

EVERYTHING YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT... SOCIAL PORTRAIT PHOTOGRAPHY

With demand for social portraiture holding up well at the moment this is a tempting sector of the market right now. Mark Ashworth explains how to start out in this area

WORDS & PICTURES Mark Ashworth

Portraiture has long been a successful part of the social photography market and, while many photographers do as I do and include wedding photography within the remit of the studio, there is certainly enough mileage within the portrait arena itself to base a business solely around this specialisation.

For anyone moving into professional social photography the most essential skill you need is business acumen. I have heard of so many photographers who have struggled and often failed because they have not looked at the structure that needs to be in place to make any small business succeed. The majority of us who work as photographers love what we

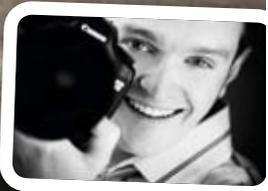
do and very often took pictures as a hobby before turning it into a profession, but however passionate you are about producing images it is so important to think very carefully about a business model and how you are going to be successful taking photographs of people, whether you are covering weddings or shooting portraits.

On the technical side, obviously you need to know your gear inside out. Learn the technical aspects by practicing on models or friends, or better still at seminars and training days, and try turning off your LCD screen on occasions to undertake a day's shoot without looking at the images: if you are continually reviewing your pictures during a wedding or on a portrait shoot

you are bound to miss crucial shots.

While technical ability is very important if you want to be a good people photographer, however, if you want to move beyond that to achieve truly great pictures it is essential to have a connection and a rapport with your subject. Being personable, friendly and approachable are attributes that can't really be taught or learnt: in short, you've either got it or you haven't, so if you don't like working with people or you can't stand children, then look for another branch of photography to move into!

"You need to have a connection and a rapport with your subject"



MARK ASHWORTH

Mark has been a photographer since leaving college at 18, and he initially worked for an established studio in Cambridge where he trained in portrait and wedding photography. After gaining his qualifications in 1998 he has gone on to win numerous accolades for his wedding and portrait work. In June 2005 Mark and his wife Kirsty founded Ashworth Photography, and his growing reputation and enviable degree of client satisfaction now puts him in high demand for weddings, portraits and commercial photography.

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Make the grade



ABOVE: The big advantage of working in a studio is that you are never at the mercy of the weather

RIGHT: Good quality, well composed and happy family pictures are the bread and butter of commercial photography

How did you break into the business?

I fell in love with photography at an early age when I found an old Kodak camera at the bottom of a kitchen drawer. I never knew what I wanted to take pictures of, just that I enjoyed taking photographs. During my time at college studying business and finance I had to find a two week work experience placement and, after phoning numerous local photographers, I ended up working in a busy social studio in Cambridge. The rest is history as they say! Following the initial work placement I went on to work there as tea boy on Saturdays and holidays until I left college, at which point I was offered a full time job. I didn't take any pictures for about two years but I did work my way up the ladder, becoming a business partner before leaving to set up my own business in 2005 with my wife, Kirsty.

Do I need a studio?

My background is in studio portraiture, and I just love working in this environment. You can position your lights wherever you like, choose your power output and, of course, it never rains! It's a very flexible and attractive option, but you can save money when you are starting out by working on location. When I opened my first business I did not have

the luxury of a studio and instead I used to shoot my portraits on location, using a hotel function room if I really needed to shoot studio portraits. Remember that many hotel function rooms are used for business meetings and might be empty at the weekend, so why not get friendly with your local hotel and try to negotiate a favourable rate for the quieter times? Just remember that you will need a portable backdrop and a studio lighting kit - this is a great contingency if the weather looks like it's going to be poor. >



ESSENTIAL PORTRAIT KIT

These days the quality of the average DSLR is superb and you don't need to invest in the most expensive kit from day one. It's more about how you see things and whether you understand emotion and know instinctively when to press the shutter that counts - everyone has heard the saying 'All the gear and no idea!' and there is an element of truth to this.

I have used Canon's EOS 5D cameras since 2005 and they really are workhorses. The most important thing for me is to partner them with professional lenses: don't buy high resolution camera bodies and then partner them with cheap glass. If you are on a budget to start with then buy a cheaper body and expensive, good quality lenses as these will last for years and years.

Nikon's current offering is the most attractive in

my opinion: their zoom lenses are just exceptional, especially the 14-24mm f/2.8 and the 24-70mm f/2.8. Put these on a D700 and you will be ready to shoot professional looking images. It's also worth mentioning that a back up camera is essential, and preferably you should have two bodies the same to make it easier to switch from one to the other, but you can get away with a cheaper body if money really is tight, perhaps backing that D700 up with a D90. Other things that I carry with me are a tripod, two flashguns, reflectors, a cable release, polarizing filter, studio lights and a light/flash meter.





"I tend to make an idiot of myself to get the baby to smile at me"

How do you approach a portrait shoot?

Don't underestimate just how hard photographing people is! I still get a little nervous about a session, even after 15 years of doing it day in day out. People are unpredictable, complex and very different. Babies are the easiest subjects to work with in many ways, and so I will start with them.

Babies: These are relatively easy subjects because they have no fear or inhibitions. They do have to be in a good mood, however, so I make sure I book them at the right time - morning is best. I also check that they have been fed and have had a good night's sleep. The parents want pictures they can't get themselves so I always have to make an idiot of myself to get the baby to smile at me!

Toddlers and older kids: These can be trickier but essentially I just have fun with them. Firstly I talk to the client when they book and tell them not to 'wind' the children up - often it is better to say nothing and to tell the kids that

they are coming round to my studio to play. At the session I get them to relax first by chatting with them and their parents - and I make sure to make an idiot of myself once again. Kids think it's hilarious when you get things wrong, so I ask their names and then call them something different - that generally breaks the ice with them. I shoot a variety of pictures, but the close up shots always sell well because people find these difficult to take themselves. If there is more than one child I make sure I photograph them with similar lighting and backgrounds so that I can sell multi-image products afterwards. I am always thinking about the end product and many clients don't know what they want until they see the pictures.

Families: If it's a family booking I just treat it the same as the sessions I've just described, so I photograph the children individually and together and then shoot the whole family together at the end. My portraits are classic contemporary images, so I want most of the shots with everyone looking at the camera. Again this is something they CAN NOT do themselves! They probably have pictures

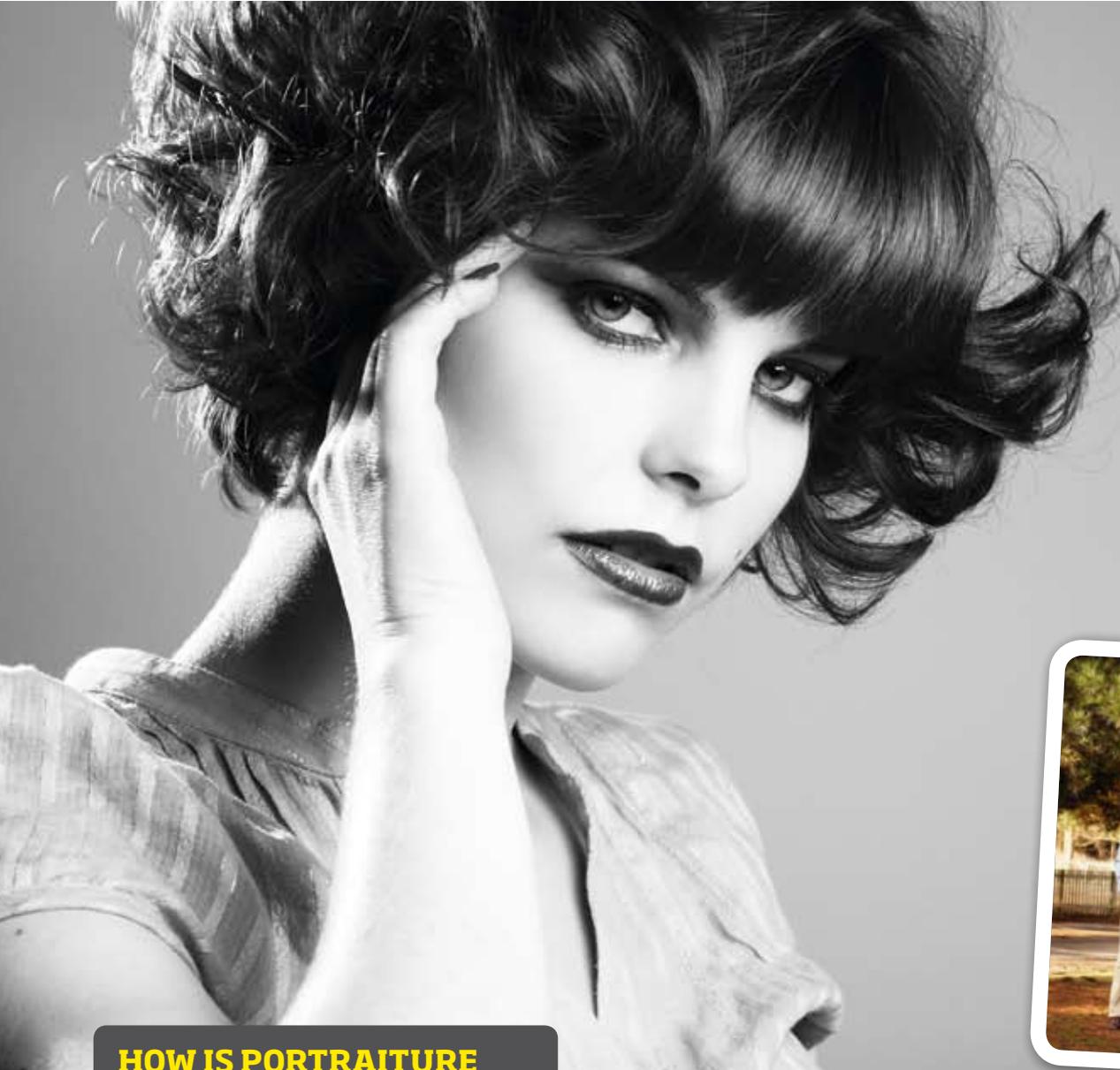
of themselves together with messy hands, clothes or hair, with everyone looking in different directions, so I want to create something informal but in a situation where everyone looks great. A tripod is a must for a shot of this kind and you need to have eye contact with the whole group, so I set the camera up on the tripod, focus and then use a cable release to trip the shutter, while doing the 'funnies' behind the camera. By this time I am guessing you might be thinking that you would rather be a still life photographer!

Couples: I offer a pre-wedding shoot to all my wedding clients most of whom accept, often subsequently placing a good order. I do a studio shoot for about an hour and start with them together and do a few individuals at the end. There is so much to chat about, so I talk about the wedding, how they met, where they are going on honeymoon, what they do for a living etc. I just have fun and ensure they relax and feel 100% confident in what I am doing, which helps enormously down the line when we get to the wedding day itself.



SHOULD I OFFER NICHE SERVICES?

My advice to any photographer is not to have a niche, and I know of some portrait photographers who have been hit hard by the recession because of their lack of diversification. My business offers baby, children and family portraits - either in the studio or on location - together with fashion and portfolio shots and wedding photography, both locally or nationally. Trends and desires change regularly, and it is important to recognise what your client wants. For example, I get a lot of feedback these days that people don't want to jump in the air or be given heavily processed images.



HOW IS PORTRAITURE FACING THE DOWNTURN?

There is a global economic downturn for sure, but just look at the facts not what the papers are saying. The working population is 31 million people with around 1.5 million unemployed, so the majority of people do still have a job. There are people out there who have money to spend, and it's just a case of marketing yourself to those who want what you do, going out there and fighting for your business. Sir Alan Sugar from *The Apprentice* is very inspiring and can teach many of us how to shake our businesses up.

In these times people are scared of spending money 'just in case' and I blame the media which has continually reported the bad news and invariably made it all sound worse than it actually is. Professional portrait photography has always been a treat whatever the state of the economy, but then most things in life are luxuries - you just need to target the people who like expensive ones!

ABOVE: Beauty shoots might call for input from a specialist make-up artist and hair stylist

ABOVE LEFT: It's important to timetable a shoot with a baby for the right time of day

ABOVE RIGHT: Learning how to put together natural-looking groups is something you need to practice

LEFT: Look for unusual angles to give your child portraits an extra lift and a simple background

How about working with a partner?

I have a busy business and want to dedicate my time to my clients, so I take the pictures, sell the pictures, edit the pictures and go and do the initial meeting with my prospective wedding clients. I also update my own website and do the marketing, and that doesn't leave me enough time to do the endless administrative tasks that go with running a successful business. Instead my wife Kirsty totally looks after the diary and office, from answering the phone, chasing and confirming appointments to sorting the lab/framing orders, designing our albums etc., as well as the book keeping - the list goes on. I would not be able to take as many pictures if I had to do any of this myself. Fortunately we work very well together and are both very dedicated to the business. I know that for some people this would not be an option, but for us it works.

Do you use promotions in your business?

Promotions are important, but it all depends on how much work you want to do. I try to use our existing database as much as possible to bring in new clients. When I worked for a busy high street studio it survived on promotions and could not have run without them, whereas I tend to run portrait promotions at the end of the year for Christmas, but that's about it. I am always trying to do lots of PR in wedding and lifestyle magazines and if you are just starting up then naturally you will need to run promotions to get your first clients.



Do you partner with other compatible businesses?

Networking is an important part of our business, and we try to work with like-minded businesses which might have a similar target market. So, for example, this could mean children's clothes shops for family portraits, hairdressers for female portraiture and wedding gown retailers for weddings.

What are the biggest challenges?

On a professional commercial level it's so important not to get emotionally attached to your work. You have to see your work as a product and be able to deliver the product the client wants to buy. On a personal level it's about being able to connect with EVERY subject in order to make them feel totally at ease and to make them relax for you - something that can be very difficult even after 15 years of experience!

What presentation do you offer?

I believe that presentation is as important as the image itself, and I offer a full range of bespoke, hand-made frames, in pretty much any size. I use Loxleys for all our printing, blocks and canvases because I've found their turnaround time and quality to be outstanding and consistent. I tend not to offer albums for portraits as I find that people want to have portraits on display, but if an album is requested specifically then again we offer those made by Loxley. ☒