

# Mark Ashworth

**M**y career started when I was accepted by a respected and well-established high street studio, based in Cambridge, UK. Frances Dumbleton had built her business from a small office at home to having three studios covering many portraits and over 600 weddings a year.

I began at the very bottom with a two-week work-experience programme when I was only 16 years old. After college I worked there full time, mainly carrying out office duties, and finally, at 19, started to take baby portraits in the studio. The rest, as they say, is history. I now run a successful business from home with my wife Kirsty, covering around 30 weddings and about 50-60 portraits per year. I am also happy to extend my skills to occasional commercial work when requested.

There are some very fundamental areas that are essential to our success, and I will look at these in turn.

## Classical Posing and Lighting

The most important thing that I had was classical training. Back in the days of medium format and film, you had to get it right first time, every time. You were just wasting money if you pressed the shutter at the wrong time. I was very fortunate to be working alongside the best marketer in the industry at the time, where the customers just flooded in. In addition to this I was trained in-house by Frances who was in turn, trained by the likes of Eric Lawe, Paul Yaffe, Roy Dorbar, Ian Gee, and Max Warwick, of which the latter taught her the importance of being a good business woman as there was no point in being a good social photographer with no one to sell to.

Portrait sessions lasted around 15 minutes for a baby, half an hour for a family, and an hour for larger groups. If you took more than three rolls of 120, you had to be sure they were going to spend! Even weddings were taken with as much discipline – about 120 frames allowed for each one. I find these factors really interesting and really feel that without this solid grounding, today's newcomers have a harder time finding the right training and knowledge about the basics of high-quality, consistent wedding and portrait photography.

It is all too easy these days to snap away and correct things afterwards, rather than concentrate on getting it right in camera, and using technology just to enhance the image, rather than adjust or change it. I believe that if everyone was shown how to correctly pose, light and have a rapport with your subject, then your casual shots will look far more professional and worthy of the money we charge. If you are asking someone to part with, let's say £50 for a 10x8 print that actually costs £2, then justification is necessary for the cost. This is made up of the level and quality of service provided, the experience in the studio, and your expertise and experienced eye. This means that your images must look different and professional to any that the client could have taken themselves. Otherwise there is no justification to the price and they will not buy.

When you watch a drama-style movie, watch how real it feels, how realistic the characters are and how beautiful the lighting and composition are. Just remember one thing – everything is acted, directed and captured by very talented individuals. So when photographers are at work, our clients are the actors, we are the directors and photographers. I have to admit, I do struggle with the term reportage and photojournalism, and I know that this subject is controversial and may cause a stir! Don't get me wrong, I love great informal and candid moments and I have seen amazing images of this genre that have been captured by very talented photographers known for this style but, in the main, your client needs to see that your images carry professionalism, talent and experience which is very difficult to show just by shooting 'informals'. Certainly in portraiture, how do you ask a family to 'just be natural' as I am sure for most families it is not that often that they hire a professional photographer to capture such important moments in their life. The point I am trying to make here is that when you know the rules of classical posing and lighting, you are able to break these rules for creative impact that your clients and peers will love. Your customers will be more than happy to pay and any judges

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will more likely award your pictures.

It has taken me 15 years to know how to make people feel relaxed and comfortable in their pictures, seeing it in the picture is a little easier but I am more than happy to inform you that I am still learning. I still listen to fellow photographers, colleagues and clients and learn from my mistakes. Remember, in business you have to make mistakes in order to know what is right. The longer you do something the fewer mistakes you make but never ever think that you will ever know it all.

## Getting your Clients

A business is no success without clients! Building a business from scratch is hard work, but remember one thing – in the early day of your business your client is the only person you should impress. Use the opinions of your peers as a way to improve your pictures. Creative people are known for being very precious about their work and take criticism badly and worst of all make excuses for it. It is so important to take an opinion for what it is, but never ever ask for one and then argue with it!

Use the techniques of creative lighting and posing, and take images that your clients can't and those that exceed their expectations. In today's society our industry faces a different approach for each area of our business.

### Weddings

When couples get married they have a list of requirements for their day, most of which will include a photographer. So they have chosen to have one – it's just now a case of looking for one and choosing one. So put yourself in a situation where these clients can find you.

### Portraits

Wouldn't it be lovely if family values dictated that every year it was perfectly normal to have a professional family portrait, just like people celebrate a wedding anniversary or birthday? Whilst in some families this is common, we could never survive on such few examples, especially as the market is already diluted with the ever-growing number of professional photographers, which is also being diluted further with the production of high-quality, consumer cameras.

I made a conscious decision to concentrate our marketing to obtain 30 weddings per year. This is built around an ongoing campaign of relationship-building with similar businesses, web activity, especially a web log, target-driven advertising, and recommendations. After some 15 years in the industry, anyone will tell you that recommendation



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and referral still brings you the best and most profitable clients. Being a wedding photographer, in turn helps to build a database of people who are ideal portrait clients. Most of these couples will go on to start families, which are a natural target for your portrait work. All you need to do is stay in touch, either by newsletter or telephone. Any good business person will also tell you that the one thing that many businesses fail to do is stay in touch with their existing clients – I know because I am guilty of it too. I also found that advertising for portrait work just doesn't work. Referrals and recommendation are best, so try making each and every client give you at least one more client. This can easily be achieved by staying in touch. I run promotions during the run-up to Christmas, and then mostly rely on reputation for the rest of the year while I am busy with weddings.

## The Client Experience

Every time you spend money on a service, just analyse what you get. On a typical long-haul flight you can pay for a journey at three levels; economy, business or first. The end game for everyone is exactly the same. You get to your destination. There has to be a combination of client experience and good service in addition to a high-quality product. It's no good if the airline gives the service of economy, but the seat of first class. This is where perceived value comes in. Offering extras such as refreshments, entertainment and a comfortable environment is all about adding value to the service.

Before you start in business you really need to decide where you are going to pitch yourself. If in the long term you want to offer people 'cheap and cheerful' then you must pitch yourself here from the outset. Having said this, it is important to remember that perceived value is actually very important and in reality does not cost that much to you, but can mean a great deal to the client – who will be prepared to pay for it. Remember it happens all the time, everywhere we go. Cars, restaurants, hotels and clothes are great examples.

I took the decision to offer my clients the best possible experience in terms of service and quality, and the ultimate in finished products. Just like the airline, I have made sure that we also give the client the best possible images. If there are lots of opportunities on for candid and informal shots, then these will be taken. If the situation is more

demanding, then the people skills help to achieve the images that I need to get to justify my cost. An example of this is images on disks. Generally I do not like to sell the disk of images, but it is different if they buy an album or a framed image initially. Our services do not offer images on disk as part of a package, but they can add it on. I don't see enough value in giving the files on disk. When you buy a DVD of a concert it may cost around £15. If you pay for the best seats at a live performance it could cost up to £200 – you still see the same show. This is why photographers find it so hard to price their services with images on disk whether they are screen resolution or high resolution. Clients perceive a disk as a cheap option and will often, therefore, be surprised at the price.

Profitability is high with electronic files, but you must make sure that when they walk out the door they are happy. I would feel much better if they bought a framed portrait or beautiful finished album and a disk at a 'special price' rather than just an expensive disk. This way they have something to show for the main part of their spend and the added bonus of having images they can print themselves. This is a really grey area with no easy answers. You really have to do what you feel is right, but I really feel that the whole industry is suffering as a result of photographers giving or selling image on disk with no other product. I don't have a problem in principle, just with the fact that this option is very hard to control in terms of how each customer may perceive the value.

Our service is customer focused right from the start. We stay in touch with our clients right through the whole process. We make sure that it is just enough and not too much, and are very confident with our experience and knowledge in order to ensure a smooth ride. This also makes the task far easier and more enjoyable for us, meaning that we can always get great shots every time that all our clients are happy with. I shot a wedding a few weeks ago and the weather was awful. The bride wore her wellies for most of the day and we did more than just take the photos on the day. The following day we received a beautiful bouquet of flowers thanking us for our efforts – before they had even seen the photographs. That is the ultimate illustration of perceived value. I also know that our images and finished product will match the level of service we provided on the day.

