


The Photographer's MBA

Everything You Need
to Know for Your
Photography Business

Sal Cincotta





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Peachpit Press

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I would like to dedicate this book to my wife Taylor, my mother Terri, and my entire team. This has been one hell of a ride. Without them, none of this would have been possible. Thank you for all your love and support—it never goes unnoticed.

Table of Contents

Introduction	viii
one So You Want to Be a Photographer	
A Career as a Professional Photographer	4
The Cons	6
The Pros	16
Getting Started	22
Final Thoughts	24
Next Steps	25
two Let's Talk Business	
Make It Real	29
Types of Business Entities	29
three The Business Plan	
It Doesn't Have to Be Painful	46
Key Terms and Definitions	48
Putting It into Practice	49
Your Mission Statement	49
Your Vision Statement	52
The Business Plan	54
Next Steps	65





four Branding

What Does It All Mean?	68
Defining Your Brand	68
What Is Your X-Factor?	86
Next Steps	87

five The Marketing Plan

Marketing Defined	90
Marketing Options	92
Next Steps	105

six Getting Social

The Importance of the Web	108
SEO	115
Social Media	119
Next Steps	125

seven Costs and Pricing

Costs	128
Pricing	132
Establishing Value	139
Next Steps	145

eight Contracts

Protecting Your Personal Assets	148
Get Legal	149
Wedding Contract Basics	151
Model Releases	157
Copyright Releases	158



Limited Copyright Releases	159
Second Shooter Agreements	160
Next Steps	163

nine Finding Your Niche

What Is Out There?	166
Where to Start?	175
Next Steps	179

Index	180
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Introduction

Like most photographers, our studio had very humble beginnings. I was a corporate slave working in a cubicle every day, working my tail off for someone else. I loved photography and had been exposed to it at a very early age. My aunt had a darkroom in the basement and my love was born. Now, I'm not going to lie. I had been an amateur for most of my life. Around 2006, a friend and co-worker got me reenergized about photography, and I knew this was what I wanted to be when I grew up.

In 2008, our first year as professionals, our studio grossed \$50,000. Hardly a living compared to my salary and benefits in corporate America. We nearly lost everything we had after that year. Looking down the barrel of foreclosure and bankruptcy, I knew something had to change. And it did! I put my business degree to work. Instead of trying to emulate what other photographers were doing in their business, I used my business training to establish a bona fide business model and plan for my newly formed company. And we have never looked back! In 2011, gross sales for our studio crossed the \$1 million mark. I share that with you so that you know anything is possible. We grew our business in blue-collar America during the middle of a recession.

When I decided to go pro back in 2008, my biggest frustration was the lack of quality educational material out there. No one would share the business side of things. Everyone wanted to tell you about flash and posing. And

when the topic of business would come up, it was always this cloak-and-dagger conversation. They would share, but not too much. After all, we might steal all their secrets. Well, I needed real substance, not fluff.

Wow, things sure have changed in the last five years! Today, not only is everyone a photographer, but everyone is an educator.

For me, there is a lot of responsibility that comes with being an educator. Unfortunately, I see a lot of people out there for the money, and that is the wrong motivation. Our industry and our profession is in trouble right now. We need help. We need to raise the bar or soon there will no longer be a professional photographer. When I decided to get involved with the educational side of our industry, I knew I had to be willing to share everything I knew. That is my promise to you as a student.

When I was coming up, no one was willing to show what was behind the curtain. Well, here we go. This book is meant to get you on the right track when it comes to the business of photography. It's not tied to any specific genre of photography, nor is it meant to be. Instead, it's a broad overview of the business side of things. If there is something I see photographers struggling with the world over, it's the business side of photography. This is a great launch point for your business. And make no mistake, this is the first in a series of books where we drill down into the various aspects of starting up, maintaining, and growing your business.

In reading this book, the best advice I can offer is to get your highlighter and use this book as a reference for everything you are doing with your business. Read it over and over again until it fully makes sense to you. Most importantly, do something with all this information. Don't sit on it. Look for ways to incorporate it into your business and get your business moving in the right direction.

Much love and success,

Sal Cincotta

For more training and education from Sal, be sure to follow him online:

Web: www.behindtheshutter.com

Twitter: @salcincotta





four

Branding

TODAY, ALL PEOPLE talk about is branding, branding, branding. But what does it really mean? In this chapter, you'll drill down into branding and discover what it means for you and your business. Without a doubt, branding is one of the most important facets to your business; without it, you run the risk of getting lost in a sea of photographers. Think about some of the brands you know and love. Are they exclusive brands or low-cost providers? Which do you want to be? Let's find out!

What Does It All Mean?

It wouldn't be a business book if we didn't open up with the standard definition.

Branding. According to Wikipedia, a brand is a “name, term, design, symbol, or any other feature that identifies one seller's good or service as distinct from those of other sellers.”

Right now, you might be thinking, “That's great, Sal, but what in the world do I do with that?”

Understanding the term helps you start thinking the right way about branding. And by “thinking the right way,” I mean thinking beyond your brand. See, my philosophy is simple. Wherever we go, branding is slapping all of us in the head. Sometimes this is obvious whereas at other times it's very subtle. But, I promise you, it's there.

Now that you understand the definition, I want you to start looking around at everywhere you go, everything you read, everything you listen to, and everything you watch. Just being honest, it's in the bathroom, too! Think about what you're seeing, what you're being influenced by, and how it's altering your behavior and decision-making process.

If you can understand how branding impacts you, you'll quickly realize how it's impacting your customers and their decision-making process when selecting a photographer or ordering products.

This is important stuff. Take notes and start thinking about how you can incorporate these concepts into your business.

Defining Your Brand

An effective branding strategy gives your business a leg up on the competition. Think about it: photographers are everywhere. From the consumer's perspective, it's a daunting task to select one. What makes your business stand out from the crowd? Did you know that your brand is not only about your logo or website? As you'll see later in this chapter, everything will

define your brand—from the way you pose your clients to the editing techniques you choose in postproduction. You have to be able to establish yourself in the marketplace and stand out from the crowd.

In order to define your brand, let's embark on a little exercise. Back to the pen and pad. Here we go:

- What is your company mission? Your vision?
- What are the benefits and features of your products that differentiate you from your competition?
- What existing perceptions, if any, are there about your brand? (This is important if you're an established studio trying to reinvent yourself.)
- When people think of your brand, what do you want them to think or feel?

Once you've answered these questions, you can start putting together a better picture of your brand identity.

For example, our studio is perceived to be expensive in our market. I am okay with that. That's part of our brand. There's a set of perceptions that comes along with higher prices. (Better quality and better service are just two of them.)

Now, I'm not naïve. I get it. Just because you're more expensive doesn't mean you are better in any way, shape, or form. In fact, I bet we all have personal experiences in our lives that we can draw on where we've paid more under this pretense and been let down. However, as cliché as it sounds, perception is reality. We can look to examples in the real world to support this—Louis Vuitton, Mercedes-Benz, Lexus, Tiffany, True Religion, and a host of other high-end brands. The people who can afford these brands love them. They offer a high-end, rich, unique experience and product, and guess what? People are willing to pay a premium for that level of quality and service.

Let's go the other way with this example—Wal-Mart, Volkswagen, Kia, Odd Lots, Old Navy. These are perceived as value brands, offering average or below average quality at a cheap-to-reasonable price.

What's your personal perception of these brands? Would you ever go into Wal-Mart and pay over \$200 for a pair of jeans? Probably not. Do you know

why? Because the average consumer has preconceived notions about the quality of product and the price point when walking into a store like Wal-Mart, and they'd more than likely reject a product in that price range. The same would happen on the other end of the spectrum, by the way. If a high-end consumer walked into a Louis Vuitton store and was presented with a \$10 pair of sunglasses, they'd immediately assume the glasses were of inferior quality; ultimately, those sunglasses *would*—not *could*—have a negative impact on the overall brand.

So let's step back here and apply this to your current world. What does your brand say about you? What category do you want to play in? Do you want to be seen as an artist offering a unique product or service, or would you rather appeal to the masses providing the low-cost solution to professional photography?

If you chose the latter, I suggest you put this book down. It's not for you. You'll be out of business in the next 6–12 months and you'll never be able to take care of your family, buy new equipment, or retire. Sorry. That's reality. I know what some of you must be thinking or feeling right now: "Wow, Sal, that's harsh!" You know what, it is harsh. It's harsh, it's reality, and it's tough love. When I started writing this book, I wanted to help photographers who want to make a career out of this amazing skill we have. This skill is not meant to be mass-produced. As an artist, your vision is tied directly to you. And do you know what you are? A very limited resource. There's only so much of you to go around. You can only shoot so many sessions per year. Show me another product or service based on limited resources that is mass-produced and cheap. After you're done thinking about it and realize there are none, let's get moving. We have a business to build for you!

So, as we move forward, here are a few more questions to ask yourself:

- ▶ What segment of the market do you want to go after?
- ▶ What will you do to stand out from the crowd?
- ▶ Does your current brand support this vision?

Let's assume you have some work to do here. And let's start looking at how to define and create your brand.



The Obvious Pieces

When you're putting your brand together, there are some obvious pieces and some not-so-obvious pieces that go into your brand. By obvious, I mean that you see these every day with the brands you know and love. To a certain extent, some of the obvious ones might be so subliminal that you don't even realize you're being targeted by someone's brand.

What are the obvious pieces of a brand? They're the basics that most people should think of when they're defining their brand. The following list isn't exhaustive, but it will surely get you off in the right direction:

- ▶ Name
- ▶ Colors
- ▶ Website
- ▶ Logo
- ▶ Sounds
- ▶ Marketing pieces
- ▶ Tagline
- ▶ Blog
- ▶ Packaging
- ▶ Graphics
- ▶ Facebook



Let's explore each of these, but before we do, I want you to indulge me in a little exercise. I want you to pick three words that best describe your brand as it stands today. In fact, take it a step further. Have people close to you offer words that best describe your brand through their eyes. This is going to be tough to listen to, but it's for the betterment of you and your business.

Now, I want you to select three words that best describe your brand as you want it to be seen in the very near future. For our business, we chose *creative*, *stylish*, and *award-winning*.

Why are these three words so important? Because they should dictate everything you do from this point on as it pertains to defining and creating your brand. You need these terms to drive your name, logo, tagline, and all the other items on your brand list. You can't describe your brand as creative and then have a noncreative logo. Use these keywords to inspire your business and the next steps.



Name

Easy, right? Just pick a name and let's go. Holy cow! Stop the madness. As you can imagine, I see lots and lots of business names, and I knew that for this book, I had to write a little section on what goes into a name.

Ladies and gentlemen, this is it! This is the first thing most people will speak when they're speaking of your brand. Choose wisely. I think you have two options here. Either go with your personal name or select a unique name altogether. Each approach comes with its own set of pros and cons.

Select your own name and the business is tied directly to you. You become the face of the brand. Your brand will live and die by you. We set up our business to be Salvatore Cincotta Photography. The brand is inextricably tied to me. This is great news if you're building your brand to be a limited-resource high-end artist. However, what happens if you ever try to sell your business? What's your exit strategy? I have news; it's going to be near impossible for me to sell my business with this name. But in the meantime, I'm able to charge a premium as an exclusive photographer. Plus, it doesn't hurt that I have a unique name.

What if you select a somewhat generic name? You run the risk of being perceived as a generic box store of sorts. This becomes a challenge as you try to build your brand and charge more for your services. On the plus side, you can add and subtract photographers without impacting your overall brand, and best of all, you can sell the business at some point if you choose to.

Whatever option you choose, please do me a favor and take some of my advice. Leave religion, politics, and hobbies out of the name. No one cares that you're extremely religious, or that you're a Republican, or that you love dancing pigs. If you do something like this, you immediately alienate a part of the market. And the one thing you need to understand as a business person is that you don't want to accidentally alienate any segment of the market due to race, religion, or politics. Saving Grace Photography: no! Right-Winged Photos: no! Funky Town Express Studio: come on. I hope you get where I'm going with this. Think about your name, and most importantly, think about how it's going to be received by the consumer. Better yet, look to corporate and find an example of an extremely successful brand that incorporates race, religion, or politics into their names that aren't related to companies that are race or religion, or politically tied.





Your name will dictate and influence the perceptions about your brand. Choose wisely and ask people you can trust for their honest gut reaction.

Logo

I know. You have Adobe Photoshop and Illustrator and now you're a professional graphic designer. They must feel like we do, don't you think? Everyone has a camera and now everyone is a professional photographer. Just because you can doesn't mean you should. Let the pros do their thing. They understand the importance of a good logo. Your logo will be everywhere—your website, marketing material, and so forth. It's worth the \$500–\$700 that it'll cost you to get it done.

Salvatore Cincotta

The logo should match the personality of you and your business. Things to consider: Do you want to be super artsy with it? Clean and simple? Work with your graphic artist and ensure he or she has those three keywords that describe your brand.

Tagline

Closely related to your logo is the tagline. The tagline can be a simple one-sentence descriptor that conveys the essence of your brand. Don't overthink it, and don't make it corny. And again, it should match the overall tone of your brand.

We used our three keywords as our tagline. "Salvatore Cincotta Photography/Creative. Stylish. Award-Winning." For us, that was perfect. Clean, simple, and to the point.

Graphics

Graphics are the elements you choose to incorporate into your logo. A graphic can be as simple as a flower or as random as the ribbon on a can of Coca-Cola. This element is not a must-have. It should complement your logo and add to the overall look and feel of the brand. If not, then you just might be forcing it.

Our main logo, Salvatore Cincotta Photography doesn't include any graphical elements. However, one of our logos for our top-end clients, Black Label, does incorporate graphics into the logo to give it a richer look and feel.



Colors

As odd as it may sound, the colors you choose are also tied to your brand. I don't know that there's a right or wrong answer here. However, I do think you need to consider colors before moving forward with logos, website design, marketing material, and so forth.

A question worth asking: Who is your demographic? If you're a family photographer, you're more than likely targeting families. If you're targeting families, typically mom is the decision maker. Therefore, I suggest that your brand, logos, colors, tagline, and so on be geared more toward women. Now keep in mind that you run the risk of alienating men, but in this case, maybe the pros outweigh the cons.

In our business, we target weddings and seniors, and those are two very different demographics. So, rather than focus on any single one color, we opted to remain neutral in our design, colors, and use of graphics.

Sounds

Really, Sal? Sounds? Yes indeed. Even the sounds you select for your website, hold music, studio music, and slideshows impact and define your brand.

Companies like Apple spend millions of dollars perfecting the right sound for when you turn on your computer or send an email, or when an error message pops up. Next time you get into your car, pay a little more attention to the sounds your car makes when you put the key into the ignition, put the car in reverse, or take any other actions. It's even more pronounced when you go from a car about 10 years old to a new one. You can hear the difference in a significant way.

For us, we opt to only have music on our site with slideshows. We feel it sets the tone and gets people in the mood to watch our portfolio slideshow. I use a company called SongFreedom.com to get legal access to mainstream music for my website. There's nothing worse than going to a website and listening to 1980s keyboard music. That's not my brand or my demographic. Is it yours?

Blog/Facebook/Website

I have lumped all three of these together not because they are necessarily the same things, but because they are all geared toward the same audience in a digital way.

Certainly the graphical pieces are important to your brand; that's a given. The piece that most people don't even think about is the voice. No, not your actual voice—your written voice. See, when you write, how you write, what

you write about—that becomes your voice and ultimately becomes part of your brand.

I'm going to level with you. No one, and I mean no one, cares what you ate for breakfast, or about your philosophy on manicured lawns or the host of mundane thoughts you have rolling through your head on a given day. Okay, maybe your mom cares, but beyond that, no one.

Your social media presence should not be your soapbox. Believe it or not, people come to your site to see great images! To be inspired. To hire a great photographer. So, rather than talk about what you ate for breakfast or your bike ride, give them what they want: great images!

Don't get me wrong; I've heard from all the "experts" in our industry about how such personal ramblings allow the clients to see who we are as real people. Um, maybe it's just lost on me, but I gotta be honest here. When I walk into a restaurant, I want great food and great service. I don't want to know too many personal details about the chef, what movie he recently saw, or why he loves baby kangaroos. I want to know things that are relevant to my meal.


Now it's your turn. When you select a product or brand, do the daily tribulations of the CEO influence your buying decisions? Or do you make your decisions another way? I'd be shocked if you told me you selected a pair of jeans because you heard that the CEO of The Gap liked yellow jellybeans.

Be conscious of your social presence and what information you're pushing out to the masses. If it doesn't help your brand, it's definitely hurting it.

Marketing Pieces

Whatever marketing pieces you put out there—whether they're flyers, direct mail pieces, or point-of-sale displays—should all be tied back to the brand, the logo, the colors, and other elements. If you have a corporate-looking brand—clean and simple—then putting together a marketing piece with frilly flowers and design elements might confuse your client base and they might not even realize it's your brand.


Nike is a perfect example of a branding machine. It's all about the swoosh. Their marketing is clean and simple. It matches the overall brand. They let the product (and typically the athlete) speak for itself; the swoosh is there just to reinforce the brand and the message. Just Do It.



Salvatore Cinotta
CREATIVE | STYLISH | AWARD-WINNING

amazing.
breathtaking.
unique. one-of-a-kind.
creative. stylish.
award-winning.
wow. ridiculous.
stupid. mind-blowing.
epic.

when only the best photography will do.
two great options.
one award-winning studio.

 prices starting at \$1999 // Salvatore Cinotta prices starting at \$4999

www.salvincotta.com // 314.800.3718

In our studio, we try to ensure anything going out is recognizable by our customer base. We spend a lot of money on marketing and advertising, but if no branding is tied to it, then all that effort and money has been lost. No one will remember who we are or that the message was tied to our company. Be sure to invest in marketing collateral that's cohesive with the overall vision and brand.

Packaging

Packaging is a tough concept for most studios. I see a lot of people I work with struggle with this one. You make a huge investment in the product—perfecting your craft, the right equipment, your logo, and your website—and then you drop the ball when it comes time to deliver your products to the consumer.

You can't be the Louis Vuitton of our industry and deliver your products to the client in a plastic polybag. When you do this, you're saying, "Hey guys, I know you spent a lot of money with us. Here's some junk I have for you to take home."

Louis Vuitton probably spends more money on their packaging and delivery of their product than they do on the actual product. I'm only half joking



here, but seriously, their packaging is like no other I've ever seen or experienced, and there is a good reason for that. They charge a premium for their products.

Our studio has tried to adopt a similar philosophy when it comes to delivering product to our clients. We hand-deliver products to our high-end clients and blow them away with our level of service. As far as packaging goes, we've spent a considerable amount of time and money creating a richly branded packaging experience so our clients feel as though they're getting the most precious of gifts.

The Not-So-Obvious Pieces

Wow. We covered a lot of things and I'm sure I have your head spinning right now with new ideas and concepts to consider. And that's awesome! That's what this is all about. Let's shake things up in your business.

Before you get too far down the rabbit hole, I want you to start thinking about a few things that aren't so obvious when it comes to branding. I find a lot of people don't think about these things at all, or if they do, they just don't care enough to give them the time and attention they deserve. I promise you, pay attention here, because this is just as important as everything I listed earlier, if not more so:

- ▶ Your dress
- ▶ Your personality
- ▶ Posing styles
- ▶ Editing techniques
- ▶ Lighting techniques
- ▶ Product lines
- ▶ Pricing

We'll explore each of these factors to show how you can make changes in your business and how they currently might impact you in either a positive or negative way.

Your Dress

Yes, the way you dress matters. You want someone to spend thousands of dollars in your studio, but you want to dress like a slob? Don't get me wrong; I'm all about hanging out in jeans and a t-shirt, but this hipster look

that's in right now is not going to bode well for your business. The way you dress says a lot about who you are as a person.

Don't believe me? The next time you walk into a store, don't talk to anyone; just look at the person working at the counter. In fact, you should put this book down right now and go do this. This is an important exercise.

Walk into Wal-Mart. Walk into McDonald's. How are the people dressed? What's your perception of them? Now ask yourself, would you trust them with \$5,000–\$10,000 dollars to document the biggest day of your life? To document your child's wedding day? Why not, just because of the way someone is dressed?

Is it superficial? Oh, without a doubt. I'm not endorsing this way of thinking at all. In fact, I try with every ounce of energy I have not to pre-judge people. However—and this is a big however—this is the world we live in. So, I'm not going to stick my head in the sand and pretend it doesn't exist. I know when people walk into my studio, they are judging me—consciously or subconsciously—within seconds. I'm aware of it and I make sure that when I'm meeting with clients I'm dressed appropriately for my brand. Creative. Stylish. Award-Winning. You don't show up in a tuxedo and you don't show up in cargo shorts and flip-flops.

Your Personality

Minds are being blown right now. “Wait, first you tell me the way I dress matters and now you want to tell me that my personality matters? Won't people just hire me because of my art?” No. No, they won't. They're hiring you just as much for your personality as they're hiring you for your art. In fact, though most of my clients are drawn to my artwork, I believe most hire me because of my personality. That's without a doubt my X-factor. When it comes to wedding clients, they're more than likely asking themselves, “Can I spend 8–10 hours with this person? Sure, he seems like he'll make the day fun and exciting.”

Again, this is reality. If I were hiring someone for my big event, I'd surely want to have fun with them. If their personality sucked, then there's a good chance the pictures aren't going to be good. As we all know, there's an art to getting people to respond to the things we need them to do in front of the camera.

Our business is different than other businesses. We spend significant amounts of time with our clients, so personality is a major consideration. Keep your energy level up, don't talk about yourself (no one cares), listen to the client, ask lots of questions about them and what they're looking for, and you'll be well on your way to winning over clients.

Posing Styles

The way you pose your clients says more about your studio than you can imagine. I look at websites all day long and I can see a traditional photographer a mile away. Which, by the way, isn't a problem if that's the client you're targeting. However, I'm going after the young trendy bride; those are the ones with money to spend and who love photography. If I were to showcase traditional poses on my website—but have a cool site with a cool new logo—I'd be sending my potential clients mixed messages. And they'd more than likely look elsewhere.

Posing is a tough thing to figure out. Do you direct your clients or do you just let them do their own thing? When is there too much direction? Every photographer has a different style of directing. There's no right or wrong answer here. Just be consistent with your posing and make sure you're targeting the right clients.

Editing Techniques

Today's client is becoming more and more tech savvy. This is a trend that will continue as time goes on. Kids are exposed to iPhones, editing tools, and a host of plug-ins at a very early age.

I have moms asking me to use “the skinny tool” on them. They understand HDR, vignette-ing, and a host of other techniques that were once only understood by the most technical of us. We have to adapt or die.

Sure, we have to create a good image in camera. We have to understand exposure, lighting, and composition, but we can't deliver printed images in an unpolished fashion. We color-correct, soften skin, and use a host of plug-ins to create a unique and artistic look for our images and our clients. Without this, our clients are going to have a tough time looking at our images and seeing them as “art” when they truly believe they can go buy a camera and

take the same images on their own. Editing techniques allow my studio to stand out from the crowd.

Lighting Techniques

Closely related to editing are your lighting techniques. The easiest way for a professional to stand out from the weekend warrior is to use off-camera flash. This strikes fear into the heart of the average photographer. New photographers—and not all of them—typically grab a camera, slap that bad boy into “P” for Pro, and they’re off to the races, basking in all that glory we know as natural light. Awesome, but what happens when it gets dark? You done for the day? What happens when you can’t shoot during that gold hour? You go home?

I shoot 12 hours a day in nearly any lighting situation. Not because I’m great, but because I’m a professional and committed to my craft. Sure, it’s a little more complicated than natural light, but take some time and practice, practice, practice, and you’ll get the gist of it. Soon, your images will have a distinctive look and feel that separates you from the crowd.

There’s a never-ending supply of lighting toys available to us, from reflectors to continuous lighting sources. Use whatever works for you. Get out there and play! And most of all, don’t be afraid to make mistakes.

Product Lines

If you want to be a high-end studio or brand, then you have to offer the appropriate products to your clients. All too often—typically because you aren’t charging enough—studios offer the cheapest prints, the cheapest canvases, and the cheapest albums. Well, guess what? You’re never going to be able to charge a premium until you start carrying products that command premium pricing.

Again, we don’t have to look far to see this in practice. Think about something that you’re into. A hobby, for example. I’m into golf. I love it. I don’t play enough, but I love it nonetheless. I can buy a set of clubs for \$89 and I can buy a set for \$1,999. I guess to a certain extent they all do the same thing; they allow me to strike the ball. However, there’s a plethora of features that make the more expensive line, well, more expensive. Bigger sweet spot to



allow me to hit the ball off-center. Strong club shaft. Better grips, custom fit to my height, and so forth.

Maybe golf isn't your thing. What is your thing? And what do you like about one product line offered by a company compared to another? Your potential clients are going to be asking the same thing. And if you find that sweet spot, you're going to be able to charge a premium for that product or service.

Albums are probably the number one product we offer that allows us to stand out from the crowd. And you could make the argument that a book is a book is a book. Well, when you come to our studio and you get to see and feel our books, it becomes something a bride has to have. The leather is like no other. We offer crushed-velvet liners versus a standard black paper liner. The covers are something most other studios won't carry because it's more expensive to get samples. The sizes we offer are also unique. One of our most unique sizes is an 8x20. Clients love it!

If you want clients to perceive your brand as a high-end brand, you have to have products that are perceived as high-end and exclusive to you. What makes them unique?

Pricing

Ah, yes. Pricing. The archnemesis of almost every artist around the world. This can make or break you and your brand. Charge too little and you risk being perceived as just a guy/gal with a camera. Charge too much and you risk pricing yourself out of the market. Though we won't explore pricing models and strategies here, I will tell you that how you price your work will have a profound impact on the success or failure of your business. We try to price our session fees and products so that we appeal to the middle through higher end of the market.

Don't underestimate this part of your business. Every time I sit with a photographer, they say the same thing. "I can't raise my prices. The clients I have now are already complaining I charge too much!" Right. That's because you're going after the wrong clients. You're priced too low and therefore attracting the client who wants quantity versus quality. Trust me—raise your prices, and you'll start attracting a different caliber of client.

Pricing is directly related to the perception of your brand. Within our local community, people know we're a high-end studio and they treat us differently because of that. They treat us like, well, artists.

What Is Your X-Factor?

When it's all said and done, your brand is your X-factor. All the pieces have to work and flow together to create a cohesive look, feel, thought, and experience. It's hard work, for sure, and it's never over. We work on our brand nearly every day. In everything we do, we consider how it impacts the brand. I encourage you to spend a significant amount of time working on this part of your business. Yes, we have to be shooters and students of our craft, but we have to be students of business, too. There's no better place to look than corporate America for inspiration. These are companies that spend millions of dollars working on their brand. They have it figured out. Who am I to argue with them? I just want to find a way to incorporate some of their techniques into my own business. So should you.

Next Steps ►►►

I want you to try a little exercise I have done in the past with great success. I want you to consider having a focus group discussion with some of your clients, both past and present—maybe even friends. Offer them a free photo session to participate. Have dinner or pizza brought in and make it fun. Shouldn't take more than an hour of their time. To get them excited, thank them for being great clients and let them know you're going through a branding reboot and wanted to pick their brains for an hour for some honest feedback.

Before the meeting, list the five key words you would like your brand to be known for. Creative. Stylish. Award-Winning. Luxurious. Rich. Come up with whatever matches your brand as you'd like it to be perceived. Take that piece of paper. Fold it. And put it away for now.

At the meeting, once everyone gets there, keep it relaxed—eat, drink, and just chat away. After about 30 minutes, kick off the meeting. Explain to everyone that you're looking for honest feedback because you're trying to take your company and your brand to the next level. Then, project your logo on the screen at your studio or print it on a single sheet of paper. Have everyone write down three adjectives that describe their thoughts about your logo. No need for them to write their name down. Remember, the goal is to keep it stress-free and get honest feedback.

Do the same thing for your website, for your packaging, and anything else you want honest feedback on. Then compare the feedback with that folded piece of paper you created. The feedback might really shock you and open your eyes to one major issue: Your perception of your brand might be skewed compared to that of your clients. And that's a huge problem that needs to be rectified immediately.



Index

A

accountants, 12
advertising, 60, 91
 Facebook, 99–101
 Google AdWords, 101
 magazine, 98
 television, 94–95
 See also marketing
AdWords, Google, 101
a la carte pricing, 133
album offerings, 85, 141
apprenticeships, 175

B

baby photography, 169–170
behindtheshutter.com, ix, 50
blogs, 122–124
 branding via, 77–78
 Facebook links to, 123
 images added to, 124
 marketing through, 98–99
 posting frequently on, 123
 professionalism of, 123–124
 SEO considerations for, 124
 See also social media; websites
bookkeeping, 12
branding, 67–87
 colors for, 76–77
 definition of, 68
 dress related to, 81–82
 editing techniques and, 83–84
 focus group discussion on, 87
 graphic elements used for, 76
 lighting techniques and, 84
 logos used for, 75–76
 marketing pieces for, 78–79
 names chosen for, 74–75
 packaging as part of, 79, 81
 personality related to, 82
 posing styles and, 83
 pricing related to, 86, 136–139
 product lines and, 84–85
 social media and, 77–78
 sounds used for, 77
 strategy consideration, 68–70
 tagline used for, 76

 three-words exercise, 73
 websites used for, 77–78, 111
 X-factor determination, 86
breach of contract, 151
bundling products/services, 135
business entities, 27–42
 corporations, 40–42
 DBAs (doing business as), 34–35
 LLCs (limited liability companies), 38–39
 partnerships, 35–36
 sole proprietorships, 30–33
business plan, 48, 54–65
 company description, 58
 creation process, 46–47, 65
 executive summary, 55
 financial projections, 63–64
 management profile, 59
 market analysis, 57
 marketing strategy, 60
 organizational structure, 58
 ownership information, 58
 product/service description, 63
 sales strategy, 60–61

C

C corporations, 40
career considerations, 4–22
center of operations, 7–8
clients
 changing the experience of, 145
 dealing with expectations of, 15–16
Coca-Cola examples, 50, 52
COGS (cost of goods sold), 128–130
colors for brand, 76
communication strategy, 60
company description, 58
competition issues, 8–9
competitive analysis, 57
consumer perspective, 8
contracts, 147–163
 copyright releases, 158–159
 model releases, 157–158
 second shooter agreements, 160–162
 wedding contracts, 151–157

- copyright
 - release forms for, 158–159
 - second shooter agreements and, 162
 - stipulating in contracts, 154
- corporations, 40–42
 - definition of, 40
 - legal implications of, 40, 149
 - pros and cons of, 41–42
 - summary thoughts about, 42
 - tax issues for, 40, 41
- costs/expenses, 11–12, 128–130
- creativity, 16–17, 143–144
- credit-based pricing, 133–134
- critical success factors, 49
- customer service
 - client expectations and, 15–16
 - value of, 140–141, 145

D

- DBAs (doing business as), 34–35
 - definition of, 34
 - summary thoughts about, 34–35
 - tax implications of, 34
- defining your brand, 68–70
- deposits, nonrefundable, 153
- digital revolution, 13–14
- direct mail, 95–96
- dress, importance of, 81–82

E

- editing techniques, 83–84
- entrepreneurial risks, 6–7
- event photography, 167
- exclusive photographer clause, 155–157
- executive summary, 55
- expenses/costs, 11–12, 128–130
- experience, 144
- expertise, 102

F

- Facebook, 119–122
 - advertising on, 99–101
 - branding through, 77–78
 - business pages on, 119–120
 - friend requests on, 121–122
 - importance of using, 14, 119
 - posting frequently on, 120–121
 - See also* social media
- family photography, 169–170
- fictitious names, 30, 34

- file-naming process, 116
- financial projections, 63–64
- finding your niche, 165–179
- fine art portraiture, 172–173
- focus groups, 87
- friend requests, 121–122

G

- general partnerships, 35
- generalists vs. specialists, 177–178
- glamour/boudoir photography, 168
- Google AdWords, 101
- governing laws, 157
- graphics for brand, 76
- growth strategy, 60
- guerilla marketing, 92

H

- happy, business of, 18–20
- high school seniors, 168–169

I

- impact images, 114–115
- inbound links, 118
- income, 4, 21
- incorporation, 12
- industry description, 57
- inspiration, 25
- Internet. *See* social media; websites
- internships, 25

K

- keywords
 - Google AdWords, 101
 - search engine optimization, 116

L

- landscape photography, 166–167
- lawsuits, 30, 148–149, 154
- legal/liability issues
 - contracts and, 154, 163
 - corporations and, 40, 149
 - LLCs and, 38, 39
 - partnerships and, 35
 - sole proprietorships and, 31–32
- legal/professional services, 12
- lighting techniques, 84
- limited copyright releases, 159
- limited partnerships, 35
- links to website, 118, 123

LLCs (limited liability companies), 38–39
 definition of, 38
 pros and cons of, 39
 summary thoughts about, 39
logos, 75–76
Louis Vuitton, 79–81, 145

M

magazine ads, 98
management profile, 59
market analysis, 57
market penetration strategy, 60
marketing, 89–105
 advertising as, 60, 91
 blogging used as, 98–99
 branding related to, 78–79
 charity-based, 96
 definition of, 90
 direct mail, 95–96
 Facebook, 99–101
 Google AdWords, 101
 magazine, 98
 press release, 92–94
 television, 94–95
 word-of-mouth, 103
 writing as, 102
marketing plan, 89–90
 how to create, 103–104
 reevaluating, 91–92
marketing strategy, 60
mission statement, 48, 49–50
mobile users, 110–111
model releases, 157–158
money considerations, 20–21

N

names
 brand, 74–75
 image, 116

O

online resources, 25
organizational structure, 58
ownership information, 58

P

package pricing, 135
packaging
 branding through, 79, 81
 value of, 142–143

partnerships, 35–36
 definition of, 35
 legal implications of, 35
 pros and cons of, 36
 summary thoughts about, 36
 tax implications of, 35
part-time work, 25
payment terms, 152–153
performance of websites, 109–110
personality considerations, 82
plans
 business, 48, 54–65
 marketing, 89–90, 103–104
portfolios, 111–112, 176
portrait photography
 fine art portraiture, 172
 session fee for, 132–133
posing styles, 83
post-event sales, 61
press releases, 92–94
pricing, 132–139
 branding and, 86, 136–139
 contract expiration date for, 157
 models used for, 133–135
 psychology of, 135–139
 reviewing your info on, 145
 session fee, 132–133
 website info on, 114
products
 branding related to, 84–85
 describing in business plan, 63
 value of, 141–142
professional photography
 business entities for, 27–42
 business plan for, 45–65
 career considerations for, 4–22
 finding your niche in, 165–173
 getting started in, 22–24, 175–176
 pros and cons of, 6–22
professionalism, 123–124
promotion. *See* marketing
psychology of pricing, 135–139

R

release forms
 copyright releases, 158–159
 model releases, 157–158

S

- S corporations, 40, 42
- salcincotta.com website, 111
- sales strategy, 60–61
- search engine optimization (SEO), 115–118
 - Google AdWords vs., 101
 - importance of, 112–113, 115
 - inbound links and, 118
 - keywords for, 116
 - naming images for, 116
 - text related to, 115–116
 - Yoast plug-in for, 118
- second shooter agreements, 160–162
- service. *See* customer service
- service/product description, 63
- session fee, 132–133
- shooting and burning, 9
- social media
 - blogs, 77–78, 98–99, 122–124
 - branding through, 77–78
 - developing a strategy for, 125
 - Facebook, 14, 99–101, 119–122
 - importance of, 119
 - Twitter, 122
 - See also* websites
- sole proprietorships, 30–33
 - definition of, 30–31
 - legal implications of, 31–32, 149
 - pros and cons of, 32–33
 - summary thoughts about, 33
 - tax implications of, 31
- sounds for brand, 77
- specialists vs. generalists, 177–178
- staffing events, 153
- startup expenses, 11–12
- strategic planning, 49
- style of photography, 178
- success
 - critical factors for, 49
 - defining your own, 21–22

T

- taglines, 76
- target market, 57
- tax issues
 - for corporations, 40, 41
 - for DBAs, 34
 - for LLCs, 38
 - for partnerships, 35
 - for sole proprietorships, 31

- technology issues, 13–14
- television ads, 94–95
- text for SEO, 115–116
- trust rank, 118
- Twitter, 122

V

- value, 139–144
 - of creativity, 143–144
 - of experience, 144
 - of packaging, 142–143
 - of products, 141–142
 - of service, 140–141
- vision statement, 48, 52–54
- voice, written, 77–78

W

- websites, 108–115
 - blogs on, 122–124
 - branding via, 77–78, 111
 - Facebook links to, 123
 - impact images on, 114–115
 - importance of, 108–109
 - inbound links to, 118
 - mobile access to, 110–111
 - performance of, 109–110
 - portfolios on, 111–112
 - pricing information on, 114
 - relevant/timely content on, 113
 - SEO for, 112–113, 115–118
 - text added to, 115–116
 - See also* social media
- wedding photography, 170–172
 - contracts for, 151–157
 - sales workflow for, 61
- weekend warriors, 4, 39, 128
- word-of-mouth marketing, 103
- working for yourself, 17–18
- work-life balance, 9–11
- writing
 - branding through, 77–78
 - establishing expertise by, 102
- written voice, 77–78

X

- X-factor, 86, 143

Y

- Yoast plug-in, 118



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