANT

After 16 years in the wedding business, Stripling has a studio that’s a well-oiled machine. Not that she’s complacent about pricing. She revisits her costs and her pricing each quarter, making adjustments if, for example, her album manufacturer has increased prices or the rent for her studio has gone up. “I am sort of in a constant state of vigilance,” she says, to remain profitable.

When she does increase prices, she does so incrementally over time, making subtle adaptations. “I don’t want to blow up my entire referral base,” she says. For example, with her most recent price increase, she raised the cost of her base collection a tiny bit but took an hour out of the session time. So if a client wants to add that time

back in, they have to pay for an hour of overtime. It’s a small enough tweak that it doesn’t rattle customers, but “If they add that hour back in, they’re paying a decent amount more.”

Currently Stripling does 50 weddings a year, and she’d like to cut back while maintaining the same income. “So I’m working to maximize my profitability from every single client,” she says. Toward that end, she’s in the process of making a few more changes. For example, she used to allow clients to add to their album by the image, but now they must add by the spread. “That makes it easier to upgrade to bigger albums,” she says. And she’s also moved her album design process offline. She used to forward clients a link to view the draft online and make changes. “It was convenient, but it resulted in no sales,” she says. Clients would forget to make the changes and albums would stall.

Her new tack is to send a link to the draft and then call that week to set up an appointment for the couple to come to the studio to finalize the album. Instead of feeling like an inconvenience, it feels like a bonus in customer service.

“The ones that have done it so far have been so happy,” she says. And she’s happy, too, averaging \$1,500 more in sales per album. Not too shabby for a minor tweak in service. •

susanstripling.com





GENERATIONS SERVING GENERATIONS

KEEPING UP WITH CLIENT EXPECTATIONS

by Jeff Kent

► There are very, very few photography businesses with the kind of longevity enjoyed by Fred Marcus Studio. Founded more than 70 years ago after Fred Marcus immigrated to the United States during World War II, the studio has been serving an upscale clientele from the same location in New York City ever since. Fred taught the business to his son, Andy, who in turn taught it to his son, Brian. And through the decades the Marcuses have built up a reputation and a client base to rival any wedding and portrait outfit in the country.

Times change and so, too, has the photog-

raphy business. As the world around them evolved, Andy and Brian, who run the studio these days, have changed with it. They've taken the traditional family studio model, pulled and stretched it, and created a burgeoning business that's been amplified many times over. Today, seven photographers work under the Fred Marcus umbrella, helping the studio photograph more than 200 weddings a year, along with dozens of portrait shoots and a healthy dose of commercial work.

The key, say Andy and Brian, is building an expansion system slowly and carefully

while nurturing a select group of photographers into positions of great responsibility.

UNDERSTANDING CONSUMERS

"Nobody has the ability to just start out shooting for us," explains Brian. "What separates our photographers is the ability to understand our clients." And that's no small thing. Fred Marcus Studio has always thrived on the strength of its long-term relationships with clients, and many of those relationships span generations. That's why it's important to help the entire staff understand



Andy Marcus

Brian Marcus



why clients keep coming back to the studio.

“We don’t look at a booking as one job,” adds Andy. “We look at it like multiple generations of business—clients coming back to you over and over again, their children coming to you, other members of their family. So we’ve been focused on finding and training people who understand how to work with these high-value clients.”

In today’s hyper-competitive photography marketplace, booking a job isn’t something that comes easy, even to a well-established studio like Fred Marcus. Earning the trust of a new client is even more difficult. Today’s consumers are used to a global shopping experience that allows them to compare products and prices across an endless spectrum of options. Pitching a high-end photography experience is tough, especially since there are no true apples-to-apples comparisons in professional photography.

CONSUMER EXPECTATIONS

Aside from relying on reputation, what can photographers do to attract the next generation of clients?

“It’s critical to recognize that every generation has its own expectations,” says Andy. “We could have a new client who’s in her 20s and came to us because her parents and grandparents were photographed by our studio. But this new client has completely different expectations and wants something entirely different out of the experience.”

The Marcus team gathers as many details as possible during the initial consultations, taking nothing for granted. A daughter might have entirely different tastes than her mother, so photographing one doesn’t necessarily mean success photographing the other. Andy, Brian, and their team of photographers, don’t make assumptions; they treat each new client engagement as the next chance to earn a customer for life.

“This isn’t a game,” says Brian. “People are paying us to photograph one of the most important days in their lives. And they keep coming back to us because of the quality of work and the level of service—people know what they are going to get.”

That surety has value. Clients don’t want to feel that they’re taking a chance on their wedding. They want to be confident that the longest-lasting aspect of that day is going to go off without a hitch.

STYLE CONVENTIONS

Client expectations include the style of photography they’ll be getting. For the photographer, that means delivering consistency without stifling one’s creativity.

“Our studio has a definite style,” says Andy. “People look at our work and recognize it. It’s visible and real.



It also sets us apart.”

Perpetuating the distinctive Fred Marcus style is a matter of constant, hands-on training with every new photographer. It involves in-studio instruction in posing, lighting, composition, and the overall approach. Andy and Brian review images with their photographers every week, looking at what could be improved. “We try to give people the confidence to bring their unique strengths to the table,” says Brian. “On the other hand, we teach a common structure and style that we want to impose throughout our work.” The combination of that individuality expressed through an established construct is what gives Fred Marcus Studio a style that’s identifiable, yet flexible and highly relevant.

Maintaining the style and growing the business has been a matter of buy-in by all parties. The photographers buy into the idea of being part of a collaborative company. And Andy and Brian buy into their photographe-



ers, investing time and resources to help build their careers. “I’m their agent, so to speak,” says Brian. “Most photographers are not willing or able to open their own studio in New York. It’s a big risk and expense. But our photographers have a dedicated salesman and an established business representing them, selling them, promoting their name as part of the studio. That allows them to focus on their craft and excel at what they do.”

QUALITY WORTHY OF INVESTMENT

Most of all, the evolution of a successful studio takes constant attention and a work ethic that doesn’t allow settling. “The business has changed a lot, even in the last five years,” says Brian. “It is a lot more difficult these days to gain the trust of new clients and prove that we are worth the investment. It takes working harder each day to gain that trust.”

Building a business that stands the test of time means understanding who your real cli-

ents are and catering to their needs, say Andy and Brian. Start with just one client who is ideal for your business.

“Do whatever it takes to build off of that one client,” Brian recommends. “There are so many ways to do that. If you photograph a wedding, that can spawn many new things. Stay in touch, and stay in front of them. If they’re starting a family, you’re in a position to do family portraits and much more. Do a holiday card for them, then it goes out to 200 people, and those are 200 new potential customers. Don’t stop thinking about how to present your work and your best qualities. And don’t let them get away.”

“Not only that, let them work for you,” says Andy. “You can create emissaries out there who can spread the word and help bring more business to you. To do that you need to set yourself apart from the competition, be consistent, and continually impress your clients. It’s not about doing one great wedding or one great portrait; it’s about doing each one better than the last. If you can accomplish that, great things start to happen.” •

fredmarcus.com

