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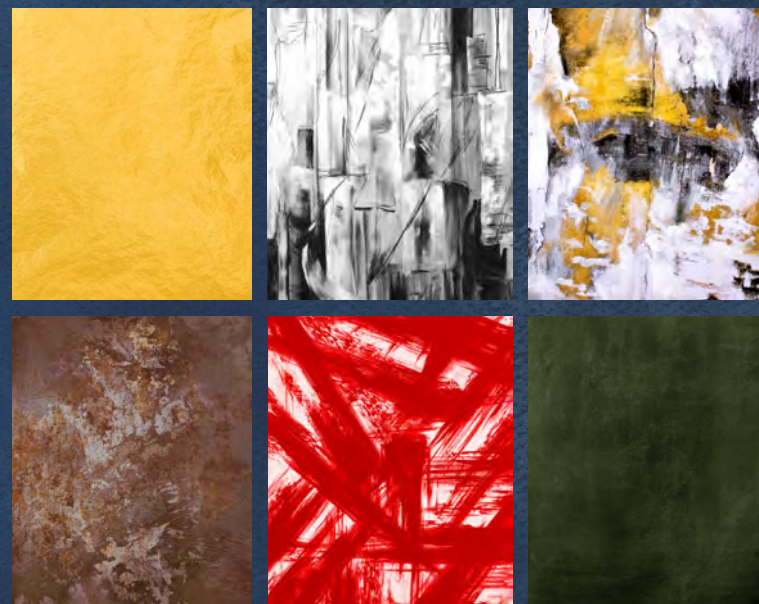
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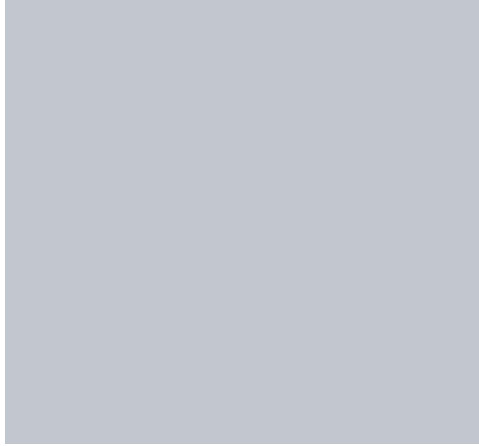
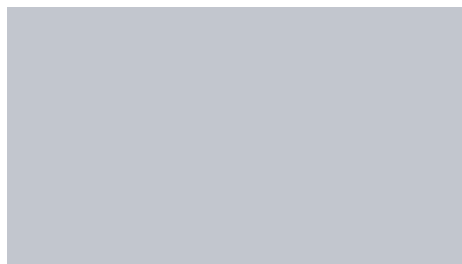
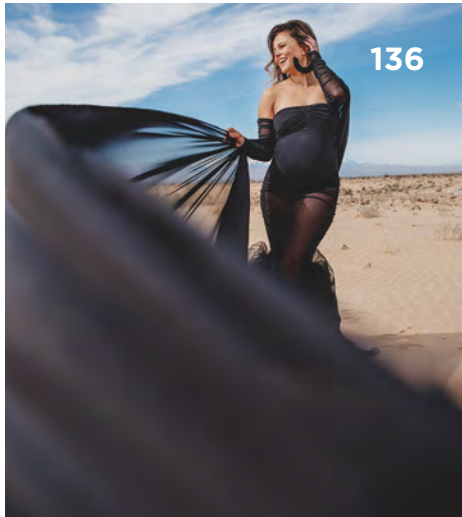
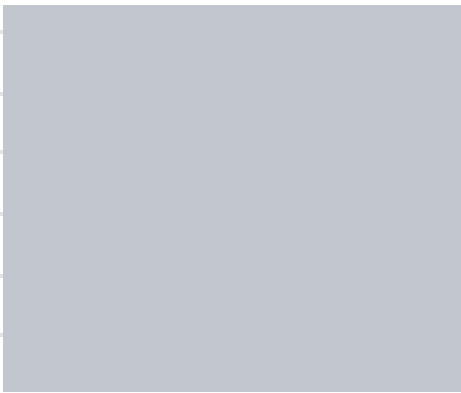


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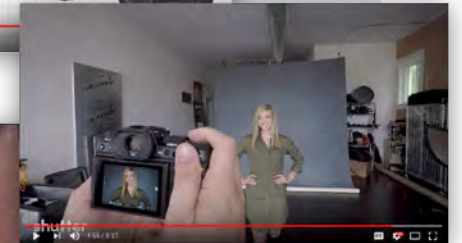
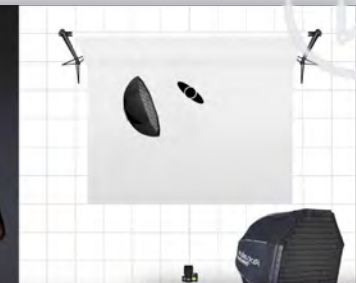
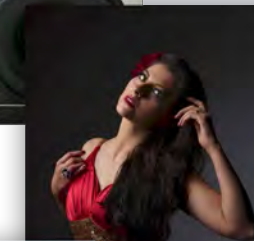
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MISSION STATEMENT

Shutter Magazine's focus is on photography education. Our goal is to provide current insightful and in-depth educational content for today's professional wedding and portrait photographer. *Shutter* uses the latest technologies to deliver information in a way that is relevant to our audience.

Our experienced contributors help us create a sense of community and have established the magazine as one of the leading photography publications in the world.

Shutter Magazine: By photographers, for photographers.

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TITLE: Saran Siren

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CAMERA: Sony A9

LENS: 12-24mm f/4.0 G

EXPOSURE: f/4.0 @ 1/160 ISO 160

LIGHTING: 2 Godox 600

MODEL: T'Aria Jones

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LAUNCH POINT

A message from the publisher

"Innovate or Die."

These words have been at the forefront of my business for over 13 years. Businesses that refuse to look forward and **grow through innovation** are destined to fail. Don't let that be you!

- Sal Cincotta

ABOUT THE IMAGE: Inspiration came from an 80's fashion image. The saran wrap created lines and dramatized shape— a perfect concept that is fashion first and maternity second. Our beautiful model T'aria flew in to Grand Junction, CO and we got to work the same day! We bought 5000 feet of saran wrap, but only ended up using a couple hundred. It took a team of four to strategically wrap and place each piece of saran wrap, ensuring they didn't touch too soon or fold away or we would have to start over. A true powerhouse, T'aria couldn't change positions for 2 hours as we shot. This image embodies everything a maternity portrait should be: A celebration of your strength and a showcase of your unequaled, gorgeous shape. Maternity photography is on a fast track to be nothing like it was a year ago. I hope to be leading the pack by pushing boundaries and exploring new concepts.

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A romantic couple is seen from behind, standing on a balcony and looking out over a city at night. The balcony has a dark metal railing. To the left, a large window of the building is lit up, showing blue curtains. Two tall palm trees stand in the foreground, their fronds silhouetted against the dark sky. The city below is a vast expanse of lights, with hills visible in the distance under a dark, starry sky.

5

TIPS FOR TURNING
DIFFICULT
CLIENTS INTO
HAPPY ONES

with Michael Anthony



Anybody who has been in business long enough will run into a customer service problem eventually. I always laugh, internally, when I am teaching a group of photographers and I ask them to raise their hand if they have ever had an upset client. The reason why it amuses me is that usually, two-thirds of the room does not raise their hand. After nearly eight years of operating a professional photography business, I know that running your business without having any client issues whatsoever is nearly impossible. You are not perfect, and neither is your business.

If a photographer has never experienced a client who did not like their photos, had unrealistic demands, or was just not a very nice person, then that photographer has not been in business long enough. The reasons why customer service issues tend to happen in our industry are numerous, but the one thing that they can always be traced back to is not managing client expectations properly.

In growing our studio from \$17,000 in sales in 2011 to almost \$1.1 million in 2018, I can tell you that we have had our share of difficult-to-deal-with clients. Some of them happened as a result of our growing pains, but there are some people in retail that you just cannot make happy whether you are in the right or the wrong.

There are a number of reasons why this can happen—your studio may grow too fast, as ours did in 2015 and 2016; like me, you may not be trained in customer service; or you may even have an unrealistic understanding about consumer psychology.

What I can say is that in 2018 and 2019, we have the happiest clientele that we have ever had, and our business operates with a higher number of referrals than ever before. It wasn't until I realized how to manage my clients' expectations and put their experience first that we accomplished this.

Re-read this twice: no amount of posting on social media will bring you new client referrals if you don't learn how to operate from a client-experience-focused mindset first.

Today, I'm going to go over how you can build a customer-first business, which will ultimately be the difference between your success or your failure over time. I'm going to go out on a limb and say that, of the over 60 articles that I have written for Shutter magazine, this is going to be one of the most important for you to read from start to finish.

Before we get into the tips, however, let's go over why customer service is so important. For those of you who have never heard me speak or never read my articles, the one thing that I mention every single time I have the opportunity to talk to photographers in our industry is that the difference between success and failure comes down to the experience that you leave your customers with. As subjective as our deliverables are, you may be surprised to find out that a customer's perception of their imagery is directly tied to their experience before your shoot, during your shoot, and directly afterward.

There is a reason that the majority of brides who were surveyed by The Knot stated that they wished they had spent more money on photography than any other part of their wedding. In my opinion, this wasn't directly tied to the quality of imagery as much as it was to the experience that many of these brides received in working with their photographers.

TIP #1: PUT YOURSELF IN THEIR SHOES

This is the first thing that you need to do mentally to be in the right mindset to deal with any client situation. A variety of different factors may influence our clients’ thoughts about an issue, and if we do not put ourselves in their mindset, then we won’t ever have the opportunity to correctly deal with their concerns.

Once you put yourself in their shoes, however, you can look at things without rose-colored glasses and make a proper assessment of the correct course of action moving forward. For instance, you may have a client who tells you that they don’t like the way they look in their photos. It would be easy to assume that the client is crazy not to like your work, but in reality, with this complaint, there is almost always something to learn from. It could be that you emphasized one of their insecurities with your choice of camera angle, lens, or lighting. It could be that you just didn’t deliver up to the standard they were holding you to. There’s almost always something you could have done better.

The truth is, you will never know what the issue is until you understand it from their perspective. People are not always willing to tell you the real issue, but if you can mentally put yourself where they are, and empathize with them, you will be in a better place to deal with it.

TIP #2: RESOLVE THE ISSUES OVER THE PHONE, OR IN-PERSON IF POSSIBLE

Step two is to find a solution for your clients, acknowledge their concerns, and then work toward a solution, but you will likely run off the road if you try to respond to a client complaint in writing.

Here is the common argument you will see in Facebook groups: If you respond in writing to an upset client, you will have written documentation for court if it comes to that.

Let me pump the brakes on that for a second. First, 99.9 percent of the time, these things will never end up in court. In order to CYA, though, everything you discuss with an unhappy client can still be written to them after the conversation.

Here is the problem with e-mail—it’s like trying to defuse a bomb without tools. People can often come across as upset when you read an email, when in reality, they are just voicing concerns. And if you try to fire off a response e-mail immediately, the same thing can happen when they read yours.

Put a stop to it and pick up the phone. I promise, you will almost always find the customer to be cooler and more collected than how you originally interpreted their e-mail.



Image © Michael Anthony Photography



TIP #3: OFFER A SOLUTION OR ALTERNATIVE

Once you understand the client’s concerns from their perspective, identify the things you could have done to avoid them. Then, you can figure out a way to offer a solution or alternative. This can be anything from an apology to a refund, but it has to be appropriate to satisfy their concerns. You are not going to give a free metal print to someone who complained that you took too long to answer e-mails—that would just be encouraging them to continue being difficult.

Instead, work out something that makes you both happy. This could be a credit toward a print order, free prints, an extra hour of coverage, an extended photoshoot, or a reduced rate on future services.

TIP #4: BE WILLING TO LET THEM GO

At the end of the day, you are running a business, and you want people to be happy about your business. If you are doing everything you can to make a difficult client happy, and you just can’t get there, then it’s time to let them go. Sometimes, that’s the best option.

Let me tell you a story that will really ring home for many of you. In 2014, we photographed a family/maternity session. The family came in to see their photos, and the expectant mother was upset about our pricing—she stated it was too high and that nobody in their right mind would pay that much for family photos. Even after we offered a discount, she was not happy. Nothing except for giving her the photos for free was an appropriate solution in her mind at the time.

So I offered her a refund for her session fee and sent her on her way. She thanked me profusely for doing so and left happy with the outcome, but without her family photos.

In 2016, we got a family referral from her. That client spent \$2,200 on their family portrait session.

In 2017, the original client booked us for her wedding, apologized to me for the way she’d acted in 2015, and ended up spending over \$18,000 with us for her extravagant wedding and related shoots like a boudoir session.

In 2015, had I held my ground and kept her \$300 session fee, we would have likely lost out on \$20,000 in income, and possibly more if we get more referrals in the future from her.

Will this happen all the time? Definitely not, but even so, if you hold onto a deposit for a couple who was unhappy with the way their photos turned out and decided to go elsewhere, then you are seriously setting yourself up for client issues down the line. Even if those clients don’t refer you, if they convince one of their friends not to consider you, then you lose that money anyway. Therefore, we always err on the side of letting bad clients go when we need to.

Does this mean we return deposits for everyone? Definitely not, but when they have a reasonable complaint that we agree with after following step one, it’s something that we will consider, and I believe you should too if you want longevity in this business.



Image © Michael Anthony Photography

TIP #5: CHECK YOUR EGO

It’s your ego. Our industry is full of egos. Your pride will cause you to become defensive just about any time a client so much as mutters any disappointment in your work. But folks, let me be the first to tell you that everyone will run into a difficult client. That doesn’t mean they don’t like their photos, or you for that matter, but until you put aside that ego, you will likely have trouble navigating the rare occasions where a client voices their opinion. So, as I have said in the past, remember to check your ego every time you walk inside your office, and your business will continue to grow, year after year. ■



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Michael Anthony is the owner of Michael Anthony Studios, a wedding photography studio based in Los Angeles. He has won multiple awards in international image competition for his creative use of light, storytelling and environmental portraiture. The five-member team at Michael Anthony Studios photographs around 60 weddings and over 200 portrait sessions a year.
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5 SOCIAL MEDIA MARKETING MYTHS

with Vanessa Joy

Images © Vanessa Joy



Social media marketing is one of the major ways that photographers help customers find and book their services. Many kinds of businesses are realizing that social media moves mountains when it comes to gaining recognition. At this point, most of us know that it’s necessary, but it isn’t easy, and it certainly can’t be done haphazardly if you truly want to be effective. You need the creativity to create a persona and brand that people will connect to. You need to create content that people actually find relatable, unique, and worth their time.

If this seems daunting, that’s okay. Because I’m here to share the things you need to know to take away your fears about social media marketing. Let’s get started.

MYTH 1: YOU DON’T NEED SOCIAL MEDIA MARKETING


These days, especially in the wedding photography business, you are leaving money on the table if you don’t utilize social media marketing to promote your business. Potential clients who are looking for photography are often looking on their phones, using optimized-for-mobile apps like Instagram rather than surfing your website on a laptop or desktop computer. Which social media site are they on? Check the current demographics for users of social media outlets like Facebook, Instagram, Tik Tok, and Snapchat to find where your target market is hanging out (and where you should be too).

No marketer has ever said, “Stay with what you know, and wait for the customers to come to you.” Instead, you have to go to the customers. Create an amazing Instagram or Tik Tok or Facebook profile that is as stellar as any website gallery or photo book. Your customers only have to “like” you or “follow” you in order to start considering contracting with you. I had a recent client find me on Instagram, message me there, receive my price sheet on her phone, and book her wedding with me ... all without visiting my website! Make your information and resources, and the evidence of your photography skill, so mobile-friendly that you can shine on any social media platform.

Small side note: Just because you definitely need social media marketing doesn’t mean you need every new social media site. Judge whether a site is the right match for your social media marketing strategy by whether the people you can get into your audience there are actually in the market for the services you offer. This brings me to the next myth, which relates to the kinds of followers you get.



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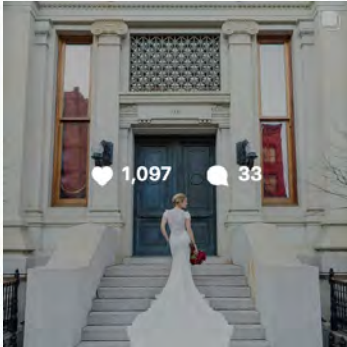



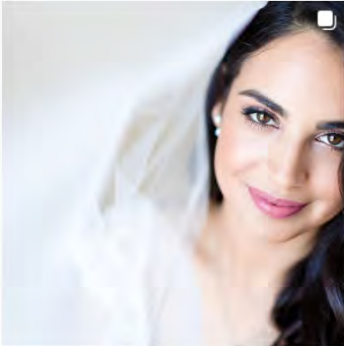
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MYTH 2: BUT I CAN JUST BUY FOLLOWERS AND LIKES

The path from no followers to 10,000 followers is an uphill climb, I'll tell you. You have to offer great content and be responsive and interactive, and it takes tons of time. So many people claim they can get all the credibility without any of the work by buying Instagram followers or likes, or following similar structures on other social media sites.

Want the truth? Everyone can tell if you are buying followers and likes online. They are the wrong type of followers, and they don't "like" in realistic ratios. Your followers should be at least somewhat interested in your genre of wedding photography. An unintelligible username with no actual Instagram posts or profile picture probably isn't contracting with you—ever.

For Instagram, a good measure is for your likes-to-followers ratio to be about 1-to-10—this means a reasonable portion of your followers saw your post and thought it looked great. Not every single one of my posts is a winner with the fans, but my overall ratio proves that all 34.5k of those followers chose to like my page without being paid, and that gives me actual credibility. That quantity of bots or fake accounts wouldn't have nearly the same level of engagement.

Engagement with real people who want your kind of services is what matters. Lower numbers of real interactions are better than higher numbers of interactions from people who have nothing to do with your business. Wherever your numbers are, in both likes and followers, start doing your homework. What kinds of posts get one, or two, or thirty more likes than the others? Learn from that, and grow your following.

MYTH 3: I DON'T HAVE TO POST ALL THE TIME

You absolutely have to post regularly. This is essential, so that people feel that you are a working professional, with a real business that they can trust enough to sign a photography contract with you. Regular posts demonstrate that this is indeed a business that you take seriously. It's easy to be dubious of online businesses, so give potential customers every reason to trust you and see you as a rock-solid investment.

As mentioned before, your social media is basically a portfolio that you have the chance to constantly curate and add to. If you are getting better as a photographer all the time (you should be!), you want to have a steady stream of new posts that both showcase your skills and remind people who follow you that you are here. Post regularly, and stay top-of-mind with your client.

MYTH 4: I HAVE TO POST ALL MY OWN STUFF ON MY BUSINESS SOCIAL MEDIA, RIGHT?

Nope! Your social media posts should be relevant to your business and its potential and current clients. If something interesting to a typical wedding photographer’s client, like a popular post about three sisters having their weddings together on the same day, is going viral, why not share it and take advantage of its innate clickability and fun? Even though it’s not your content, it can generate activity on your page, which is great for your reach.

My reach is pretty good on my own posts, but I use popular outside content when it makes sense, and I ask the readers a question, something like, “Would you want to get married on the same day with someone else?” so that people can weigh in through the comments. Engagement breeds connection, and that keeps people visiting your page, considering your photos, and deepening their knowledge of your brand. Popular outside content does all of that for you, as long as you have plenty of your original content in there too.

MYTH 5: IF I DON’T DO IT MYSELF, MY SOCIAL MEDIA WILL LACK MY VOICE

Not true—you can have someone else run your social media! Pay a virtual assistant or a friend or anyone who has managed a social media page before. These days, even our thirteen-year-old neighbors, our kids, and our grandkids are ultra-savvy when it comes to social media posts. Yes, you should be very involved at the beginning to make sure the direction someone else takes your social media is a good and helpful one that maintains your voice. Once they “get it,” though, you don’t have to always be working on it yourself; you can just monitor it from there on out and make adjustments as needed. Outsource this task away from your daily to-do list once you see that they are posting consistently and in your style.

P.S. One more freebie when it comes to social media: always tag other vendors. The images in this article will be tagged to death when I post them online so that I can thank everyone involved, like @KatydidFlorals, @AshfordEstate, PPA Education, Models @Tyreesel and @Brookeitlist, and @KleinfeldBridal. Be sure to tag them in the photos and the description so people can find them, and so they can see the extra effort you’re going through to give them proper credit for their work. Who knows, it could lead to more booking through a great vendor relationship!

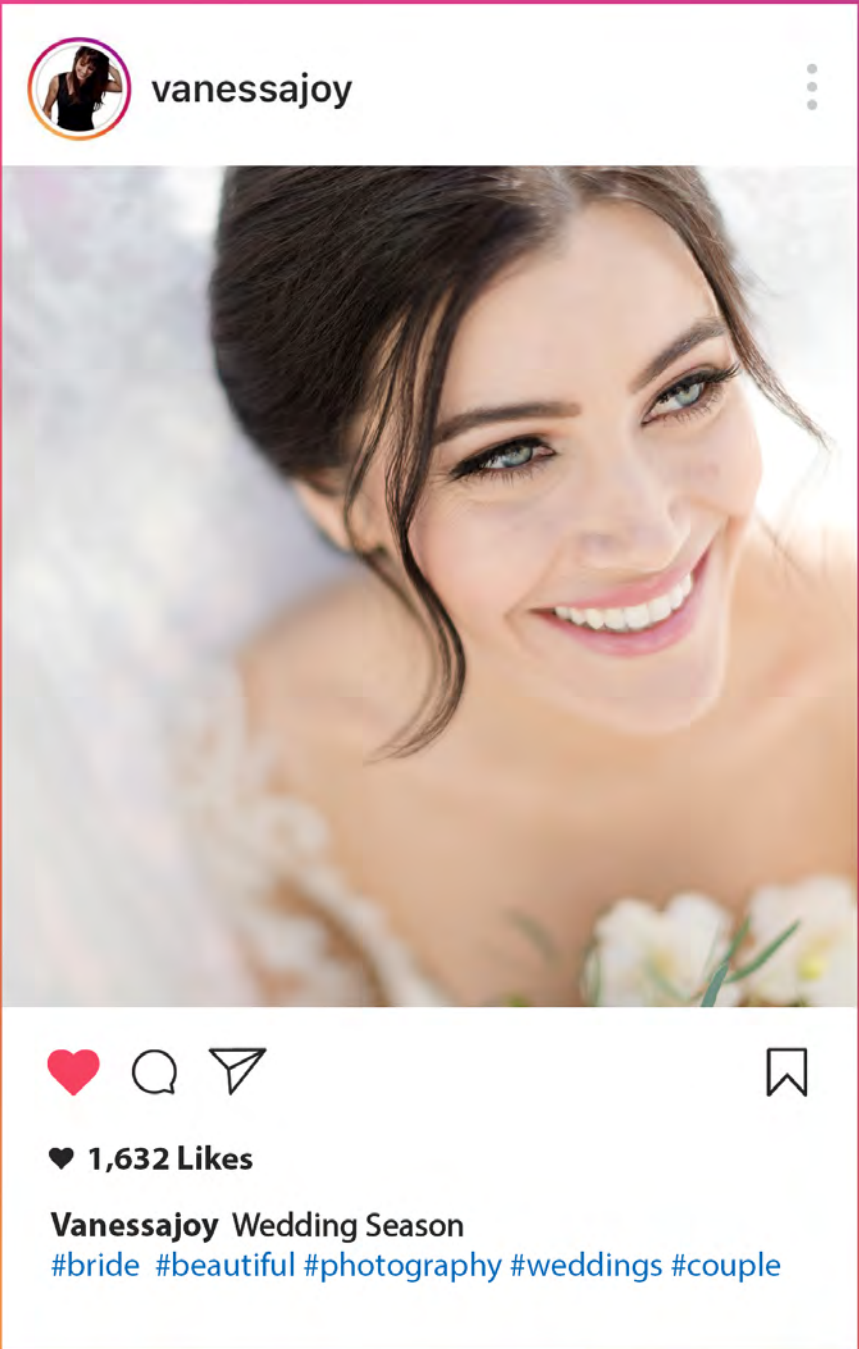
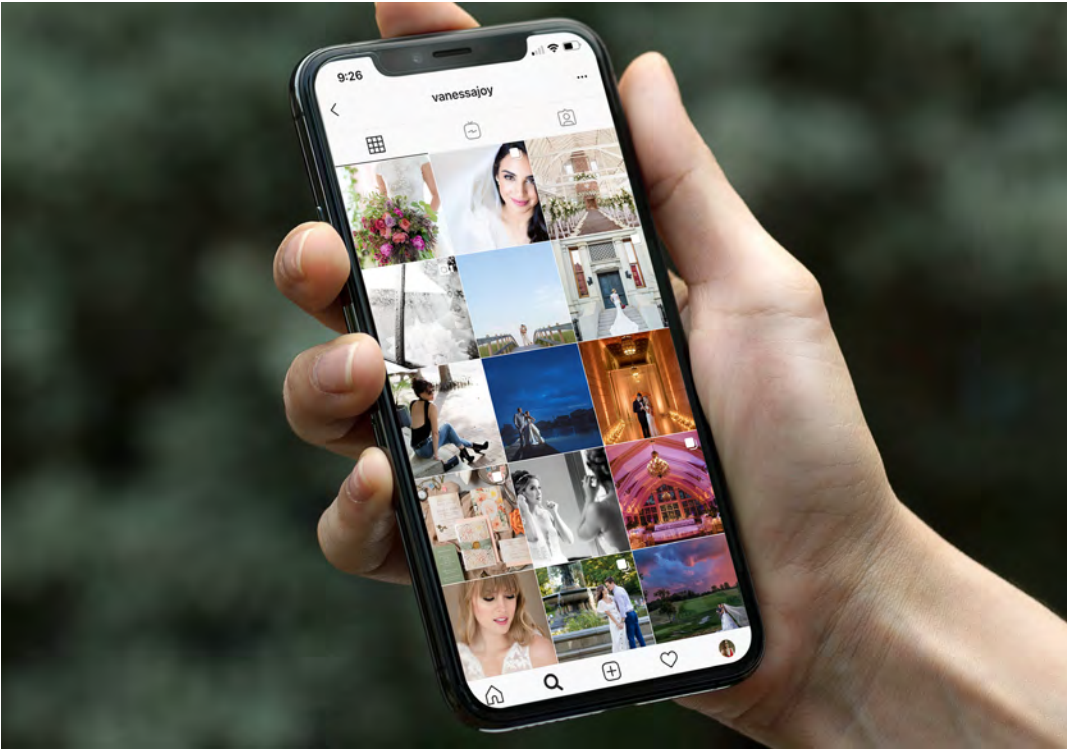


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Want more help with the beast that is social media marketing? Check out the webinar: “3 Huge Mistakes You’re Probably Making on Social Media.” Also, follow me on Instagram @VanessaJoy to see more of how I use social media for my business and the ways I practice what I preach about these myths. Feel free to snag any ideas you see me experimenting with and try them out on your account. Happy posting! ■



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youtube.com/btsShutterMagazine



Vanessa Joy has been a professional wedding photographer in New Jersey since 2002, and an influencer in the photographic community for years. Since starting VanessaJoy.com in 2008, she has taught photographers around the globe at almost every major platform in the industry (LearnPhotoVideo.com). Vanessa has been recognized for her talent and business sense at the renowned industry events CreativeLIVE, Clickin’ Moms, WPPI and ShutterFest. Her peers love her informative, open-book style of teaching.

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INNOVATE OR DIE

with Sal Cincotta

This has been my battle cry since my early days on Creative Live. Innovate or die—sounds sexy, but what does it really mean? Before we dive in, I need you to do some soul-searching here. Are you the type of person who just bitches about everything? Do your friends see you as a positive person? Or would they describe you as a bit of a pessimist? I know this is going to be tough for you to be honest about, but it’s crucial to your success—not only in business, but in life.

I find that people who just like to bitch and complain tend to blame the world for all their issues. It’s never your fault. It’s always someone or something else that is impacting your ability to succeed. Basically, what I am telling you is to get your head out of your ass and stop blaming the world for your failures. I was trying to do it in a very new-age, self-awareness way, but here is the reality: if this is you, you are too busy being pissed off at me for calling you out on it. So, I figured I’d just cut to the chase for you.

Here is the thing. The businesses that succeed are the ones that understand they must keep innovating or they will just fizzle out. Our industry is a perfect example of this. Look around at the companies and photographers in front of you today. There is a very high probability that half of them will be gone in 5 years. I can remember 13 years ago, when I started as a professional photographer. Of the companies and educators that were dominating forces then, many are now gone. Why? Where did they go? What happened? I ask this in a very serious and curious way. Why? Because I don’t want to make the mistakes that others have made and suffer the same fate. I want to learn from their mistakes. History is a very powerful thing if used correctly. History is also a very terminal thing if ignored.

So, where does that leave us? Right back where we started. Innovate or die. Here is some insight into what that really means and what it will require you to do.

STOP LIVING IN DENIAL

This is step one. If you think that everyone else is the problem and that is why you are failing, why you are not where you want to be in life or with your business, then you, my friend, are in denial. For many of our readers, we live in a free world and free market. You, and you alone, control your destiny. No one else. If you are failing, it’s probably because your inflated ego doesn’t allow you to acknowledge that you are not doing the things necessary in order to succeed.

I have seen this time and time again. A photographer who once dominated a local market suddenly finds that the competition is handing them their ass. Instead of changing or altering course, they are so set in their ways that they refuse to see what’s happening right in front of them. The market is shifting. There are competitors serving a niche that they are not, and they are losing their customers, both old and new. So what do they do? Do they innovate? Update their business? Change their tactics? Nope. They blame the new photographers. They blame the consumers. They blame the camera companies. And they live in denial until the very last stand, when they have to close up their shop. Instead of looking inward and updating their business model, they choose to look outward and blame the world.

If you are not where you want to be, do something about it. Control your destiny.



Image © Salvatore Cincotta Photography



LOOK FOR NEW OPPORTUNITY

After 13 years of doing this, I have seen my fair share of trends and opportunities come and go. Through it all, I am always looking for new ways to expand my business and fend off competitors. The easiest way to keep your career moving forward is to look for needs that are not currently being serviced in the industry. Look at your competitors—what are they doing right, and what are they doing wrong? What are consumers asking for? What are they complaining about? Fill that gap! That is the way to keep your business moving forward at all times.

Looking for new opportunities is one guaranteed way to ensure that your business is always looking forward. This is one of the main ways we have continued to grow our company. We spend very little time looking in the rear-view mirror. Sure, we are aware of our history and the things that have gone right and wrong, but we are always looking forward. That is key to any successful operation.

Is there a new product you can offer? Or are you still just offering prints and canvas? While these are great staple products, there are tons of innovative products in the marketplace like metals, acrylics, fine-art prints, high-end albums and more. You can offer these new and exciting products to your customers and get them excited to do business with you. The number-one product we continuously invest in? Albums. This, to me, is the best way to stand out from the crowd.

LISTEN TO YOUR CUSTOMERS

Customers vote with their money. Make no mistake. Stop convincing yourself that everything is ok because one client told you one time that they loved something. The same can be said in reverse—don’t abandon your plans because one client told you they hated something. I try to live my life and run my business according to the 80/20 rule. And most of the time, if we are being honest, it’s the 95/5 rule. I am not going to alter my course of action on anything because one or two people don’t see it the way I do. Listen to the majority of people, not the minority. Listen to the people who are spending real money. Listen to people whose opinions you actually trust. Do you know what I mean here? We all have friends and family who are very opinionated. They know everything about everything, and yet their own lives are a shitshow. Do you know anyone like this? Yeah? Don’t listen to them.

Closely related to this is watching trends. What is happening in the marketplace? Go to trade shows, learn from leading educators, and watch the products that companies are offering. The key here is to change your mindset. This means, instead of walking in and saying, “My clients won’t go for that,” find a way to highlight the product so your clients *will* go for it.



Image © Salvatore Cincotta Photography

CHANGE YOUR PHOTOGRAPHY

Whoa. I am sure heads are turning right now. “Change my photography????” Yep. Guys, I got news for you. What was cool in 1980 is not cool today. What was cool in 2000 is not cool today. Trends and tastes change and evolve. I see it in my own body of work. I have changed my style multiple times over my career. Sometimes for the worse, but I can at least laugh about it today. Regardless, It is very important that you continuously look for ways to evolve as an artist. It will give you a fresh perspective on your craft as a whole, and that’s a great thing for sure.

Musicians, actors, writers—all re-invent themselves at some point in their careers. Why would visual artists like photographers be any different? We have to keep learning and growing, and part of that is altering our view of the world through the lens. While this can be painful at times, I can truly say I have enjoyed the reinvention process over the years.

What does that look like? Well, every year, I mark off two to four weeks of time for myself. No clients. Just working on me and my portfolio. This does a few things. First, it allows me to slow down and think about what I want to learn and practice. For example, several years ago, I wanted to get better at lighting and off-camera flash. So, I worked on it for three weeks straight. Every shoot, whether it needed it or not, I found a way to use flash. My skills grew ten-fold. They grew more than they ever could have if I was working with paying clients. All that pressure was removed. I was able to slow down, and most importantly, I was able to take the time to make corrections in the field. This proved priceless in helping me grow as an artist. If you think you are above improvement or that it doesn’t matter to your clients, you are wrong. That will be the beginning of the end for you.

INVEST IN YOUR BUSINESS

New camera? Gotta have it! New widget? Yep, I need it. Marketing, business plan, vendor relationships? Whoa. That takes work. I’m too busy for that. Sound familiar? Well, we are right back to making excuses. Here is the reality of running a successful studio. You will spend more time on marketing, networking, sales calls, etc. than you will shooting. Any successful studio owner will acknowledge this. I spend 90 percent or more of my time on business-related tasks and 5-10 percent of my time shooting. I get it—you got into photography because you love making pretty pictures. While that is all fine and dandy, the reality is that in order to keep making pretty pictures, we need to invest in the business to ensure we have clients that will pay us for the 10 percent we get to shoot. You can’t have one without the other.

Most photographers don’t like hearing this. Usually, it’s the ones who are failing in their business. This, by the way, is the most ironic part of this whole thing. You are failing, yet you think you know better. See the utter stupidity in this?





Image © Salvatore Cincotta Photography

If you are failing or struggling or just not where you want to be, it might be time for you to take a fresh look at your business and ask yourself the tough questions. The simplest is: Why? Why are we failing? Why are we not where we want to be? And if any of those answers start or end with it being someone else, your client, another photographer, the market, etc., you are so off-course there may be no help for you. You are destined to a life of becoming a troll and blaming the world for all that is wrong and bitter in your life. However, I can promise you this: If you take a step back and look inward, you will find the answers. They might hurt and involve some tough love, but you will be looking at actionable items you can control. That's the difference here. Blaming others takes your power away from you. Looking inward, while painful in the short term, will allow you to control your future. You and you alone will be responsible for your successes and your failures. I like those odds.

Ultimately, remember this: We are not entitled to success. We are entitled to the pursuit of success. Don't waste that opportunity. It's an amazing gift we all have. Make the most of it. ■



Sal Cincotta is an international award-winning photographer, educator, and author, and the publisher of *Shutter Magazine*. Sal's success is directly tied to the education he received in business school. He graduated from Binghamton University, a Top 20 business school, and has worked for Fortune 50 companies like Procter & Gamble and Microsoft. After spending 10 years in corporate America, Sal left to pursue a career in photography and has never looked back.

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- 0.05 to 0.9 second recycle time
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7-PART

SERIES TO STEP UP YOUR
LIGHTROOM GAME:



PART 5: CREATIVE EDITING

with Dustin Lucas

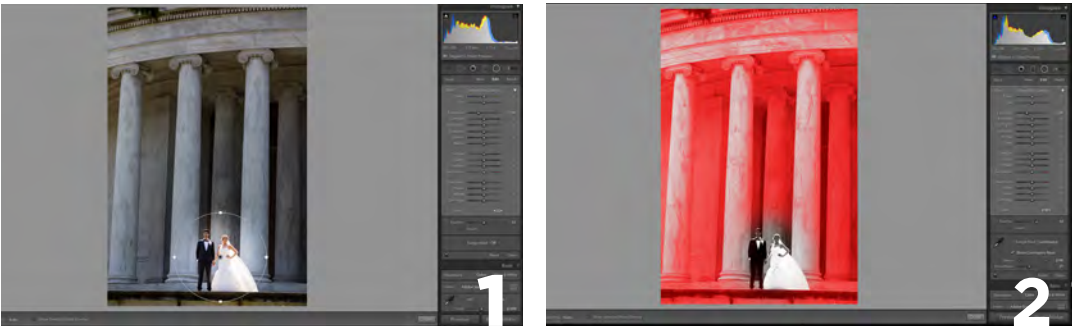
Now that we’ve finished correcting color and exposure, it’s time to get creative and show off our best work. When it comes to creative editing in Lightroom, there is a lot we can do without having to jump into Photoshop. That’s exactly what I want to cover in this article, while also offering workflows for Lightroom to Photoshop for that extra level of editing. Obviously if you want to do a composite, swap a sky, or move people around, you have to leave Lightroom. This is why it’s important to know how to work in other programs while keeping files organized in your catalog. The last thing you want is to hunt down edits done outside Lightroom.

I want to start with Lightroom’s local adjustments, including the brushes and filters to show off the editing power of this program. It’s a perfect way to brush on skin-smoothing effects as well as an efficient way to dodge and burn. You can build a custom profile in Adobe Camera Raw and load it in Lightroom to offer a complete, non-destructive option for creative edits. This is a really awesome upgrade! Going from Lightroom to Photoshop files should be an organized process, and I will show you how with the Edit in Photoshop feature. This is a game-changer for my post-Lightroom workflow.

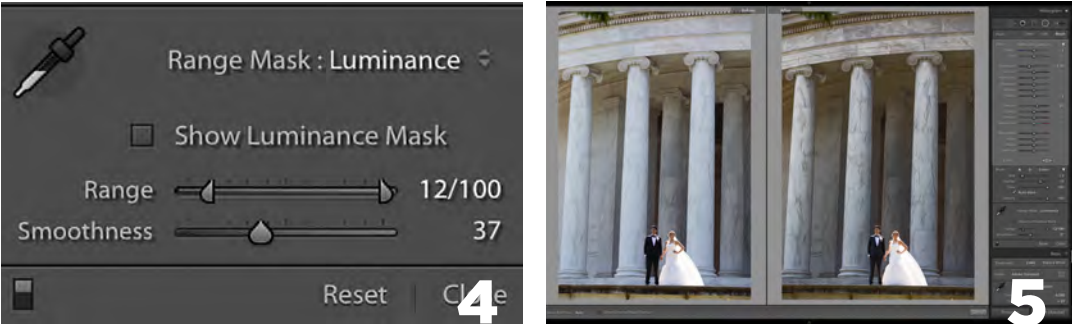
Let’s dive into brushwork in Lightroom to get started.

LOCAL ADJUSTMENTS WITH BRUSHES & FILTERS

When it comes to local adjustments, my first instinct is to burn down the background and make the subject pop. The quickest way to burn down the background in Lightroom is to invert the Radial Filter, draw an oval over the subject, and drop exposure. It doesn’t stop there, because you will have a massive halo around your subject, which looks almost as bad as an out-of-focus image.(1) Since this did most of the heavy lifting, we need to limit the range of the mask by either color or luminance. With the bright dress and her lighter complexion, I would choose Range Mask: Luminance. Then grab the selector tool, hold shift, and click the structure behind. This doesn’t really help isolate the couple from the background. (2)



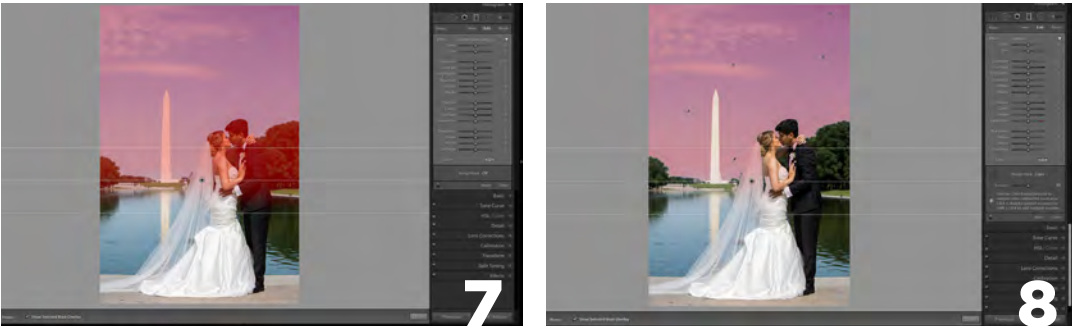
To perfect this mask, we will have to add/remove areas with a brush. Keep in mind that only the colors included in our selected luminance range will be added when painting with a brush.(3) If we need to widen the range, we can quickly turn Range Mask off. (4) Next, you will want to erase the mask off skin tones and wherever the mask is on the subject. To do this, you can choose a brush at the top of the panel, hold option, and be sure to turn off auto mask when applying. If you want to apply different adjustments on a new pin, you can also duplicate the pin. This is likely the most time-intensive part, but following these three steps helps cut time down.(5)



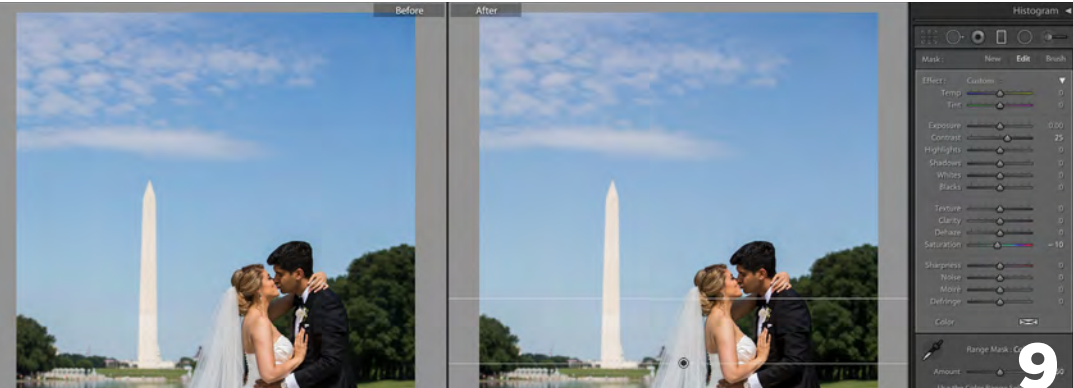
Other useful options for dodging the client are using the adjustment brush with auto mask to keep the hard edges of the dress and paint in highlights.(6) To separate adjustments from the subject and background, I recommend the Graduated Filter.



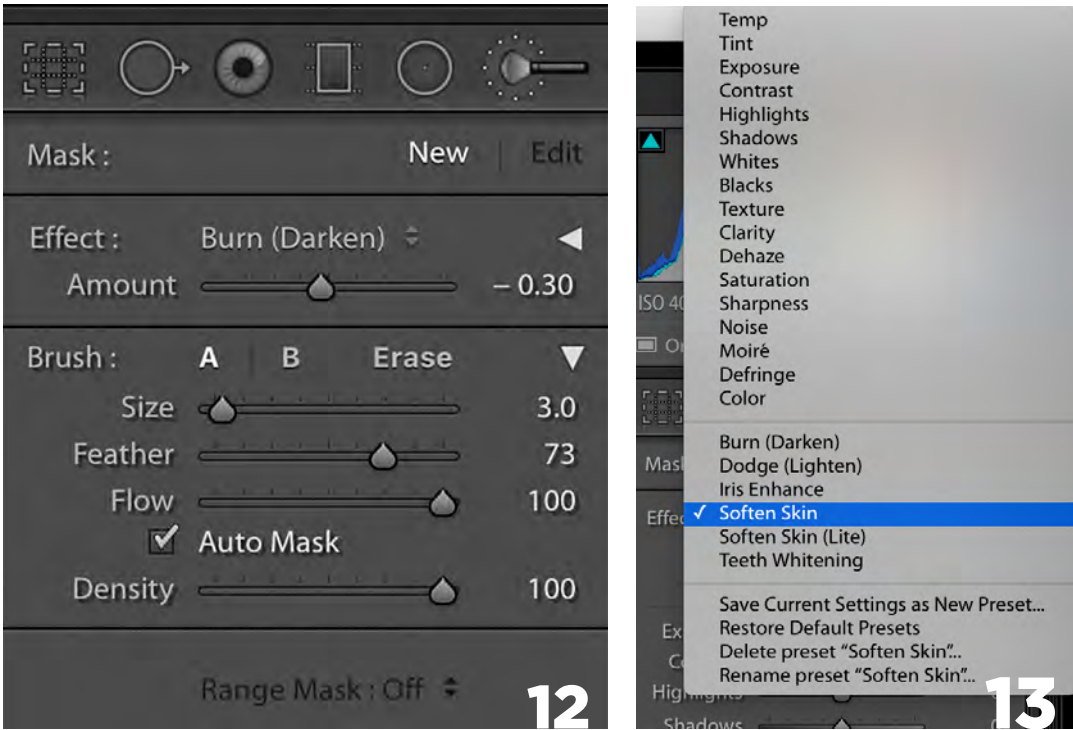
Once you strike the “m” key, this opens the Graduated Filter, allowing you to click and drag downward so the mask applies to the top horizon line. Everything above the filter is automatically added, and the gradient is determined by how far you spread the bottom bar.(7) To adjust the bottom bar only, hold the command key while dragging it down. Then you can quickly mask out everything but the sky with the color range mask. Using the selector tool, click in the sky—it helps that we added some blue tones earlier. Now we can start to add effects to increase the intensity of the soft sky.(8)



After adding contrast, the sky starts to get too blue for my liking. This is easily fixed by lowering saturation.(9) For a more HDR effect, I can increase clarity or texture to start adding intensity to the softness.(10) The same process can be done for the architecture as we add a new filter and drag upward. Then, we can use the color range mask to remove the sky and subject. Also, if some areas overlap, we can lower the Amount slider. Boom. Now our image is ready for skin softening.(11)

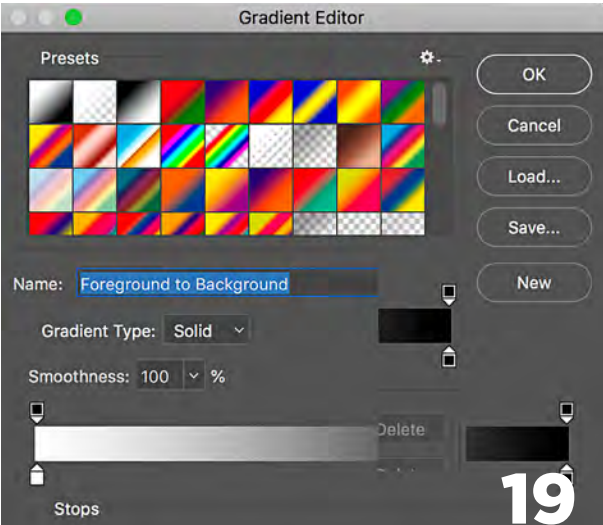
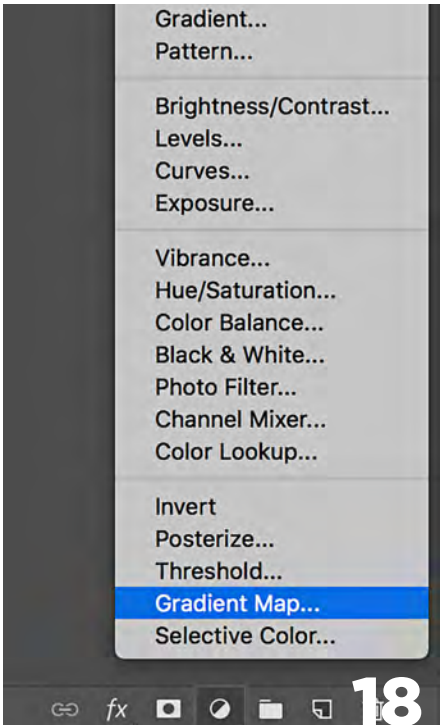
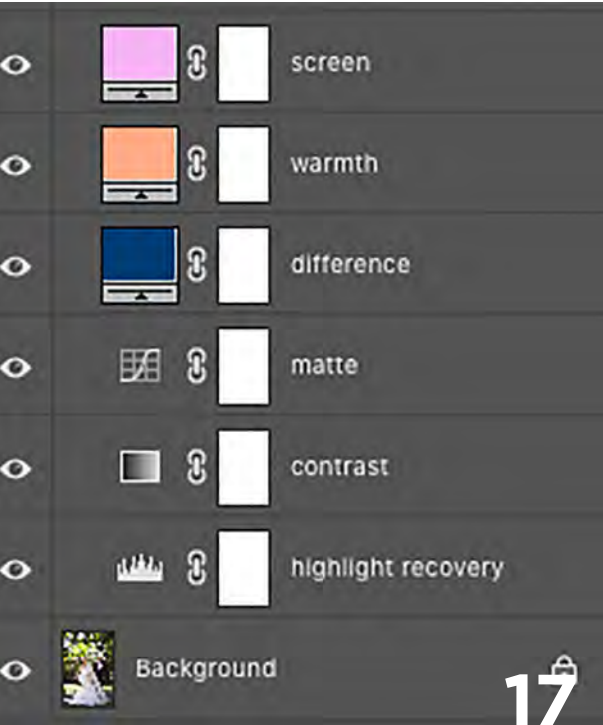


I typically use Portraiture for skin softening, but when I want to stay in Lightroom, I'll use the adjustment brush by striking the “k” key.(12) Now there is a quick preset to use for skin softening that lowers clarity, but I have really enjoyed lowering the texture slider instead.(13) This offers softening without affecting any of the tonal range on the skin.(14) It helps to use auto mask to keep the softening off the eyes and lips.(15) You can also enhance the eyes with this tool to really offer decent retouching options for your subject's face.(16)

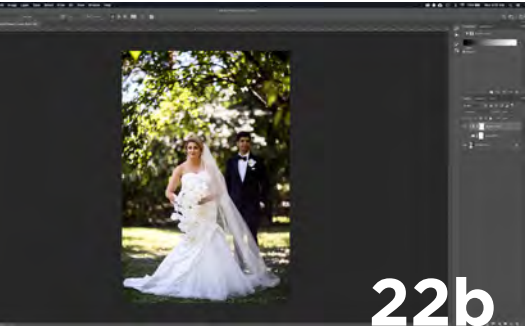
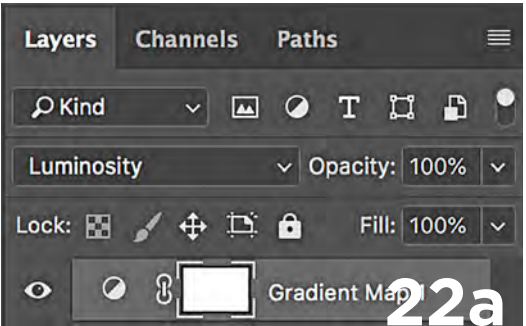
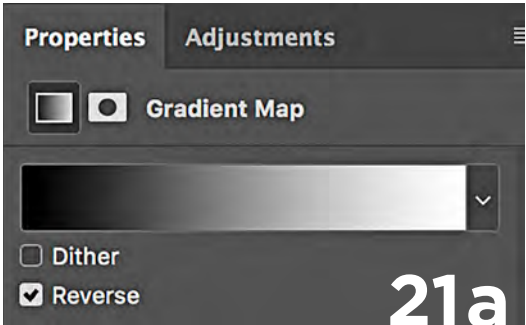


NON-DESTRUCTIVE EDITING WITH CUSTOM PROFILES

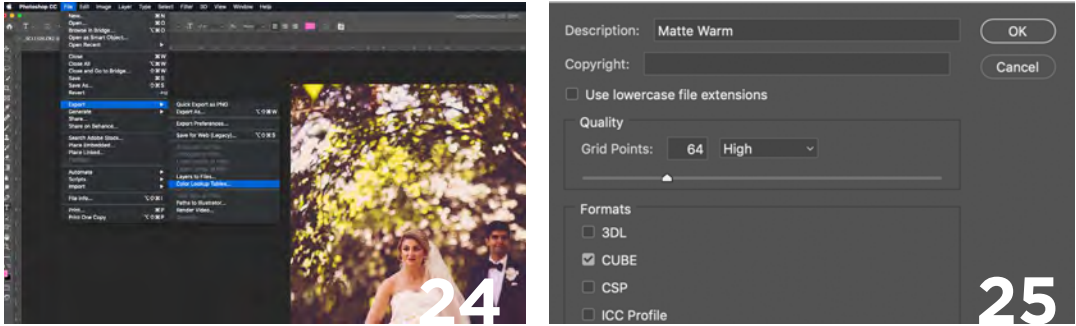
Before we get started, we need an action in Photoshop to apply and be sure it only contains adjustment layers. Image layers will not properly export, which will cause issues with the final look.(17) All of the layer adjustments can be found at the bottom of your Layers palette by clicking the middle icon.(18) If you don't have an action built, don't worry—you can apply a few adjustments to get started. One of my favorite tools is the gradient map for converting to black & white; it's also a quick way to color grade.(19) If you haven't used this tool before, I suggest adding it to your list. After adding a gradient map, you'll see your image looks more like a negative. (20)



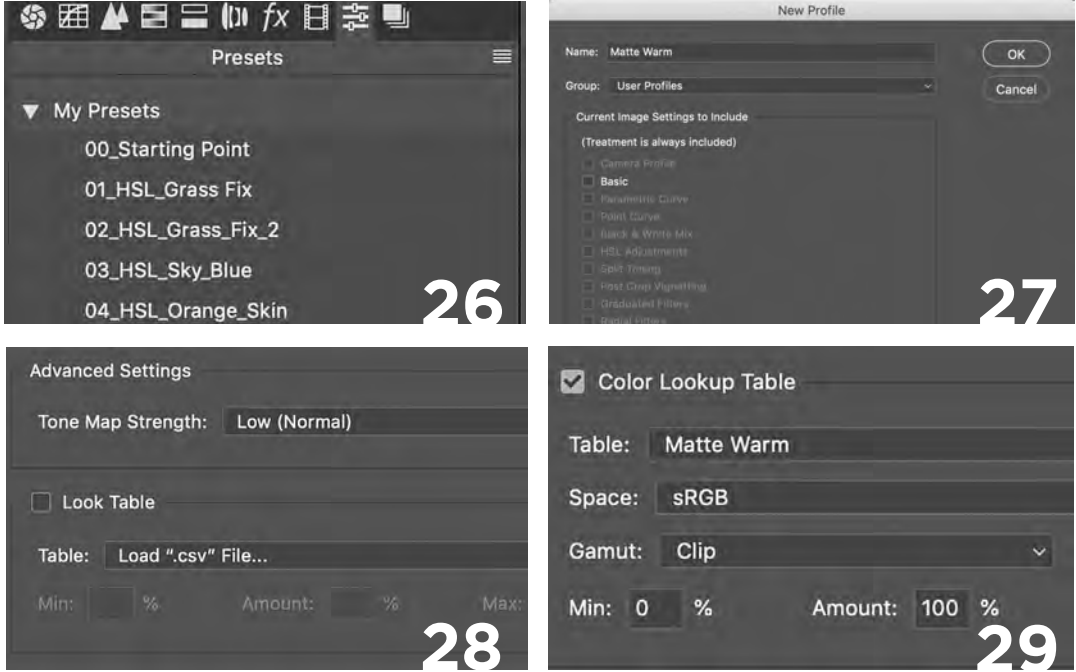
This is simple to fix by clicking the reverse button so your gradient reads more like a standard histogram—the left side is black, gradually shifting to the right to make white.(21ab) If you want to keep the image in color, you can change the Blend Mode to Luminosity, which will keep the tones and revert back from a monochromatic image. (22ab) The same goes for Black & White—you can apply this to your image to quickly shift the luminosity of specific colors.(23) Once you have a few layer adjustments applied, you are ready to export as an LUT.



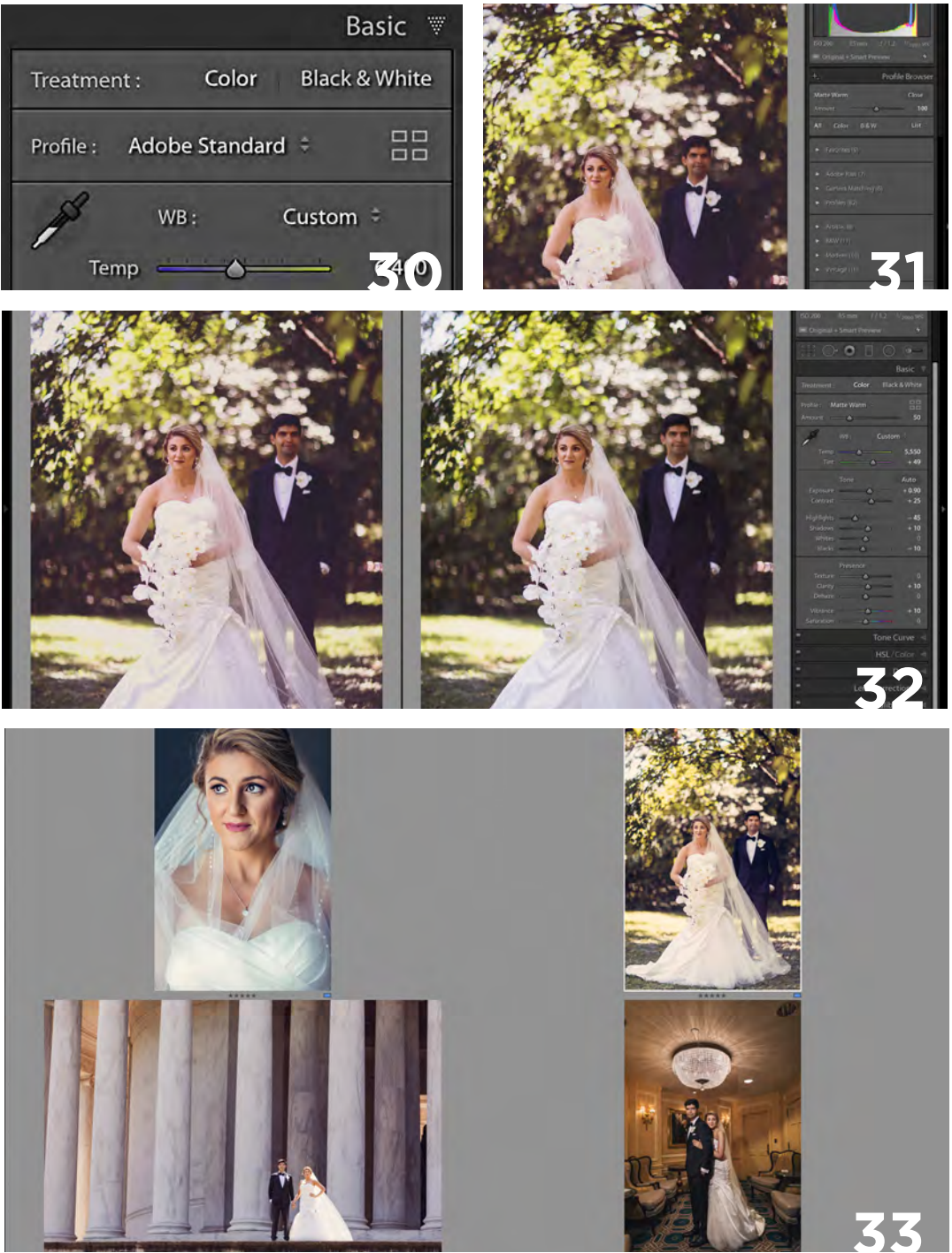
To export, you will go to File in the top menu bar, hover the cursor over Export, and click Color Lookup Tables. (24) When exporting, I typically leave everything at the default settings in the popup dialog box. You can add a description and copyright, adjust quality to high, and uncheck formats as you see fit. I will only need a .cube file for Adobe Camera Raw, so I'll only select that option to reduce file clutter.(25) The next screen is important, allowing you to name the file and store it for later use. Once this is done, we are ready to jump into Camera Raw.



Now that we have our LUT saved from Photoshop, we need to open Camera Raw to save it as a Custom Color Profile. Once Camera Raw is open, we need to navigate to the Presets panel.(26) Just as we have done before with creating a Custom Color Profile from our slider adjustments, we need to hold the option/alt key and click the Create Preset button at the bottom of the panel.(27) This opens the New Profile dialog box, where we can choose a name and where to store it in the Color Profile section. I leave the Tone Map Strength at Low (Normal) and check the box next to Color Lookup Table.(28) Now I can locate that .cube file we created earlier and click OK.(29) Now we are ready to apply this in Camera Raw and Lightroom.

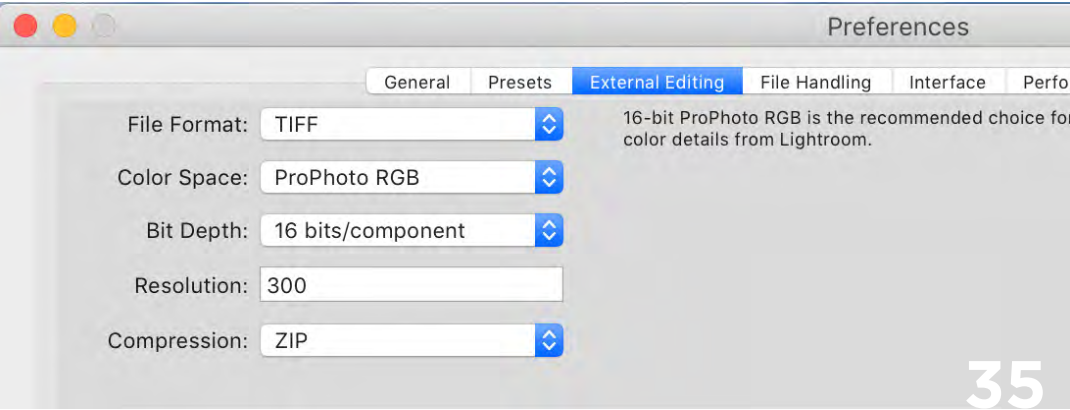
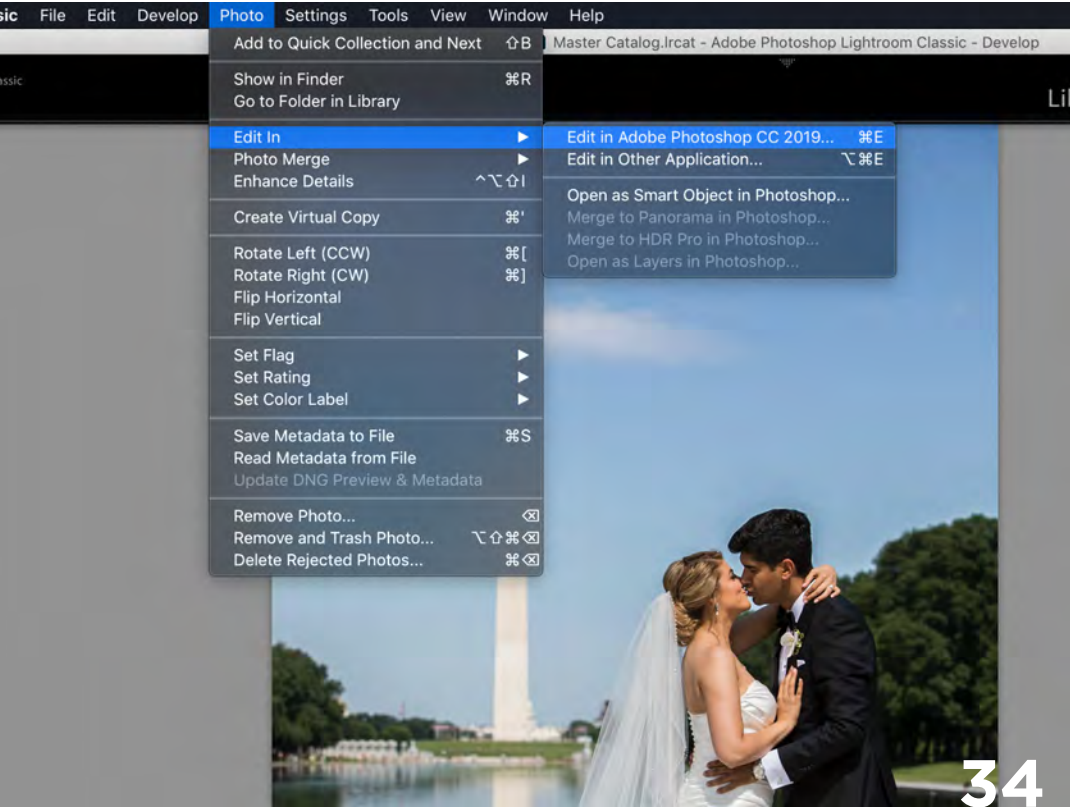


If you have Lightroom open while creating a new profile, you will need to relaunch it to select it. You can find your profile at the top of the Basic Panel in Lightroom Classic version 8.1.(30) Find the set you saved it in, and click the profile.(31) What's really awesome about using custom profiles is the addition of an Amount slider, allowing you to lower or raise this effect. This starts at 100%, and you can drop down to 0 or raise to 200.(32) Now you can apply your Photoshop actions directly in Lightroom and work non-destructively, because your develop sliders aren't affected. This is a massive game-changer for my workflow.(33)

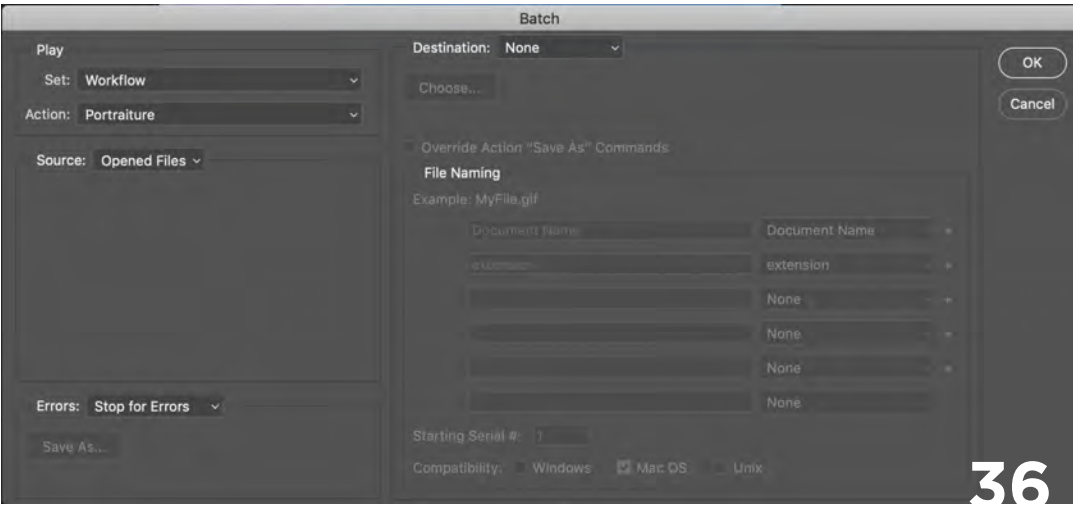


EDIT IN PHOTOSHOP FROM LIGHTROOM

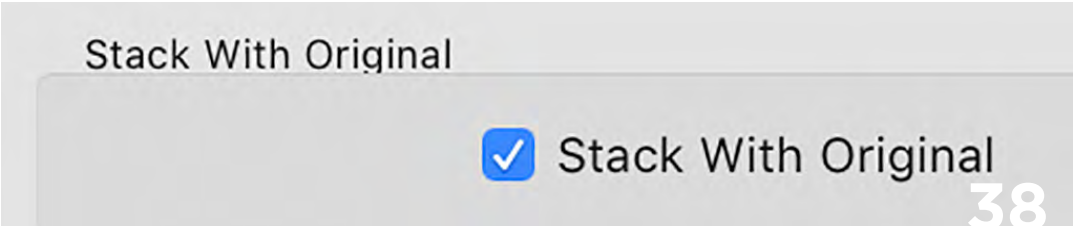
The Edit In feature is a popular option in Lightroom, allowing you to bounce between programs. You can quickly choose any image or images, hold command, and strike the “e” key. This converts your RAW file into a TIFF file and opens it immediately into Photoshop for you to apply your actions.(34) If you want to change your preferences, go to the preferences External Editing tab to change file type, color space, bit depth, resolution and compression. I prefer using Adobe’s suggested settings of 16-bit ProPhoto RGB.(35) Not a bad option, considering you can work one image at a time from Develop or select multiple images from Library. Now this would require us to apply the action manually for each image.



We can utilize the Automate Batch processor to apply an action to the opened images instantly. Under the Play settings, we can choose the set and action to apply. For source, we want to click in the box and select Opened Files. Last, you want to set the destination setting to None, so it leaves the images open—otherwise, it saves and closes your edits. Save and close would make sense if you were batch applying an effect and wanted the images to close and load back into Lightroom.(36)



Once we save our edit, the newly created files are loaded into Lightroom next to the original RAW file. This really allows your workflow to be built on organization.(37) Another preference you can choose is to have the exported copy stacked with the original.(38) This allows you to collapse all stacks after you save edits in Photoshop and the RAW file is hidden. It’s very useful when exporting images for a client, so you don’t have duplicate color-corrected files following the creatives.(39)





This workflow is great for quick edits and certainly small batches of images. However, if we need to export a thousand images with some simple adjustments that Lightroom can't handle, it's not a viable option. We'll discuss how to deal with that in next month's article.

THE RESULTS

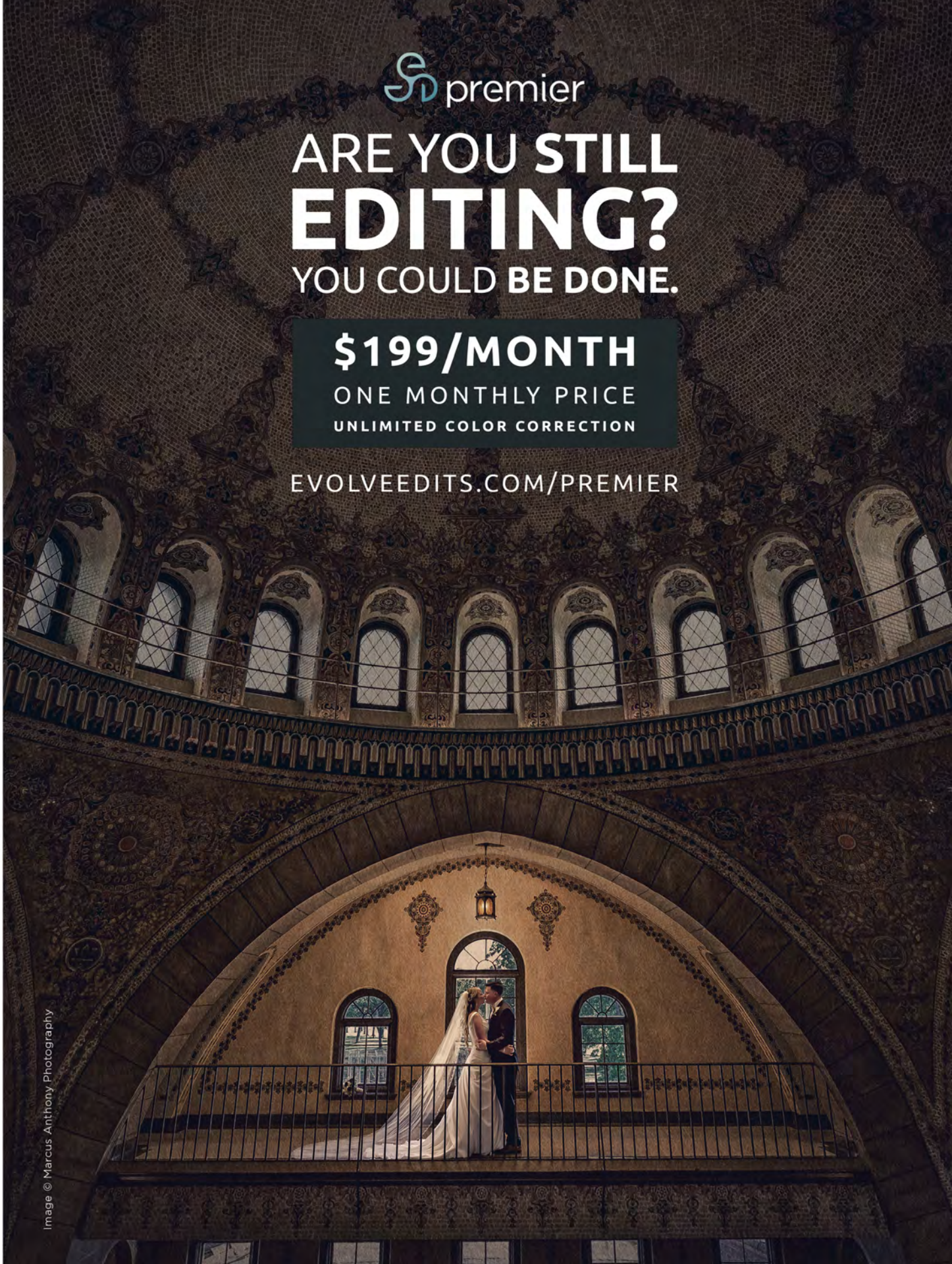
Now that we've really dialed in the best images to apply some creative adjustments, our work is almost done. Start with the tools already in Lightroom like Local Adjustments, and expand to Color Profiles. Custom Profiles have single-handedly changed the way I work in Lightroom, since they don't change my develop sliders. What's even better is I can convert a lot of Photoshop actions as well as create new profiles in Adobe Camera Raw with the sliders if I don't have actions. Once I combine these both into presets, I can edit multiple images instantly. Of course, if I need to edit further, the Edit in Photoshop feature works great.

Next month, tune in for Part 6 of this Lightroom workflow series, Finalizing Your Files. We will cover how to rename and reorder files, export presets and droplets, automation in Photoshop, and much more! ■

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Dustin Lucas is a full-time photographer and educator focused on the wedding industry and the academic world. After achieving his master of fine arts degree, a career opportunity opened once he began working with Evolve Edits. Through teaching photography classes and writing about photography, Dustin continues to expand his influence on art and business throughout the industry.
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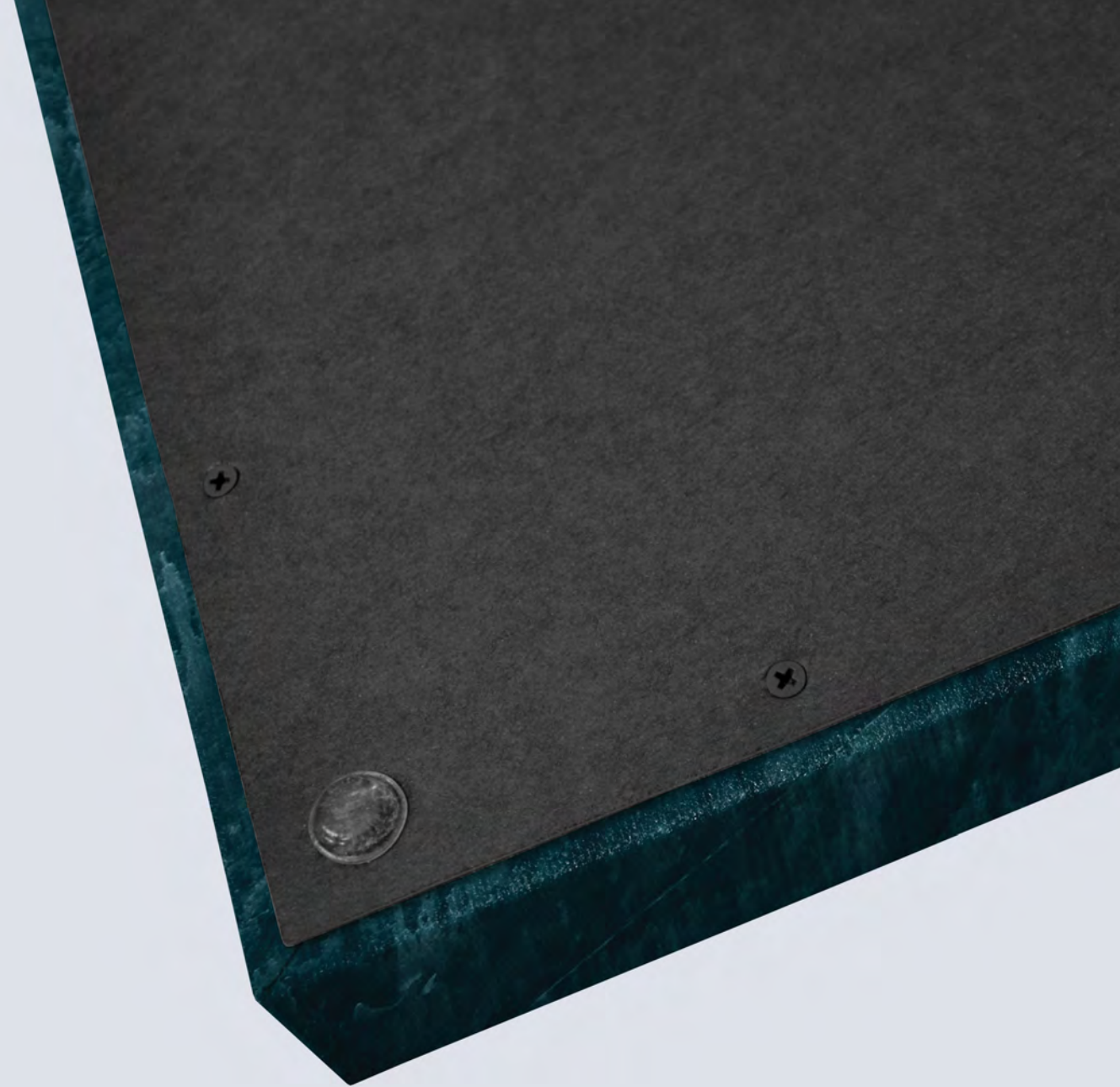
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THE CONVENTIONS OF

Beauty

AN INTERVIEW

WITH SUJATA SETIA

by Grace Jaskot



The photo industry is obsessed with the young and the beautiful. That is why there are countless photographers taking photos of babies, flowers, and women in dresses. But that is easy! That’s what “works.” Of course babies are beautiful. The trick is finding beauty in less obvious places. Sujata Setia’s photography does just that. The beauty in her images does not come solely from her subjects, but also from the compelling narratives she conveys.

Sometimes, photography can feel like a vending machine: put pretty pictures in, get adoration from your audience out. This can feel dependable and safe. In a world that tells you that your audience wants to see “beautiful” photos, Sujata had the courage to break out from that box and choose subjects whom she enjoys photographing and who exhibit beauty in a more nuanced way.

Sujata believes that art is visual as well as emotional. Artists who go for conventional “beauty” are actually only looking at the visual aspect of art. For Sujata, it is more an emotional journey. Her art is derived from narratives, stories, and emotions, rather than physical attributes. She has never really paid attention to how conventionally beautiful her subject is, as long as they have a story to tell. Her photography feeds us the human experience we are all so hungry for.



Sujata resorted to photography when she was going through her darkest time. Photography became a way for her to heal internally. She dug deep into her life, the life of her daughter, and those of the people in her immediate surroundings, because that’s where she thinks inspiration really comes from. Every time there is a crisis in her life, she finds that inspiration surfaces. She lives somehow vicariously through her images. As a result, she never looked for conventional beauty to create them. She looked for narratives that would give her some sort of hope or show her the positive side of life, so that she could come out from the darkness.

This is why she is so attracted to a narrative style rather than just looking for, “Oh, is she pretty or not?” She has never been a part of that norm, that culture of photography. She couldn’t possibly fit herself into it.





FINDING BALANCE.

The thing about the conventions of the photo industry is you can't really run from them. They are often the bread and butter of how photographers make money. Sujata has found a way to balance the opposing factors of what you need to shoot and what you want to shoot. She finds that with her students, when they start doing photography, even if they pick it up as an art form, as a form of fashion, they very quickly turn it into a business, and all they want are the numbers in the bank at the end of the month. They start taking the more conventional route of, "Oh, we need to get this many likes on this image." They mold their photography to fit certain trends in the industry.

Sujata started that way as well, of course, like almost all photographers do. She wanted to take up photography as something that would bring money to her bank account. She realized very quickly, though, that it was taking the passion out of her love for the art. So, she divided her business into two parts, doing her dutiful client work with part of her time, but spending the other half of her month doing work that truly came from a space in her heart. She does this to be able to stay in this industry, continuously. For her, it's like a marriage—you have to balance it out. She does the conventional stuff, and then she does something that truly makes her live in this marriage, forever and ever.

That's the art that she posts on social media. She started doing so without even hoping for the number of likes that she has started to receive. But she never asked for those likes. She never sought them, and she's not doing anything to please anyone, yet the likes keep coming. This is a true testament to the need we have as humans, even in a digital space, to connect to one another, to the emotions and tropes we all experience.

A lot goes into creating this magic. From timing, to posing, to lighting, to setting, Sujata makes decisions to convey her narratives skillfully.

Image © But Natural Photography



TIMING.

When it comes to timing, some of it is obviously “created” magic—Sujata has realized over time that magic is not a sheer coincidence. It is actually a very calculated risk that you take in your art. And for that, Sujata says you need to have your shot description written down before you go out to shoot. Always, before she steps out, she writes her shots down in a very detailed manner so that she knows what elements she’ll need while she’s there on location. She knows that you cannot wait and hope that the magic will naturally happen. You have to pose the shots; you have to place your subjects in a scenario and then wait for the natural course of their love to take place.

In a particular shoot, she places them in the right spot, and then waits for that moment when they do exactly what she was hoping for them to do. She quickly presses her shutter, to get an adorable photo of an older man giving his wife a flower. Older individuals can be like children, and their level of patience is extremely low. You have to work around that. Sometimes, the easiest thing to do is to give them a flower. The moment you pass on a flower to a child or an elderly person, they will very easily be able to express their emotion by handing it over to someone else. That’s the easiest technique, and that is what she does—tries to simplify her process.



Images © But Natural Photography



Image © But Natural Photography

POSING.

For Sujata, the technical aspects are very important. When it comes to posing, she likes to think of it as a triangle. So, the heads need to come closer. The moment that happens, the emotion comes through. She always looks for a moment when the subjects are looking into each other’s eyes. Sujata places them at an angle to her camera, not facing it, but parallel to it. In the case of elderly subjects, most of them do not have the physical strength in their arms left to be able to hold their grandchildren in a position Sujata may want. She has to make it as comfortable as possible for them for 10 seconds while she quickly takes the shot. Her shutter speed is always very high, around 1200, and on continuous focus, so that she does not miss these moments.



Images © But Natural Photography

LIGHTING.

Sujata’s photos feel very much like dreams, almost like paintings of memories. This is achieved by the choices she makes when lighting her subjects. Sujata is continuously looking for good light. To her, good light is light that is falling very softly on the subject. She finds her best light right before sunset. Sujata looks for extremely soft light filtered through any natural resource, say tree leaves, for example. She is always searching for a sort of rim light around her subject. When you add a rim of light, it creates a beautiful, three-dimensional aspect to your image. The softer the light is, the more beautiful your narrative is going to look, the more your story will stand out. The light doesn’t become too messy or overpowering in the image. Sujata says light has to basically complement your narrative and not take away from your story.

Many of Sujata’s photos juxtapose the young and the old. This makes it clearer for her audience to see that the two might not be that different after all. In most of her photos, the elderly seem to be just as playful as the children. Sujata has a lot to say about age and growing older. She really wants to celebrate aging. She finds it incredible how her subjects truly are like children, how they really want to celebrate. They don’t want to be grim about their situation. They don’t want to talk about sad narratives. They just want to enjoy the little time that they have remaining. This has changed the way Sujata feels about growing older and has helped her heal tremendously.

Sujata recently experienced a tremendous loss in her life. This elderly couple series has helped her because, in a way, it allows her to keep seeing the lives of the ones she misses, which she wasn’t able to photograph. She tries to recreate that magic, to recreate that life that could have been possible, through these images.

For her, spending time with these elderly people is absolutely incredible. They are always so full of love and blessing and forgiveness. There is no ego, and they display a certain ability to forgive themselves for all the faults they’ve had in life. They do not live to others’ expectations, nor to an industry’s expectation. Much like Sujata’s work, they exist for themselves, and others revel in their beauty. ■



After receiving her Bachelor of Arts in English Language and Literature, Grace Jaskot began her journey working for Behind the Shutter. She assists Alissa Zimmerman, the editor-in-chief, with many tasks, one being social media (follow us on Instagram at @btshutter!). Probably her proudest accolade, Grace is the owner of a miniature Dachshund named Sibyl who is the Champion of her Local Weenie Dog Race. With a love for written communication and a passion for sharing human experience, Grace is honored to write for the readers of Shutter Magazine.

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GELLED LIGHTING:

MYSTERIOUS, YET FAMILIAR MAGIC

with David Byrd



At some point in our image-viewing lives, we’ve all been enamored with a photograph where gels and color were used to augment it. Whether this image has a small kicker accent of gelled lighting or is created entirely with it, we respond to that infusion of color—the image has a larger impact on the viewer. In many ways, the underlying story of a certain image can only be fully revealed through the use of color and gels.

Stepping into gelled lighting, however, can be a tough road to navigate, as some of the initial attempts do not achieve the desired visual outcome. When I first began to use this image-making style, my work looked like a (colorful) hot mess. It was quite by accident that I discovered my fatal flaw, and that began my deep dive into the genre.

My first inspiration for this type of photography came from the beautiful work of Jake Hicks. His command of color and lighting in order to bring his subjects to life was utterly mesmerizing. I felt as if he was creating an entirely new world, even though the pose of the subject, the clothing, all of it was somehow familiar. Surely, this was some secret that had taken years to perfect. I wouldn’t even know how to begin.

I was pleased to find out that it wasn’t a secret at all.

When I looked at where the light was hitting the subject, I quickly realized that this was a recognized lighting pattern for athletic images. You know the look: Your main light is slightly elevated in front of your subject, and they are rimmed on either side by two strip lights. That cast of three lights competing against each other usually creates a dramatic image that brings the details of the subject to life using the folds of the fabric, then sculpts them. However, that look wouldn’t be appropriate for a glamour subject ... unless color was added to the mix.

Rad. I had figured it out.

I rushed to the studio with a model and a concept of my own design, and got ready to make some magic. I set up the three lights, metered them all to be at a pleasing portrait level of f/8, and fired away. The image looked like the typical athletic, dramatic image. Perfect. I added color to the mix with a blue gel on the main and orange on the two strips. I chose that pattern because blue and orange are opposite of each other on the color wheel. I adjusted the power of the lights to make sure we were still at f/8 on all sides and then fired away.

ENTER THE HOT MESS

It looked like two colors were at war with each other, and the innocent glamour model was the casualty. I checked my settings, checked the color wheel, took another shot, and ... same results. I moved the lights farther away. Hot mess. I moved them closer. Hotter mess. I almost gave up, but accidentally took another shot out of frustration. Thankfully, the main light didn’t fire, but the strips did. I quickly realized the whole issue: the blue gel light was overpowering the others. This was simply because I had set them all to the same power setting.

So, I changed it up by reducing the main blue light to f/5.6 and left the strips (orange gels) as they were. I took the shot, and there it was—the beautiful image that I’d seen in my imagination.

I decided to do the reverse and test out the look. I brought the main back to the previous f/8 and reduced the strips by one stop of power. Holy cats. The image was vastly different—the blue was such a strong focus point. The orange caught accents in her body and clothing that had previously been washed out by the intensity of the light. Over the rest of that session, I tested all types of power settings, camera settings, color combinations, positions of lights, and so forth. I even called a hair-and-makeup artist whom I absolutely love working with and said, “Can you come style my next model, and bring some Crisco? I want her skin to really shine!” (She informed me that it’s called “highlighter” and that she would be leaving the Crisco at home.)

After I started sharing my work on social media, I was blessed to get a ton of messages from the community telling me they loved the work and they would never be able to do that themselves. I started asking them the same question, “Do you know how to light a general, simple portrait with three lights?” Many proudly said that was easy to do. I then replied, “Congratulations, you now know how to do gelled glamour lighting. Hop to it!”

The position of the lights and the intensity you use in normal portrait photography are the same foundation you use in gelled lighting—the color pallet and dominant color are the only things that change.

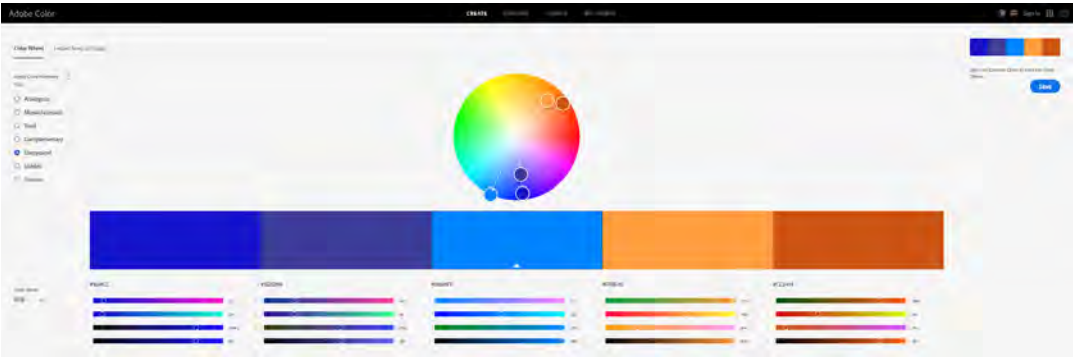
YOUR FRIEND, THE COLOR WHEEL

The basis of all color theory is born out of this little circle of colors.



What colors can interact with each other, complement each other, and of course should never be seen together—all that is dictated by this wheel. Different art disciplines have their own theories as to what is “right” and “wrong.” These decisions are born out of hundreds, if not thousands, of years of experience in art and creation. What has amended the rules is the evolution of different artistic mediums. Photography and gelled lighting let you test new theories and perhaps evolve old ones.

A great place to choose your color pallet for a session in gelled lighting is the Adobe Color app.



This free service from Adobe allows you to select a main color and then bounce between all the various color harmonies to the associated color. For example, if you start with the color blue and choose its complements, you’ll see the color orange on the opposite side, as well as analogous colors of both.



With that in mind, put a blue gel onto one light and an orange one on the other. If you use the app and select the “Triad” feature, you can then see other options that might mix with your initial choice.



In this case, if we choose a deep blue, we’ll see red and yellow as the completion of the triad. Now experiment with a blue and red gel, or a blue and yellow. You can add all three, but that is where the blending of colors will create new ones (we’ll discuss that a little later). For now, the best course of action is to pick your main color and find the complements or the completion of the triad, and begin experimenting.

Some combinations are more favorable than others, but I want to stress that there is no “wrong” way of doing this. It’s up to the artist and the vision you want to create. Yes, there are color theories out there that will ring true no matter what you choose, but they do not mean you shouldn’t try something new. Experimentation is the key. To help you get started, I’ve included some of my standard combinations.



Main: Orange
Side lights: Blue



Main: Blue
Side lights: Magenta



Main: Red
Side lights: Purple



Main: Purple
Side lights: Green

NOW YOU'RE COOKIN' WITH CRISCO

When approaching hair and makeup, you have to make choices that are just as important as choosing spots on the color wheel. After all, depending on how many lights you are using, the makeup can be washed out or change significantly with each gel.

The best makeup application is the use of a highlighter product or glycerin. Glycerin will give the model's skin a reflective surface for the lights to pop off of. However, it tends to provide a flat level of shine or specular highlight. The use of a highlighter creates a sparkle within that shine, due to the crystal infusion of its components. (I have yet to experiment with adding actual glitter to the glycerin/highlighter combo and painting the model to look like they waded through a unicorn battlefield, but that is my next adventure to go on.) The product used during this session was Glossier Haloscope in Moonstone.

Clothing choices play such a powerful role in all of this as well. For the images captured here, I chose to have the models each wear a predominately black costume made of dull fabric. I wanted you to see how the colors play off of their skin tones and the variety to be found therein. Of course, the color and light will play differently off of actual fabric versus skin, so how much clothing your subject wears is key.

To demonstrate how different clothing choices can change the tone of the images, I included a highly reflective piece of clothing labeled "Unicorn Suit." Getting that invoice from Amazon was the highlight of that particular day.

Unicorn Suit



Image © Reality Reimagined

Black Costume



Image © Reality Reimagined

PAY ATTENTION TO THE COMPLEXION SPECTRUM

As photographers, we always have to be prepared to adjust our skills and tools to the subject. Based on the unique aspects of the human being in front of us, we may choose to change the light angle to flatter their particular facial features. We can choose a different pose that alters body shape. Skin tones are no exception, and how the color of your gels harmonizes with various skin tones will showcase a unique result. Essentially, the color stays the same, but it takes on a different tonality as it interacts with skin tone. This is different than mixing colors to produce a new one. If you point a blue gel and a yellow gel toward the subject, inevitably you are going to start seeing a shade of green. The yellow and blue gels will have a different tonal range based on the skin tone of the subject, but they won't change colors entirely. The farther you move into a pure white base of any aspect of your subject (usually clothing, hair or background), the less your gel colors will be seen.

In the examples here, I am using a blue gel for the main light and two magenta/pink gels for the strips on either side of the subject. As you can see, the two varying skin tones cause a small tonality change to the colors, but they practically remain the same. As with all skin tone variance, the only change you need to consider is the power of the light. The light may need to be increased to illuminate different skin tones or decreased to properly illuminate lighter hair color.



Image © Reality Reimagined



Image © Reality Reimagined



WHERE DO I START?

Begin with a three-light setup, placing the main light at a pleasing front angle to the subject. Now, add the other two lights, either to the side or slightly behind your subject. Let's add some color by placing a blue gel on one of the side lights and red on the other. Sculpt the light until you see the pattern of highlight and shadow that you prefer. Does the red highlight speak to you more than the blue, or is it the reverse? Whatever color you favor, position that light to fall more onto your subject, and feather away the other color.

Now it's time to add color to the main light itself. Place the blue gel on the main light, and place a red gel on the remaining lights. Move the lights around in the pattern that makes the most sense to you. Once you find your preferred method of lighting, change the gel colors by going to the color wheel.

Introduce a fourth light on a boom, directly above the subject. Select a color that is analogous to the main light's color, and keep that light's power a stop lower than the rest. To breakdown the image example I am using a double blue gel on my main light (number 1) with a 47 inch octabox, positioned for butterfly lighting. Light number 2 is a double orange gel that is using a 12x55 inch strip box and has been placed a good distance from the model, with a slight feather toward the metal wall behind her for specular reflection. Light number 3 is using only one orange gel, same strip modifier and has been placed right outside of the frame on camera right. Finally light number 4 is using a purple gel and a 28 inch beauty dish, boomed directly above the model's head.

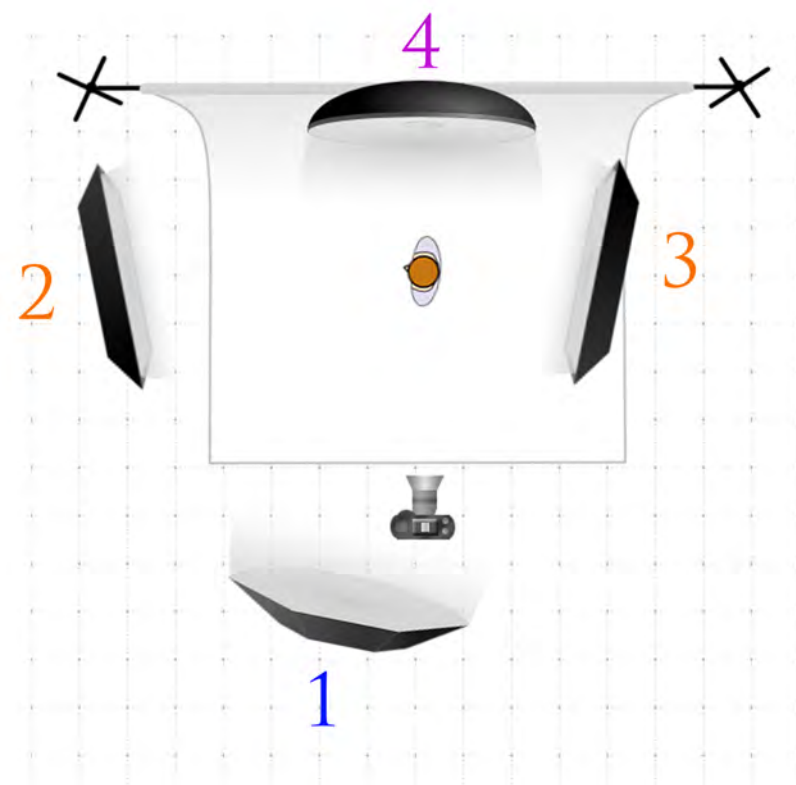




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Once you find the favorable lighting pattern you prefer and the color theory to match, test different clothing choices and different make-up options—even throw glitter into the mix. Emboldened by that success, now photograph your subject on a white, high-key background. Keep them a few feet away from the background, and repeat your light pattern and color choices.

The possibilities are endless, and once you accept that this genre of photography is almost the exact same process as standard portraiture, you will be well on your way to creating some great gelled-lighting artwork!

In part two of this series, we'll take some of the images into Photoshop and go over the best practices to bring them to life. ■



David Byrd has an overactive imagination and has used that gift in his art. He has a degree in theater, and worked as an actor and director before turning his attention to photography and Photoshop. It was through those collective disciplines that he realized he could tell stories from his imagination through photography, similarly to how he once did it in the theater.
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FIVE STEPS
—FOR—
CREATING
—A—
SUCCESSFUL
PHOTOGRAPHY
NARRATIVE

with Kate Woodman



Image © Kate Woodman

Storytelling is what we do as humans. It’s in the movies we see, the books we read, the music we listen to—it’s even in that commercial for your laundry detergent or favorite soft drink. Now more than ever, creating a narrative is the key to engaging an audience that is constantly bombarded by content—and more and more photographers are being hired to fabricate these stories for brands.

So what is the key to creating a series of images that tells an effective story? Below are five tips to help you bring a successful narrative to life.



Image © Kate Woodman

STEP 1: CREATE YOUR CHARACTERS

Have you ever been to a movie that has a great plot and beautiful cinematography, only to have it ruined by bad acting? You can have the best story in the world, but it’s all for nothing if your characters aren’t convincing. When I photograph my stories, I try to put myself into the mindset of a film director. Whether you’re shooting a portrait, a fashion editorial, or a commercial campaign, giving your talent a backstory and an emotional direction will help them to get into the head of the character or subject they’re trying to portray and make for a much more compelling image. Tell them that they’ve just won the lottery, and watch their face light up—or that their dog ran away, and watch their body language slump. The more you can reduce their inhibitions and allow them to roleplay, the more believable their character will become (and the more fun you’ll have on set!)



Image © Kate Woodman

STEP 2: FOLLOW A NARRATIVE ARC

Most stories follow a classic narrative arc, comprised of four major parts—exposition, rising tension, climax and resolution.

EXPOSITION

The exposition sets the stage for your story, usually by introducing the characters, location and/or time in which the story is set. This is the chance for you to give your viewer a hint of what’s to come and establish a hierarchy of importance. For example, if your story is set in a fantastical realm, your introduction image might be a wide-angle shot of a magical landscape. Or, if your series relies mostly on your character development rather than an interesting setting, start with a tight portrait. This is your first impression, and it’s an opportunity to hook your audience with a compelling image, so you want to make it count!



Image © Kate Woodman

In my series “Time After Time,” I begin in a monochrome-color bar and introduce my two main characters as they are about to meet for the first time. This sets the aesthetic that remains consistent through the rest of the series.

RIISING TENSION

The rising tension is where the plot thickens, so to speak. This is where we build interest, tension, or suspense that leads to the climax of the story. That character-building is going to be very important. Unlike in a film, where you have time to develop emotional nuance, here you have to condense that into a limited number of frames. You’ll want to illustrate that emotion in the form of expression, body language, and/or a change in time or location to propel your story forward. It’s worth noting that your rising tension can be developed over a number of images, depending on the complexity of your story, so take as much or as little time as you need here to develop your plot effectively.



Images © Kate Woodman

In “Time After Time,” there are three rising tension images that show the evolution of our main characters’ relationships, beginning with their budding romance in “Red,” continuing with their contented domestic bliss in “Yellow,” and finally exploring the blossoming toxicity in their relationship in “Green.”

CLIMAX

The climax is the decisive moment or turning point in the story. It’s usually when a character makes a key decision or puts a plan into action. This could be a battle scene, an athlete crossing the finish line, or someone’s untimely demise. Because of its pivotal nature, the climax is usually showcased in a single, penultimate frame; as such, I like to incorporate something different aesthetically to set it apart from the previous imagery.



Image © Kate Woodman

In “Blue,” the story reaches its pinnacle when the lead female character leaves her partner. Unlike the rest of the images leading up to it, in “Blue,” I’ve introduced a light source of a contrasting color to draw more attention to the woman who is leaving. This shows that she is no longer in the same world as he is, as she ultimately chooses to go her own way.

RESOLUTION

The resolution brings the story to a conclusion. It can be the calm after the storm, or where all of the loose ends are tied up, such as a king being crowned after his defeat of an evil army. Or, conversely, it can surprise the viewer by going in a direction the audience may not have expected, like the reemergence of the killer you thought the protagonist had defeated. This is the finale of your story, and it is likely the image that your audience will remember best, so you’ll want it to complement the series leading up to it.



Image © Kate Woodman

In “Grey,” not only do we finally get the big reveal of the canvases, but it represents a shift from the aesthetic and characters present in the rest of the series.



STEP 3: LIGHTING

As photographers, we all understand the importance of lighting. Particularly in the portrait and fashion fields, there is often an emphasis placed on flattering light for our subjects. In narrative photography, however, the light has to complement the overall mood of your story. For instance, if you're shooting a campaign for a whitening toothpaste, you don't want dramatic, dark lighting, because it's incongruous with the brand message and content—instead, you'll want lots of bright, high-key lighting. Conversely, if you're shooting the promotional art for the local theater's latest production of Macbeth, it's totally okay to sacrifice flattering, soft light for the more dramatic, contrast-y light that the play inspires. At the end of the day, you want to make sure your lighting serves the emotions and the aesthetics of your story and not the other way around.

STEP 4: COLOR

The same principles of lighting can be applied to color. People assign a lot of meaning to color. You see it in branding all the time—that quintessential Ferrari red that inspires power and boldness, or the Barbie pink that embodies femininity. We have developed strong associations of color with emotion—when we're sad, we "feel blue," or when we're angry, we "see red"; if someone is new to something, they are "green," or if they are cowardly, they are "yellow-bellied." Colors have a strong psychological impact on us, and we can leverage this in our own work by incorporating color to facilitate an emotion we're trying to portray. Color can be used in a very literal way, like in my "Time After Time" series, which uses a saturated, monochromatic color palette to set the tone of each scene. Or, it can be used in a more subtle way, like in this image, "Ignite," where accents of red in the character's wardrobe and the gas allude to a sense of danger. We can also use color harmonies to create balance within an image or across a series.



Image © Kate Woodman

STEP 5: COMPOSITION

The last tip for creating a successful series involves the use of strategic composition. We want to find a balance in the series so that the images are cohesive but not too repetitive, and we can do this in a number of ways. If the lighting and/or color varies significantly from image to image, we can use similar composition to provide a consistency between images that will help tie them together. In “Time After Time,” the composition of the scene is fairly consistent (wide angle, shot at hip level, straight on, etc.), though the colors change dramatically as the characters shift farther and farther apart as the narrative progresses. Conversely, in “The Christmas Party,” the colors and lighting stay fairly consistent, but the composition shifts from image to image, with a mix of tight, medium, and wide-angle shots, as well as high- and low-angle shots.

Not only can composition be used to provide variety or cohesion across your series, it can also be used as an effective plot-driver. We can establish a scene using a wide shot, which provides context and allows the viewer some breathing room. Tighter shots, on the other hand, can feel very intimate or claustrophobic. Shooting up from a lower vantage point gives the viewer a sense of power and height and gives a character more prominence; conversely, shooting down diminishes a character, making them appear vulnerable or childlike. An aerial shot will convey a sense of detached omniscience, as if the viewer is observing from far away, while shooting through an opening or partially obscuring your view makes it feel as if the viewer is physically there, voyeuristically engaged with the subjects. These compositional tricks can help to add meaning and significance to the storyline.



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One fun exercise I have found to be very helpful in developing my storytelling abilities is to distill a film into a series of stills. The next time you're watching your favorite movie, see if you can select a set of stills (somewhere between 10 and 20) from the film that would convey the same story to a viewer who's never seen it before. Pay attention to the variables above—does this series show emotion and character development? Is each image important to the narrative arc, helping to move the plot along? Do we get a variety in the composition of the images—or, conversely, is there a repeating composition the director keeps coming back to in order to drive a point home? How are the lighting and the colors conveying the mood of the scene, and are they consistent throughout the movie, or do they change? If you do this exercise enough times, you'll be able to start implementing all of these ideas into your own work, and your stories will start to take on a life of their own! ■



Born in Darmstadt, Germany, Kate Woodman was brought up in Connecticut and currently calls Portland, Oregon home. A structural engineer by training, Kate developed her love of photography in 2011 while investigating earthquake damage in New Zealand. What began as a compulsion to document the environment expanded into a fascination for narrative storytelling, typically with a conceptual twist. Her engineering background serves her well in her photography, provoking a sense of balance and attention to detail and engendering a creative approach to the technical challenges of creating an image.

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LEAD NURTURING WITH DRIP EMAILS PART 1: THE KNOW-LIKE-TRUST PRINCIPLE

with Jeff & Lori Poole

ATTRACTING LEADS WITH MAGNETS

In last month’s The Business Corner, we talked about attracting leads to your studio using a special kind of bait called a lead magnet (September 2019, How to Get More Leads in Your Sales Funnel With Lead Magnets). Lead magnets are simply bits of content your ideal client may find useful and educational. For example, you might target wedding couples with helpful tips for wedding planning or getting great photos. Or, you might target headshot clients with networking tips. The idea is that these magnets are less about selling you, and more about helping your target client. If the prospect is interested enough in what you have to offer, they’ll gladly give you their contact information in order to get your magnet. Now that you have their information, what do you do with it?



A REFRESHER ON THE SALES FUNNEL

Whether you know it or not, you have a sales funnel. Your funnel is a representation of the path that people take from “lead” to “client.” Since literally every client was once a lead, every client came through your funnel.

At the top of your funnel, prospects are in the Awareness phase. They are learning about photographers, and they are getting acquainted with you and your competitors. As they move into the Interest phase, they are trying to determine what distinguishes you from your competitors. In the Desire phase, leads start to want you more than they want anyone else. And in the Action phase, they book you.



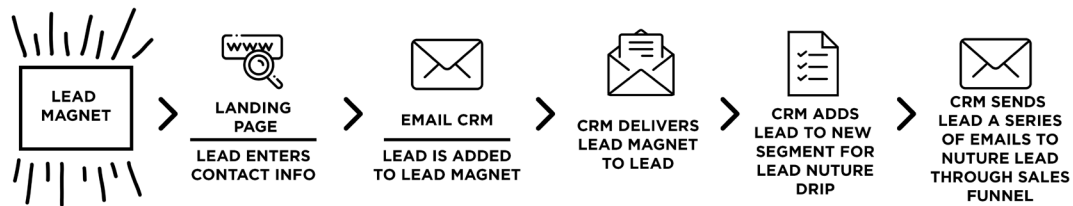
Your lead magnet alone is usually not enough to move a prospect from Awareness to Action. Neither is any one ad, image, or website visit. Most prospects need to know more about you before deciding to book. How can you help them move through the funnel stages? Enter the Lead Nurturing sequence.

WHAT DO I DO WITH THEIR CONTACT INFORMATION?

Remember that thus far, you’ve tempted your prospect with a tasty lead magnet. This can be marketed several ways: posting your magnet on social media, using targeted ads, or putting links to your magnets at the bottom of every blog post. Just get it out there.

The prospect visits a special page on your website, called a landing page, and enters their contact information into a form in order to receive your magnet. They have opted into receiving emails from you. They are now a lead.

On the back end, that contact form should then port the lead’s information to your email CRM of choice. There are lots of options on the market: StickyEmail, MailChimp, Constant Contact, Mad Mimi, Get Response, and more. The next few steps will need to be set up as an automated drip within your CRM. It takes time to set up the first time, but the process is automated from then on. Here’s what the process should look like:



- 1.From the contact from, the CRM drops the contact information into your mailing list in a sub-group, or segment, for that specific lead magnet.
2. Each time a lead is added to that segment, it triggers an automated email to that lead, delivering the magnet.
3. Once the magnet has been delivered, the lead is added to a new segment for nurturing.
4. Adding a lead to the nurturing segment triggers a series of pre-written emails, sent at specific intervals, known as a drip campaign.



NURTURING LEADS THROUGH YOUR FUNNEL WITH A DRIP CAMPAIGN

The lead you’ve attracted with your magnet is most likely in the Awareness stage of the funnel. They’re browsing around for photographers in your niche, and your magnet looks like just the information they need to help them on their journey. You can now use carefully crafted emails to help nurture your lead from “looking for photographers” to “I want that photographer.” To do so, we will use the Know-Like-Trust principle.

Bestselling author and motivational speaker Bob Burg says, “All things being equal, people will do business with, and refer business to, those people they know, like, and trust.” You might argue that you are not equal to or the same as your competitors, but the point is that being known, likeable, and trustworthy gives you a leg up over them. Not surprisingly, the progression from know to like to trust mirrors the progression from Awareness to Interest to Desire!

AWARENESS > KNOW

During the Awareness phase, leads are getting to know you and your competitors. In its most basic form, being “known” is about your visibility in the market. Try to be everywhere—social media ads, guest blog posts, attending or sponsoring local events, and networking with other business owners are all methods to help you become more known. But this is merely helping them know of you.

Beyond that, how can you use the power of email to help your lead get to know you better? For this stage of your drip campaign, open up to the reader about your “why.” Share why your heart is in your specific niche, and how you got there. Do not say it is because you like capturing moments or memories. That’s what every photographer says. Dig deeper. Get personal. Use your unique voice to help them feel like you are more than a faceless company.

INTEREST > LIKE

Once they start to see you as a little different than your competitors, it’s time to gain their Interest by helping them like you. In this stage, it’s important for you to be authentic—even if it might turn some people away. It’s more important for you to become unique in this stage. Share a personal story. Talk about a client you worked with, a project that really got to you on an emotional level. Dig deeper into your “why.” Be vulnerable. If it fits your brand, use swear words. Let them see the real you. Grow your tribe.

DESIRE > TRUST

They know you. They like your unique quirks. Now show that they can trust you. They want to know before booking you that you aren’t going to screw up the job, or take their money and run. Share client testimonials and reviews. List awards you’ve received. Display badges you’ve been given from other sites (such as *Wedding Wire’s* Couples’ Choice Awards). Talk about any product or service guarantees you offer.

DESIRE, PART 2 > THE BENEFIT OF THE BENEFIT

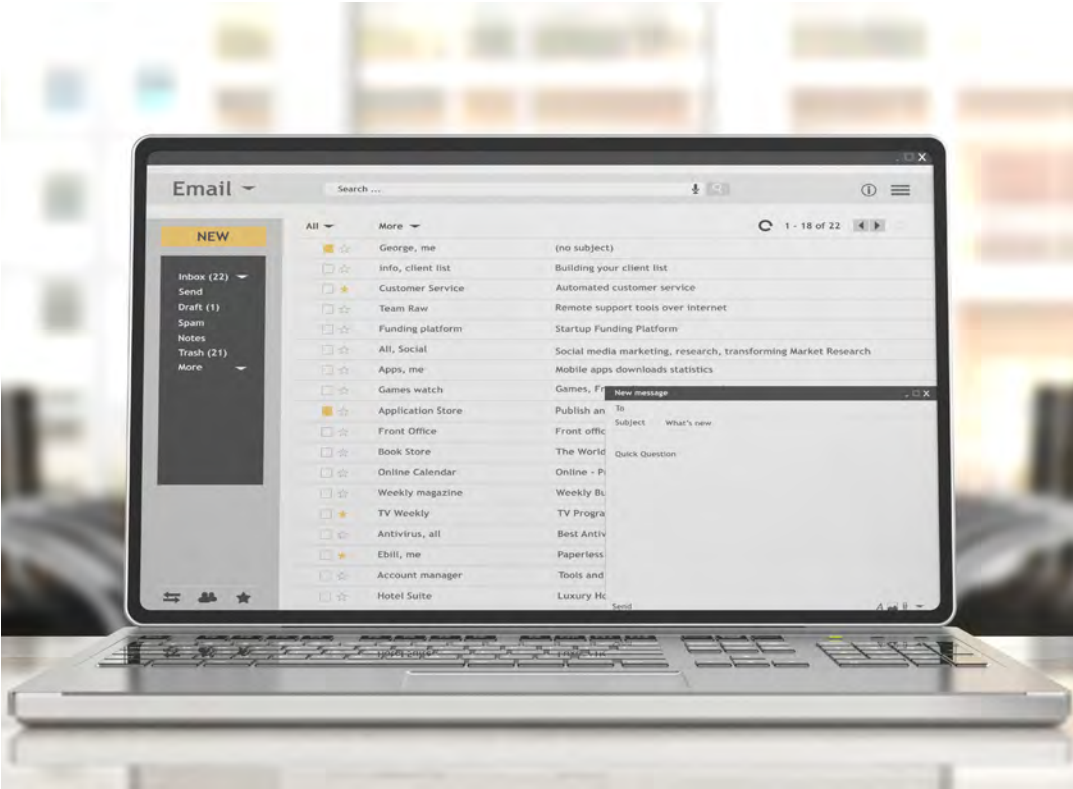
While not officially part of the Know-Like-Trust sequence, an additional email you can include to increase desire is referred to as the benefit of the benefit. This is the dig-deep reason your clients hire you, and it’s not to have photos. Think of this as your client’s “why.” How will photography with you bring them closer to the version of themselves they want to be? How will photography with you change their life?

It sounds heavy and overdramatic, but there is truth in this. If your photography doesn’t in some way make your client’s life better, why would they buy it?

Let’s analyze what the Benefit of the Benefit is with an example. I’m a boudoir photographer, and my “why” is helping women love themselves. I convey this message by talking about boudoir photography’s features, its benefits, and the benefits of its benefits.

- Features: Skillful posing and lighting to accentuate your best features.
- Benefits: The best photographs you’ve ever had of yourself, with or without clothes. See yourself in a new light. Self-love.
- Wear a bikini without fear. Play on the beach with your kids. Be more present in your life without worrying about your appearance.

Do you see the progression? Are you still trying to sell yourself on features alone? Or did you stop at the benefits? The benefit of the benefit is the hardest to convey into words. No one but you can convey your “why” or the benefit of your benefit, and that is exactly the reason it is crucial in ramping up your lead’s Desire for you alone.



GETTING TO THE BOTTOM OF YOUR FUNNEL

With an automated drip email sequence, it’s possible to nurture your lead from Awareness to Interest to Desire. Help them get to know you, like you, and trust you, and share with them how your photography will improve their lives. At this point, they should have no choice but to Desire you above all the competition! Join us next month as we explore continuing this drip sequence to help the client through the conversion (Action) and beyond. ■

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Just a few years after Jeff and Lori found themselves struggling to survive while living in the basement of their studio, back in 2012, they are the proud owners of a brand-new home on the coast of North Carolina. The owners of Wilmington’s Indigosilver Studio offer boutique boudoir portraiture and wedding photography. They are also the founders of The Shoot Space, their educational resource for photographers. Their *Shutter Magazine* column, The Business Corner, is dedicated to helping you grow your photography business.

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WHEN EVERYONE IS
SPECIAL,
NOBODY IS

HOW TO
STAND OUT
IN AN ALREADY
UNIQUE
WORLD

with Jess Hess





It's a tough world for the artist looking to stand out. When it comes to uniqueness, it's hard to think of something that hasn't been done to some extent or the other. It really, truly seems like everything already has. I'd like to preface the bulk of my article and say that no, I don't believe everything has been done before. I'm sure there are lots of ideas that have never come to fruition. What are they? Beats me. I guess I'll know them when I see them. If I'm lucky, I'll know them when I do them. So how are we supposed to stand out? How are we supposed to grab attention when we think we've seen everything?

1. WORK ON HITTING THE "TRIFECTA": A GOOD IDEA, EXCELLENT TECHNIQUE, AND A STRONG VISION.

I read somewhere once that an impactful photo can be felt regardless of technical excellence. So it would seem to stand that if you can score on both your technical quality and your impact, the image will be even more valuable, yeah? Combine your skills in such a way that your work stands out as extra polished.

A strong vision and a strong idea aren't the same thing. An idea can simply be "trash the dress" or "underwater goddess," and your vision of those scenes could be wildly different from others' of the same. How you approach an idea and the personal touches you put on it are what makes the difference. Arguably the hardest part of the trifecta is the good idea. It's hard to come up with a new idea. You can't research how to do something differently, because the baseline doesn't exist to look up in the first place. The kicker here is that the idea doesn't have to be the hardest part. If you focus on the other two bases, you can still create something entirely unique. Find an idea you like, whether something you've done before or something you've seen before, and use that idea in a fresh way. Bring your technical excellence to the idea, and bring your new vision as well. It doesn't matter if there are hundreds of photos of a woman in a field of lavender or of witches around a fire, so long as yours are different.

An example of this that comes to mind is a very classic idea where a spread of fine foods and wines are arranged on a lovely table with magnificent linens and dark, moody tones. It's been done over and over in painting and photograph alike. And while there are a multitude of wonderful pieces with this very idea, the one that sticks in my mind the most is a photo of the same setup with fast food. The same lighting, the same luxury linens, the same feeling and mood, but the subject was swapped out. The juxtaposition of old and new, of luxury and bottom of the barrel; it struck me, and I thought it was absolutely genius. They used a classic idea, and shot it in the classic way, but approached the vision in a very off-the-wall manner, thus giving it an entirely new distinction. They hit their trifecta while only ever having to focus on changing one of the aspects. They copied something done thousands of times and over hundreds of years and still made it entirely unique and brand new.

2. DON'T IGNORE THE POWER OF JUXTAPOSITION.

Things that aren't supposed to be there tend to stick out. Part of the reason white mascara is so popular in fashion and beauty photography is because eyelashes typically aren't supposed to be white—they stand out. It's the opposite of what it's supposed to be. When you imagine a photo of a young boy, you might picture him smiling, because he's “supposed” to be smiling, but why can't he be sad? Don't ignore the “things that shouldn't be”—embrace them. Remember the photos of Marilyn Monroe in that potato-sack dress? Juxtaposition can be found in all kinds of things and all types of photography.

For instance, in photojournalism, you might see a photo of a grown child in clothes that are much too small for them. A photo like this would show poverty and difficulties among the lower class. The vision of innocence being restricted by the harsh realities of the adult world—that's an impactful photograph. An example for fine art photography could be a mock fashion shoot where your subject is pale and sickly, in a hospital gown, and modeling a colostomy bag or IV in the same manner you'd see a model pose with a designer handbag. You'd be mating the fashion world with the real world in a way that might make people stop and really take a look. As one more example of juxtaposition, a fashion photographer might choose a model with a unibrow or other distinctive feature (yes, you've seen this done dozens of times before) and photograph said subject like they would any beauty client. It's blending the beauty industry's standards of how to look with a real-world take on something that's usually socially unconventional. It's blending exorbitant grooming with the face's natural state, together in one look.

Pairing opposing styles or moods can really help create a well-rounded, impactful photograph. It gives your viewers something they have to process, at least subconsciously, while they view your image. When you can hold the attention of your audience for more than a few seconds, you stand a better chance of having that image remembered.





3. DON'T TRY TOO HARD TO STICK OUT, OR YOU'LL FIND YOURSELF STILL LOOKING TO OTHERS FOR INSPIRATION.

If you find yourself researching ideas, you'll be looking at the same 50 images that the rest of us are looking at. When you notice photography trends among your friends and peers, it isn't by some coincidence—it is because we are all being advertised to and inspired by the same images and articles. You can't just do things because you do or don't see people doing them. You need to try things that you actually want to do.

Just because something hasn't been done before doesn't automatically make it good, either. Being different for the sake of being different doesn't have a perfect success rate. Remember, however, that the next photo you take certainly won't be your last photo. So while you should definitely take time and care to plan each session, you don't have to throw all your apples into one basket. Save ideas until the time is right, and allow yourself to experiment. There will always be more to create and more images to capture. The excitement of any single image is fleeting; it comes and goes. One photograph doesn't have to speak for your entire portfolio. Once your portfolio is seasoned enough, it all works as one being. It is the amalgamation of all your collective hard work and learned skills; one entity that shows to the world what you can do.

A photograph won't give you an edge, but a unique and diverse portfolio just might. Some photos are going to be magnificent, while others will be restrained. But what will make you distinct is your ability to be the one who created both. This means that you don't need to push yourself so hard to stick out, you only need to push yourself to keep creating new and interesting images without giving up. Another thing to remember is that most people strive to be the best at something while never considering that they could be the "only" at something. Being the best at what you do definitely gives you a leg up on the competition, but being the only one who does something can help you take giant leaps over those competitors. Ask yourself: what is it that makes you unique?



4. DON'T OVEREXTEND YOUR ABILITY. PRACTICE A LOT, AND SOMETIMES SHOW RESTRAINT.

We all want to advance, and the faster we can do it, the better. We have clients to obtain, notoriety to achieve, and conventions to smash. This desire pushes a lot of us, myself included, into ruining photos because we think we have to. This is done in multiple ways. For instance:

- We rush into ideas because we simply have to shoot them as soon as possible, even if we know we aren't ready to do so. Just because you yearn to shoot something now doesn't necessarily mean you should. Wait until you can gather the appropriate wardrobe, or until you find the specific location you want. If your vision is bigger than your skillset and dedication to planning, you won't ever achieve the image in your head. It's something that takes work. Take your time. Give your all to each session, and if things don't turn out perfectly, you can always redo them later.
- It's easy to cut corners. For example, fantasy photography is incredibly popular across the world. Some people are so keen to start shooting fantasy that they invest in a bunch of wardrobe items and edit photos into oblivion to try to keep up with the trends. They have no planning, no restraint, no technical skill—but they have a photo of a fairy, and of a mermaid, and of an angel, and that is all they care about. They tick it off their checklist and move on. If you can't execute something correctly, you should choose to either not do it until you know how, or to instead do it over and over again until you can. Don't just stop because you've marked an idea off your list.

It also helps to try taking some plain-Jane portraits first. Once you knock those out of the park, move on to the bigger ideas. If you can take an ordinary portrait and wow people with the results, imagine what you'll do with all your creative ideas. A wise dog once said, "Sucking at something is the first step to being sorta good at something." We all have to suck for a while—that's life. If you refuse to run the risk of possibly sucking, you won't advance. If you refuse to work and rework your ideas until you're better, you won't advance.

- Not showing restraint. You might start with one light, and eventually the number of lights you own will grow. But just because you have six lights doesn't mean they all need to be used all the time. If you're afraid to not use all your gear at once, you're not showing restraint. Some sessions call for six lights, some call for one. That was something I struggled with for a time. Just because I have something doesn't mean it needs to be utilized in every session. It's ok to use a setup that isn't technically as good if it's going to produce the results I'm trying to create.

Another example of this is sacrificing image quality for an edit. You may really want to change your background to some fantasy woodland dream, but if your subject's hair where it meets the swapped background is blurry, or if you've left a lot of ghosting around the subject (stuff being erased that shouldn't be erased, artifacts left over from the old background, too soft a brush for your layer mask, etc.), you have destroyed your image quality for the sake of an idea. Proper execution is necessary if you want your images to have the impact you hope for. Fairy lights and falling flower petals can be neat, but if they don't look believable, you run the risk of ruining your image. So while you may really want to change something to fit your idea, if you don't know how to do it properly, you are taking away from your image by not restraining yourself. This is again where practice makes perfect, but sometimes not doing something is the key to a successful photograph.

If you don't learn how to do exactly what you want to do, your work will be buried in a sea of other mediocre work. A million people are creating so-so images of women on unicorns, so you need to create the photo of that. Standing out is often an uphill battle, and you won't get anywhere by sitting on your ass. There aren't any shortcuts that you can take to having a well-rounded, thoughtful, technically stunning portfolio. Not a one.



Image © Wurmwood Photography

5. YOUR WORK ISN'T THE ONLY THING THAT SHOULD BE UNIQUE.

Your approach and the experience you offer should also stand out. You've got to be unique.

You can certainly take a page from successful photographers around you on how to approach finding and booking clients, but things are a bit different when it comes to different types of work, especially fine-art or conceptual photography.

For portraits, you're selling a memory. For conceptual, you're selling a look or an experience. People want to see themselves as their fictional counterparts. They want to look and feel powerful, and this means that the approach you take to plan and execute a session could be wildly different than usual. Personally speaking, I make a lot of headpieces and accessories. Because I'm the only one in the world with these headpieces, it helps me sell sessions to people who are fans of my design work and want to be pictured in that work. I also make a lot of custom pieces specifically for certain clients and their ideas. My ability to do this helps secure my spot as a person who can "make the impossible happen," which gives me the edge on my competition.

Because I'm willing to go the extra mile for each individual client, I can offer everyone a very custom, tailored experience. I can give clients exactly what they want and make their fantasy selves come to life. One example of this is that I'll often have clients tell me how they want a photo to make them feel, and I will do the design work from there. I had a woman tell me she wanted me to "unlock her inner dark goddess," and we did just that. She didn't tell me anything aside from that. We were able to make her dream a reality, and she absolutely adored the images. Not because of how she looked, per se, but because of how she felt when she looked at herself as that character.

Alternatively, a lot of people buy or rent wardrobe items from well-known designers and then advertise portrait sessions utilizing those costumes. This is selling a look. And while that is less unique than creating a new concept for each client, it can be a great way to book a lot of clients quickly and make the most of your rented wardrobe. A photographer can sell the same look to numerous clients because those clients are dying to be pictured in that specific designer's pieces, and it's a different method of advertising altogether. This is still unique in a way, because you will be the only one in your area with that costume to offer, which can help set you apart from the crowd.

It definitely pays to be attentive to trends and what people like, and then purchase items for your arsenal that align with those desires. Having an interesting wardrobe can be the difference between securing a client or not, and it helps to expand your collection with new and unique pieces. I've seen several less-than-spectacular photographers find success by having good ideas and a good wardrobe.

So back to that trifecta—if you can offer those things coupled with technical excellence, you have a recipe for success. What helps make you stand out as a photographer might not have anything to do with photography. Be it making wardrobe items, or doing makeup, or your editing skills, or even your out-there personality: if you can focus on expanding your network of skills, there is so much more you can offer to your clients.

So how does this section pertain to portrait and wedding photographers? Simple: What are you doing that your competition is not? What is your competition doing that you are not?

If you consistently push yourself to be interesting, an interesting portfolio it will make. You've got to work hard, practice continuously, and marry all your collective skills to create dynamic and impactful photos that will grab your audience's attention. Mind your details very closely, mix opposing ideas, and don't be afraid to try new things or retry old things if it means creating what you want. Don't cut corners. Focus on the experience you have to offer, and work your way to the top. The major secret behind standing out and succeeding lies only in one's ability to stick it out and keep working. That's all there is to it—just keep trying. ■



Jess Hess is an internationally published fine art and conceptual portrait photographer in southern Ohio. At her Wurmwood Photography studio, she blends vibrant colors and unusual ideas with classic portraiture for her own unique take on portrait photography. She strives to do something fresh and different in every session, constantly experimenting and pushing the envelope to satisfy her love of art. In her spare time, she runs an underground art magazine dedicated to promoting other artists around the world.
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PERFECTING — *your* — CRAFT

with Scott Detweiler



I used to believe that total time behind the lens was a considerable measure of skill, but now I know better. I have met many amazingly gifted photographers who are somewhat new to the industry. Conversely, I have also met folks who have been doing this since just after the Earth cooled, yet their images are average and they have zero interest in looking to improve.

That being said, I think the vast majority of us have a pretty strong desire to grow and get better, perhaps even to a level that we might believe to be unattainable. With hard work and lots and lots of shooting, one can certainly get better, right? But during this blind pursuit of excellence, how do you know if you are actually improving? What do we need to focus on in order to advance?

Knowing precisely where you think you are limited gives you a place to start on this roadmap to a solution. The good news is that there are probably areas where small adjustments can yield massive improvements, and you probably know exactly where those lie. Need to take private photoshop lessons because YouTube just isn't working for you? Need business coaching or marketing help? Does the seemingly magical strobe leave you scratching your head? In all of these situations, you can probably see a path to resolution once you decide to fix the issue.

The second issue revolves around getting honest feedback. Do you know what others feel is your most significant area of concern or weakness? Your personal opinion on what needs improvement might not be the biggest problem in the eyes of your customers, so you need to get some honest and frank feedback. Asking random people, family members, spouses, etc. isn't usually helpful. It seems that the vast majority of folks have no idea what good photography looks like. Even if they do, those closest to you will balk at potentially squashing your artistic genius, so they tend to keep their mouths shut and praise your mad skills.

The other ugly truth is that most people will simply gush over a cringeworthy image if they like the subject matter or even the image’s intent. Things like exposure, focus, or aiming like a Stormtrooper and getting half of the face in the frame are seemingly arbitrary in terms of receiving gushing praise. For example, a parent will like just about any photo of their unruly kid, even if it is four stops underexposed and shot with enough headroom to add in a full-grown adult wearing a cowboy outfit riding a rearing horse. This is great for stroking our confidence and ego, but utterly useless for improving our photography. Some people will like every steaming pile we show them. Welcome to Facebook.

There is also a segment of souls who don't feel they have any more to learn. Typically, this is a result of their clients being just fine and dandy with their "meh" product, and no further actions being required to keep their particular market segment happy.

Many people have heard of the Dunning-Kruger effect, but if you haven’t, understanding it might help you in terms of wrapping your head around the idea of your total knowledge pool. This theory illustrates how the less you know about a given subject, the better you think you are at it. For example, if you ask the cocky high school senior MVP tennis player how good they are, they will probably indicate that they are pretty damn good. However, given a chance to have their ass handed to them by someone from the Olympic team, they’d suddenly realize that they indeed have a great deal to learn, and would probably re-evaluate their skills as much lower than before their soul-crushing defeat.

This entire concept applies to just about every aspect of life, from parenthood, to business acumen, to any skill worth learning. Of course, this happens a great deal in photography, since it has a low-cost point of entry, and it isn't challenging to learn the basics (aka the Green Box). Combined with the assistance of skin-destroying portrait software, copious filters, plugins, etc., it is seemingly effortless to fall into the trap of feeling one has attained a quick mastery of photography and should quit their job and focus on their new passion. However, when exposed to the work of a true professional, their eyes grow suddenly wide with the knowledge that perhaps they have a great deal to learn to improve in areas like composition, skin retouching, augmented lighting, posing, and the other regions where the world of technology has not yet penetrated.



Image © Scott Detweiler



As we discussed, it is going to be hard to get honest or educated feedback from friends or clients, so where can you turn for the brutal feedback that will help you to improve? In my case, I found exactly that by entering image competitions. In my opinion, these are an excellent way to get your bearings and have a baseline of how you might actually be doing in your image-creation endeavors. Sure, the judging is subjective, but at least those judging the photos are experienced and can be considered qualified to do so, and you will get bits of wisdom from listening to the critique. For example, the competition at Shutterfest is a great learning experience, and the judging is open to anyone who wants to sit in the conference room and watch. I highly recommend it!

You can learn so much by listening to all of the issues found in photos others have taken. This lets you learn lessons the easy way, without feeling you are being judged. Once you see some of the photographs and how they score, you will have a much better grasp of where you might be positioned in the food-chain of this industry. Since these commentaries are pretty severe and full of dream-crushing criticism, you have the option to actually grow from the information given by the judges rather than just sitting there and feeling offended. You will need to put your ego in your pocket and be prepared to open your eyes to what is said, and sometimes that can be hard to do. However, it is better feedback than you will get from some crazy aunt who loves every blurry photo you take.

On top of that, if you have someone you respect or admire, you can often reach out to them for a friendly critique. Even some of those rock-star photographers out there would love to help others grow and are often willing to give a quick critique if you are simply brave enough to ask. However, be careful of receiving feedback from unsolicited sources.

A few years ago, I was receiving some pretty brutal feedback from another photographer, and it wasn't pretty. Apparently, I was rather terrible at this entire camera thing, and he was basing all his ultimately inaccurate assertions on how I was shooting. Only after numerous remarks on how awful I was did I bother to research him and learn that he only shot trains. Yep! He didn't even photograph people—he shot locomotives in broad daylight with his pocket camera. Knowing the difference between an opinion and actual criticism helped me know when I was listening to noise versus the voice of wisdom. Social media is full of people like him, and it took some time to get a thicker skin to handle them. I eventually realized most of these people just have opinions and are not speaking from a position of experience. Learn to ignore the noise and not get upset about those who are only there to troll.



Images © Scott Detweiler

Most larger photography organizations have continuing-education credits that are required to maintain certification. This might seem like a pain initially, but every time I have attended a session or workshop, I have left with some knowledge I didn't have going in. More importantly, it was knowledge I didn't even know I needed. Join a local camera club or the PPA chapter nearest you, and keep an open mind.

Finding light in those dark little caves of experience I didn't know existed is one of those things I really enjoy. This applies to every aspect of adulting, not just photography. Figure out what areas you need to improve in, and create a plan to resolve them. Start with the ones that are causing you the most pain, like studio lighting or Photoshop, and focus on those until they are no longer the biggest concerns. It is also worth noting that although there are plenty of free resources out there, some of the best investments I have made have been those private lessons or workshops I paid for that were precisely what I needed. Don't ignore personal education just because you might have to spend a little money. For example, saving a few hundred hours learning skin retouching on your own and instead learning from a professional is worth some cash to me, since time is money.

We can all become the photographer we desire to be, but knowing what we don't know is the first step toward that dream. Take some time, and figure out your primary areas of weakness. Then, get honest feedback from peers, judges, or those you admire, and make a plan. Keep an eye out for that knowledge you didn't know you needed. ■



Scott is a conceptual portrait photographer based in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Along with his original approach to portraits, he excels at fashion and boudoir, and is an amateur body painter. When he is not shooting, Scott turns his studio into a classroom where he holds workshops on lighting, conceptual work and boudoir. Follow him on Instagram @sedetweiler and visit his website at www.sedetweiler.com.
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Comfortable. Safe. Predictable. Those words describe mediocrity. As do forgettable, mundane and basic.

It's where most businesses—hell, most individuals too—love to live. Why push to be anything more? It's sufficient, right? Staying within the lines, never deviating? Sounds boring as shit to me.

Bold. Risky. Memorable. Uncomfortable. Those words speak to me. They form the path that makes the few rise above the majority. Let me tell you—it's way better up here.

Creating a path to greatness isn't for the faint of heart. If it was easy, everyone would do it. No, this has to be a conscious decision—no luck, no happenstance. You have to want it. You have to plan it. You have to take it. These three key focus points will catapult you on your way to the top.

1. DON'T BE AFRAID TO SWIM UPSTREAM

I know we feel like everyone and their brother is a “photographer.” And social media has made this much more overwhelming for all of us. All you have to do is create a page, put the word “photography” next to your name, and voila, you are in business. So how do we compete in this sea of photographers? How do we overcome it all to stand out as great? It's simple. Don't compete. You heard me right. Just don't. Instead, change the conversation. When I started my company, 90 percent of the photographers in town were shoot-and-burn, giving or selling digital files. Providing prints and finished products was rare. But for me, having started in the film days and worked in a formal portrait studio, I hated the idea of handing over the digital files.

So I decided to not drown in the sea. I swam upstream, offering a full-service portrait experience. I identified the “norm” and then blew right past it! I made the conscious decision to stand out on service and the customer experience that we would provide from start to finish. I also accepted from the beginning that this would immediately turn some prospects away, but I knew that would be an overall good thing. If you called and you wanted a CD, I politely said, “Totally understand that we are not a great fit for everyone. We truly believe in the importance of the printed product. I appreciate you taking the time to check us out.” I practiced. Over and over, so that it was smooth and confident. I owned it. Some people appreciated that we stood by our products and changed their focus on what they thought they needed. Others hung up on us. It was ok. Not everyone was our client. But those who were have stuck with us over the years. They spend more money each visit, and they still have our images hanging in their homes. The others ... I'm sure they have a drawer full of useless CDs.

This one stance made us immediately different. It made our client experience go from the same as everyone else's to something unique and complete. As far as competing, we weren't even in the same stadium as the other photographers at that point, because we had chosen to rise above. We don't focus on competing—we focus on changing the conversation.

2. BEING A REBEL WILL PAY OFF

Rebel isn't a bad word. In fact, throughout history, rebels were the ones who pushed the boundaries and expanded horizons. They took rules that confined creativity and broke them, knowing that on the other side stood ingenuity. Be brave. Taking risks and stepping outside of the normal flow of traffic is scary, but for me, standing still, not pushing, is even scarier. When you become stagnant, you die, creatively and in your business. This industry is always changing and pushing forward. You need to find ways to jump to the front, lead, and push. Don't follow. Be aware of what others are doing around you, but don't be consumed by it. Use it to fuel new, outside-of-the-box ideas. Open your mind to inspiration that can occur anywhere. Never rule something out as a possible outlet for growth. Some of the things you try will lead to great success. Others will lead to failure. Accept that. Not everything will work—how could it? But you will learn from each attempt. Take those little knowledge nuggets and try again. Each time, you will grow and strengthen in your quest to rise above the rest.

Force yourself to make time to shoot and experiment. It's crazy how you can start in one direction and it will lead to a completely unexpected, wonderful place. Challenge yourself with new techniques, styles, and subjects. Only shooting for your clients will lead you into the world of the mundane—it's easy, and sometimes it's necessary, but it doesn't have to be your prison. Setting time aside to refresh and feed your creative soul will provide you with new, stunning images that stand out to clients and re-spark your energy to continue your quest to greatness.





Image © Casey Dittmer

3. NEVER APOLOGIZE

Take what is yours. That’s right, it’s yours, you just have to take it. Hungering to be more is often frowned upon. Why do you need to make waves? Can’t you just be happy with the status quo? No. To that point ... hell no. I don’t want to have my work look like everyone else’s. I have no desire to just be another Pinterest clone. I refuse to fall into cliché filters, styles and gimmicks. I know my artistic voice. I know how hard I work every day. I know the sacrifices that must be made, and I am proud to have chosen the path to be better than everyone else. There is nothing wrong with wanting to be the best. I’m pretty sure my clients want me to be the best too. So why hide or whisper your plan? Shout it. Own it. Take it.



Image © Casey Dittmer

It’s ok to lean on your support network, too. They are rooting for you! You can’t do it alone. It may be your work team, family or friends who give you strength ... whoever it is, never be afraid to lean on them for support, bouncing ideas and getting extra hands for those complicated creative shoots. We all celebrate when someone we love succeeds, so don’t feel guilty for raising a hand in need once in a while. Stop making excuses. It’s going to take work. A lot of it, and hard work, too. You will cry, you will get mad, you will feel defeated. But that doesn’t mean you stop. It is yours to take. You alone stand in your way. So take it. And never apologize for wanting it.



Image © Casey Dittmer

Rising above mediocrity isn't something that everyone wants. And that's ok. For some, the status quo is quite fine. Go, be a minnow. But to all my fellow sharks—Wake up. Eat minnows, scare other swimmers, and be a shark. They apologize for nothing. ■



Casey Dittmer is an award-winning published photographer from western Colorado. As a 17-year veteran of the photographic industry, Casey has seen trends, economies and businesses come and go. She loves traveling and sharing her knowledge in the hope that it will help other photographers build a strong base for their business and avoid some of the roadblocks she has encountered.
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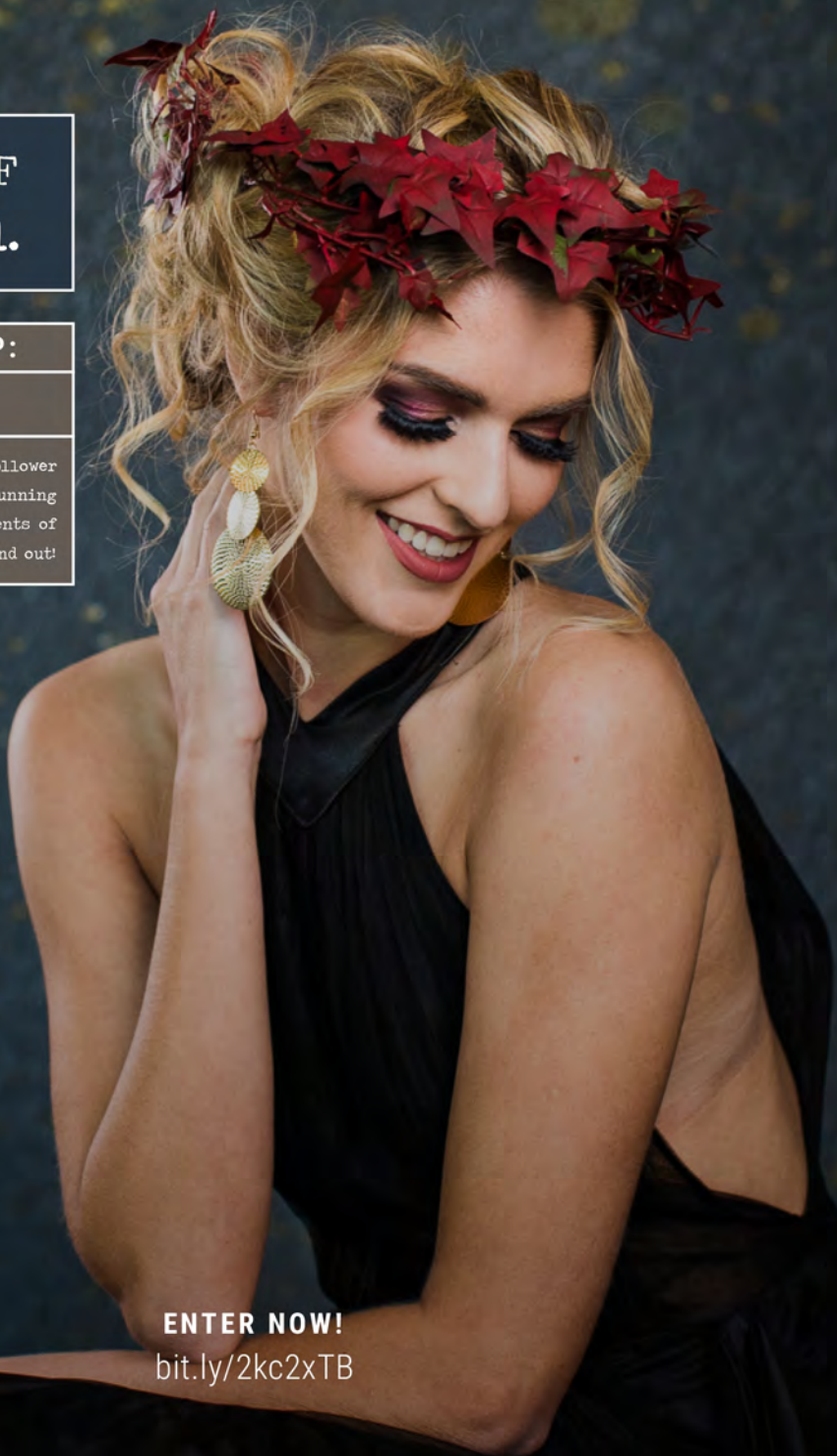
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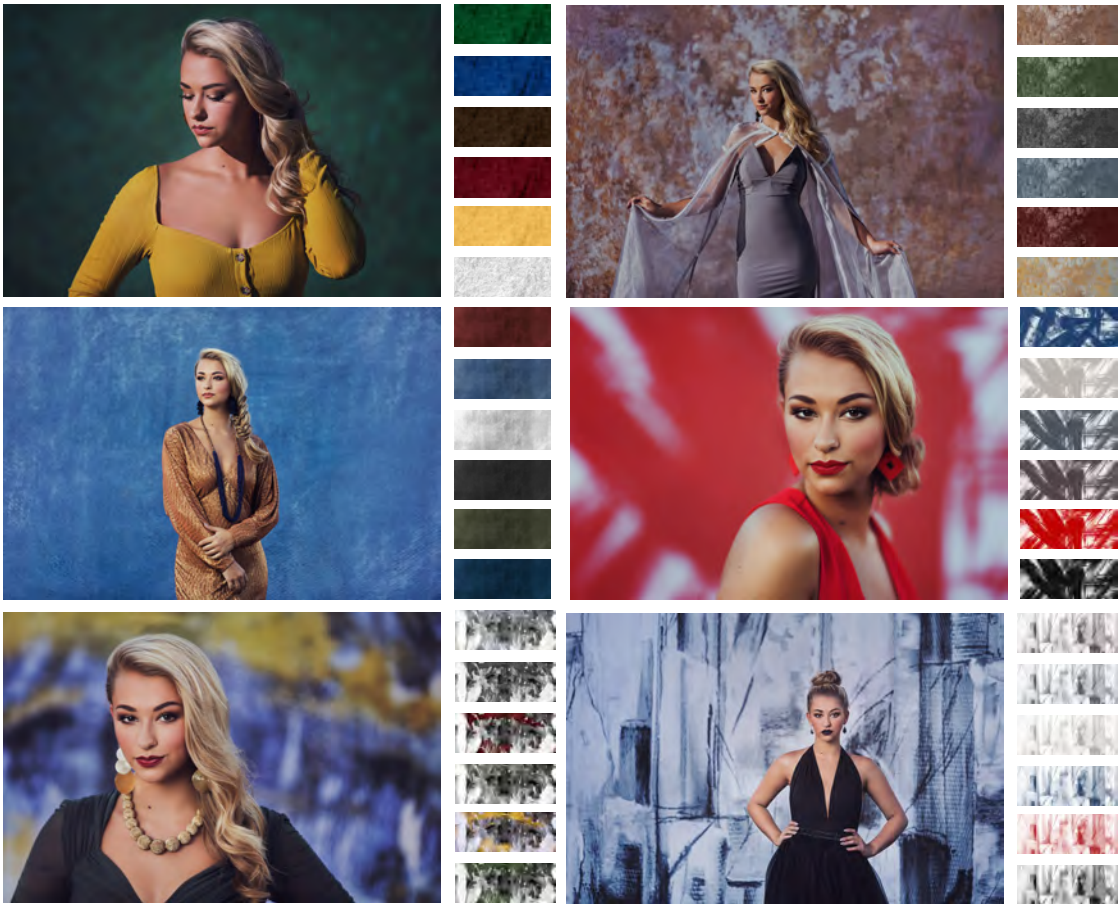
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ADVOCACY — AND — ADAPTATION

PROMOTING INCLUSIVITY IN PHOTOGRAPHY

with Elizabeth Rajchart





In the summer of 2016, I had my portrait taken by a photographer at a flea market. Summers are always hard for me; my medical conditions and disabilities cause me to be very heat sensitive. My face swells massively, my temperature rises above 103 degrees, and sometimes, I even pass out. This photographer offered something intriguing, which she called “soul portraits”—unedited portraits taken after answering various prompts about yourself, your goals, and your dreams. The photographer didn’t even watch as she took the photograph. When I received my soul portrait a week later, I was in awe. I saw the bright red face, swollen cheeks, and lopsided eyes ... but I saw a fighter. I saw exactly who I was, or at least who I wanted to be.

Our society looks at disability so negatively; it’s something to be hidden away, to fear or pity. At the other end of the spectrum, we are characterized as “inspirational” to able-bodied people, “brave” for simply living our lives, or caricatures that make everyone else feel better about themselves. More often than not, we fight to be portrayed just as we are, or how we want to be seen. We deserve the right to decide how we’re represented.

I’ve identified as disabled in one way or another since I was a child. It’s always been a part of me, and it’s something I’m not ashamed of. Growing up, I would lead lessons on disability rights, and I was always the student chosen to assist new classmates with disabilities. Last year, my disability went from invisible to visible when I started using a wheelchair. While this mobility aid helped my life tremendously—I could now last longer, go farther, and be more independent in all aspects of life—it also caused some new issues for me and my career. I had to take a break, reassess my abilities, and redetermine my new career goals.

The first and biggest change was my approach to performance and concert photography. Everything I’d learned in two years of experience with shooting all types of performances became unhelpful with a wheelchair. In the club scene, I had been known just as much for my shooting style—climbing under tables, standing on chairs, even hanging from bars in the various clubs I shot in—as for my actual photography. In the pit at concerts, I moved around a lot as well, working around other photographers but still getting as close to the action as possible to make sure I got my shot. The wheelchair made me bigger and bulkier, and ironically took away so much of my mobility. I not only was fixed at the same angle all night, but I found that some locations weren’t even accessible to me. At venues that couldn’t fit me, I was relegated to the wings—watching other photographers interact with the performer while I was shooting from half a stage away. In the studio, where I once was able to move around and play with angles, I was now either stuck in my wheelchair or placed on a stool.

But these limitations taught me to focus more on my technical and composition skills. Education on studio lighting became invaluable, as I couldn't always maneuver myself to the best natural lighting. Composition skills became crucial: at concerts, I had to see what was possible for me to capture from where I was, rather than having the entire stage to work with.

But an even bigger change was learning how to advocate for myself in these settings. Advocacy is incredibly important to me, and it's a skill I think everyone should learn to develop from a young age. After starting to use the wheelchair, I had to learn how to advocate for myself to the bands and venues I worked with. I was in tears working at a major venue I had become familiar with the year before, frustrated at what I now had to work with. The pit, the aisles, the sound booth—none of them gave me a window to be able to see above the heads of the other photographers or the crowd. Finally, after squeezing myself through a very tight barricade, I decided to ask the videographer, positioned on a raised platform, for help.

"Do you mind if I come up there with you?" I yelled, gesturing at the box he stood on. And to my surprise, he welcomed me up. My PA helped me stand, and while I clung to the gate, he hoisted my wheelchair up to the platform before lifting me up. I sat down and was finally able to breathe. I could finally see the band clearly. For the first time that night, I was actually able to do my job.

The next day, I called the head of photography at the venue, explained my struggles the night before, and discussed what accommodations might be helpful in the future for me. I was beyond terrified to bring this to his attention. What if I was asking for too much? What if these requests crossed a line? What if I got blacklisted from the venue?

But as I explained my needs, the exact opposite happened. He started brainstorming with me, suggesting ideas that would make my job easier. He helped me establish a new plan for future concerts, to make sure I was accommodated for and on an even playing field with the rest of the photographers. He gave me ways that I could simply do my job.

I have the privilege of having a loud and (usually) listened-to voice. Not everyone in my community has been given such a gift. With that gift comes responsibility, not only to advocate for myself, but also for others. I want to use my voice to make sure others have the opportunity to experience art the same way I have. It is my fundamental belief that art is a human right and can truly save lives. As someone chronically ill and homebound, art through photography gave me a reason to get up every day. Later, art got me out of the house and gave me independence for the first time. Art has given me an outlet for emotions that seemed too overwhelming to handle, and it has made me feel less alone by connecting me with others. Art changes lives, yet there are so many limitations, including physical accessibility, lack of closed captioning or interpreters, even overcrowding, all of which leave it only accessible to the abled population. Art is how cultures communicate, how emotions and experiences are expressed, and how healing happens. To leave this available only to part of our population is not only wrong, it is a true attack on the rights of many people.



Image © Elizabeth Rajchart

Photography, particularly boudoir photography, is a field that has especially been kept from the disabled population for multiple reasons. For one, society is subconsciously taught that disabled people don't have sex and don't want to be seen as sexy. Also, many photographers simply don't have the time, energy, or drive to learn how to work with this population—certainly not enough to specialize in it. I decided to start focusing my photography on the disability community as a way to take back our power in how we choose to present ourselves and create a more inclusionary space in the field of photography. Through photography, my models can present their strength, sexiness, and personality in a way that feels right for them—not as dictated by an ableist society. My goal is to reach all demographics within the disability community and foster a new era of art accessibility. Photography has historically either ignored the disabled or used us as subjects to pity or place on a pedestal of “inspiration porn.” I want to take our voice and power back, while creating an inclusive space in an otherwise ableist and exclusionary field. I want to give other disabled people the feeling that photographer so many years ago gave me.



Throughout my career and health changes, I've had to redefine success for myself again and again. For so long, I was living in the mindset that success had a very narrow definition, determined by people who did not have my goals, were not on my path, and had no business defining my own success. So many people fall into this trap and let others convince them they are unsuccessful, simply because their own journey isn't understood by others. So many people compare their lives to those on completely different paths and forget to celebrate all of their victories, both big and small. As both a disabled person and an artist, I have learned that only I can decide what true success is to me. Climbing corporate ladders doesn't interest me, but creating beauty and making a difference does. Making unique art and helping change lives are my goals for success. On harder days, simply getting out of bed is my success, and I try to celebrate it just as much as huge career accomplishments. I remember that fighter, back in 2016, who could hardly leave the house. I remember that no matter how much farther I have to go, I've come such a long way. ■



Elizabeth Rajchart is a disability rights and accessibility advocate, performance photographer, and disability portraiture photographer from St. Louis, Missouri. As a disabled photographer, Elizabeth's passion for art accessibility and arts representation led her to her latest specialization of disability portraiture. Her goal is to reach other people in her community and capture their inner beauty, strength and uniqueness.

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FROM INSPIRATION

TO INNOVATION
with Andy Strong

We all want to grow. To grow our business and our photography to that ever-elusive next level. The truth is, you can't just sit around and wait for the next big growth spurt to come knocking down your door. If you've got a new idea that you need to get out into the world, you're going to have to stretch those creative muscles and get comfortable being uncomfortable. One of our studio objectives is to dive deeper with our clients and focus on long-term relationships. One way that we have challenged ourselves to stretch creatively in this way is by expanding our pre-production process.

From a business standpoint, I want you to be able to create long-lasting relationships that include regular clients and repeated referrals. From a personal standpoint, I want you to feel fulfilled as an artist. That being said, here's a five-step breakdown of our pre-production process. My hope is that our insights will inspire you to create new ways of connecting with your clients.

STEP 1: INVESTIGATION

We love to get as much information from our clients as possible before, during and after our sessions. In the beginning, our main tool for this was Google Forms, but we made the switch to 17hats last year to keep our questionnaires and workflows tidy and have never looked back. Every incoming client receives at least one questionnaire on their way through our workflow. Beyond the basic logistical inquiries, we have added questions that focus on storytelling and vibe, as well as provide insight for offering any appropriate package add-ons.

We've built up our asks through trial and error, and with one common theme in mind. We are always searching for clues to our clients' visual vocabulary. In other words, what is their definition of cool? How do we create images that reflect this essence?

KEY QUESTIONS:

We ask two simple and complimentary questions as the opening act for all of our creative work. I've been pleasantly surprised at how simply and directly the most basic-seeming inquiries can help point out idiosyncrasies and keep me on my toes. I have a feeling it's because we are most similar in that we are all a little bit different.

Let's compare some actual recent answers to guide the examples.



Image © Andy Strong



Images © Andy Strong

QUESTION 1: What are three words you'd like to use to describe your content?

- A. Swag, Approachable, Impressive
- B. Psychedelic, Fusion, Radiant
- C. Diva, Dramatic, Confident
- D. Fun, Confident, Leading Man

Can you imagine how different each of these sessions might be? As the director of the shoot, how might you speak with each person as they step up in front of the lens? What angle might you take? What lighting might you use? What lens choice is most appropriate based only on this question?

Why ask this question? We want to get a feel for what a client wants to see in their end product, how they want to feel when they look at it, and what style of language they are bringing to the table. We are already beginning to lead them in co-curating the experience, letting them know that their opinion and spirit will help shape the shoot.

QUESTION 2: Who are three artists or public figures whose careers you admire?

- A. Tom Brady, Leonardo DiCaprio, James Bond
- B. Red Hot Chili Peppers, Vulfpeck, Tame Impala
- C. Barbara Streisand, Carole King, Stevie Nicks
- D. Lin-Manuel Miranda, Rob Evan, Sutton Foste

Again, clock the differences between the energy and artistic direction of each shoot. Take a moment to pick one of the selections, and see if you could visualize a pose or setting for it. Two questions, and it is pretty obvious which session involves an athlete, a band, a singer, and an actor.

Why ask this question? The career aspect of this question has been a key differentiator for us. It becomes less about who is "it" at the moment and more about long-term admiration and development. These celebrities and icons also become the cornerstone of inspiration boards that set the tone for both mood and technical aspects.

BONUS TIP: Treat each inquiry as target market research. What kind of people are reaching out to you? What do they like? Do you see any patterns? Any repeated requests for "edgy" or "dramatic" images? Does this reflect the work you are currently sharing? Try utilizing this information when creating your next marketing campaign.



Image © Andy Strong

STEP 2: AGGREGATION

Once we have our desired information, we begin to gather visual references for conversation and creative stimulation. The main tool we use for putting our images together is Pinterest. We begin to search through images of the public figures mentioned, looking for an essence of at least one of the adjective prompts we’ve been given. We’ll pick 10-15 images from each public figure. If we want more, Pinterest can autosuggest more visually similar photos to pick and choose from. This saves time and often helps find additional personas that match up with our goals. Ten to fifteen minutes will create a pretty healthy board, but more often than not, these continue to get added on during decompression time throughout the day.



Images © Andy Strong

STEP 3: DISTILLATION

After throwing our inspirational paint at the wall, the next step is seeing what sticks. The main tool we use in this step is our own taste. Here are a couple of ways you can begin to make your own distillation from your images.

3a. First, shuffle photos around on your board and look for patterns in feel. What commonalities can you see? Take note of why you enjoy a particular image, and create a section with that key differentiator as the note. We have recently started creating four to six sections on our boards—one each for wardrobe, lighting, location, hair, makeup, and vibes.

3b. Now that you’ve determined what you like about a photo, let’s start to really boil the pot and concentrate this down to a handful of ideas. To use an example above: Could you take the hair inspiration from a photo of Leonardo DiCaprio, add in the wardrobe from a Tom Brady shoot, and mix it with the iconic poses of James Bond? Could you add a touch of approachable swagger in there for good measure? Now that you are combining resources, you are thinking in the right direction to create something more than a carbon copy of someone else’s work. You are working toward innovating your own results.

STEP 4: FORTIFICATION

Once we have a solid idea, our next step is to find any holes in our plan and come up with creative solutions. Our main tool here is old-fashioned pen and paper and 10-30 minutes of our time.

4a. The first layer we want to fortify is our creative idea. One positive and constructive way to do this is to pretend that you have already done the shoot. See what details you can visualize about your time on set or on location. Answer the question, “What could I have done better?” Time yourself for five to fifteen minutes writing down your answers. The point here is not to beat yourself up, but rather to prepare you for inevitable opportunities to tighten up your process. What are some of the things you “could have done better” that you can implement in your upcoming shoot?

4b. The second layer we want to fortify is our project objective. Ask yourself, “Why must I create this piece of art?” Time yourself for five to fifteen minutes writing down your answers. Try filling in the phrase, “I must create this work of art because I need to _____.” What objectives emerge?



4c. The third layer we are fortifying is our creative self. When we innovate, we are putting ourselves out there to be vulnerable, and will no doubt come across some haters. When we have a solid baseline of knowing what aspects of craft and business we are working on, it becomes easier to take criticism for what it is: someone else’s subjective experience. Remember to be kind to yourself when you make the inevitable mistakes. Human error is human!



STEP 5: IMPLEMENTATION

Now it’s time to put your preparation into action. The main tool here is your own willpower to stick to the objective. Of course, at some points, it will be necessary to improvise and make gut decisions. Don’t be afraid of Plan Z. It might lead to the most interesting results. Remember, as an innovator, you are writing your own road map, so it’s ok to be confused at times. Take stock of your objective. Revisit and refine as needed. And keep going.

FINAL THOUGHTS

When we first started stacking on heavier loads of pre-production, it seemed counterintuitive to spend so much time obsessing over details that could easily be overlooked. A headshot session is inherently simple, and it seemed like we were making it overly complex because of some gut feeling. But we kept going. As time progressed, we have turned these fawn-legged experiments into concrete session add-ons that have more than doubled our average session spend and opened up pathways to artistic, soulful and fulfilling collaboration. Work that seemed extra or out of the ordinary in the beginning is now bringing in business that expects the hands-on attention and is eager to pay for it.

Images © Andy Strong



Real growth is as time-consuming as it is exhausting. It takes energy that might otherwise be devoted to items that are arguably more fun, or at the very least easier to deal with. Remember why people are coming to you. We don't typically ask for photos of ourselves unless it is a monumental and pivotal occasion in our life. You might be surprised at what some extra time and energy getting to know your clients can give back to you. ■

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Andy Strong believes in dancing in public and smiling at strangers and conquering vertigo via exposure. He loves to explore jubilant storytelling in several media. He loves working with his partner, Ariel Hansen Strong, on their photo and video business, A Strong Photo. They live in San Francisco with their dog, Bowie.
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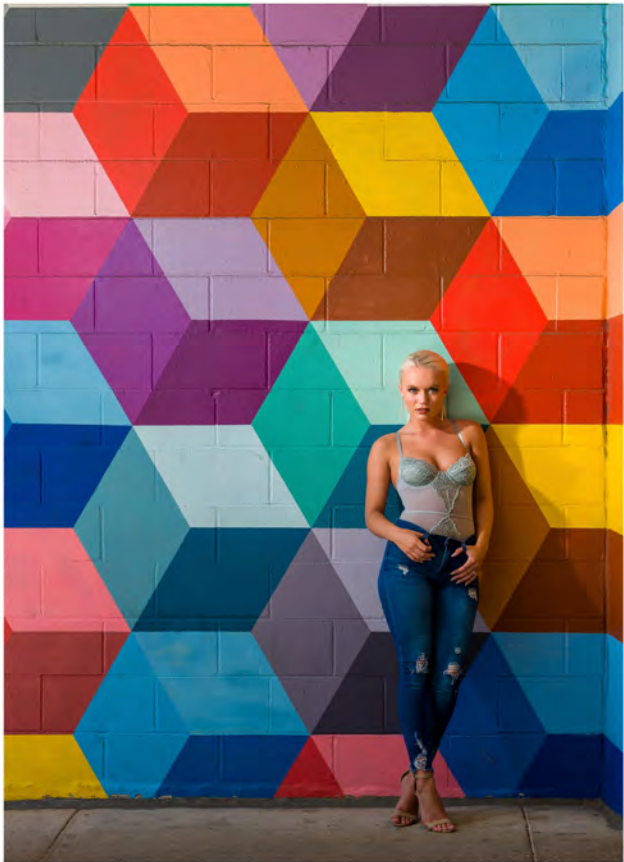


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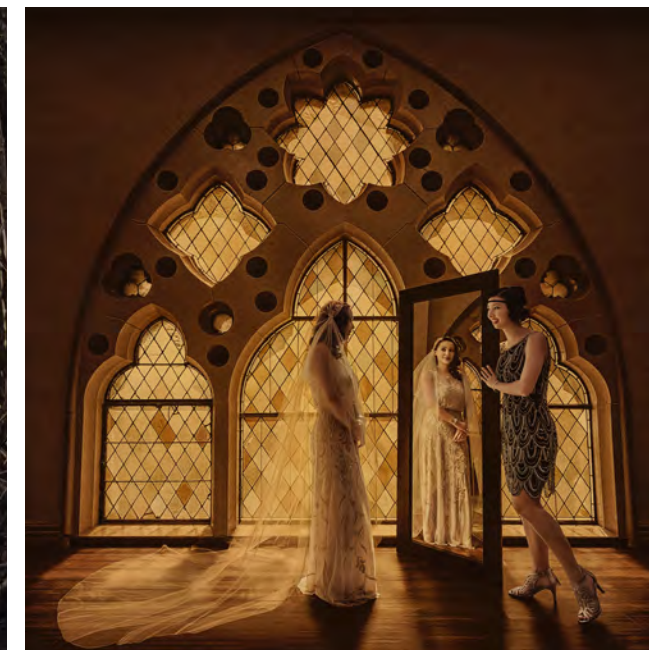
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HARD LIGHT IT'S EASY!

with Michael Corsentino



LIGHT MODIFIER SIZE

The first and most critical piece of the quality-of-light puzzle is the size of the light modifier used. With soft light, large modifiers are the order of the day. Hard light, naturally, uses the exact opposite. The basic rule of thumb is that the smaller the light source, the harder the resulting quality of light. So it follows that for the best results creating hard light, you'll want to employ a small light modifier. This can be a beauty dish, a small reflector, a soft box or an octabank—whichever modifier you choose, make it small for optimal results. You can easily control the degree of light hardness by using one or more layers of diffusion fabric if desired. Softboxes and octabanks typically have a removable inner baffle and outer diffusion fabrics, providing a ton of options from super-hard light (totally bare), to slightly reduced (with the interior baffle), to an even-further-lessened effect with the exterior diffusion or both fabrics in place.

This series of images was produced using a Mola Setti 28" Softlight Reflector with a white interior on the key light. Silver ended up being too harsh. A second lighting zone comprised of 4 strobes and v-flats was used to independently illuminate the background. In this case the hardness of the light is due to the small size of the modifier, its conical shape which gives the light rapid falloff and contrast, and its 15' distance from the subject, was used to independently illuminate the background.





LIGHT MODIFIER INTERIOR FINISH

In addition to size, the interior finish of the modifier plays an important role in the specularity created by the lighting. For the hardest light, use a modifier with a silver interior, as it boosts contrast, maximizes light output, and creates the crispest edges. If you desire light that is slightly softer, then a modifier with a white interior can be substituted. Experiment and have fun creating different degrees of hard light with various modifiers and their add-ons—there are myriad options across the hard-light spectrum.

The shape and depth of the modifier also contributes to the quality of light and the speed at which the light falls off the initial circle once it leaves the modifier. Deeper, conical, parabolic-shaped modifiers deliver increased contrast, heightened light fall, and dramatic results.

For this promo image for a local band 2 30x40 silver interior soft boxes were used stacked one on top of the other and placed 15-20' feet from the subject. This arrangement was used to create a vertical column of hard light large enough to cover the subjects. A second lighting zone comprised of 4 strobes and v-flats was used to independently illuminate the background.

DISTANCE

The distance of the key light and its modifier from the subject is another key factor in creating quality of light. The closer the light source to the subject, the softer the quality. So when it comes to hard light, you'll want distance between your lighting and your subject. Your mileage will vary depending on the desired effect, size of the modifier, and power of the flash being used, but the basic rule still applies: the more distance between the light and the subject, the harder the resulting light will be.

Distance and size are interrelated, and the reason why is known as perceived size. For example, if you place a 10-inch reflector 2 feet away from your subject, it will have a larger perceived size relative to the subject than the same modifier placed 10 feet away from that subject. The farther away the modifier is placed, the smaller its perceived size relative to the subject, and vice versa. This is good news. It means if you only have a medium-sized modifier, you can still create hard light with it. Placing a medium-sized modifier farther away from your subject will essentially make it smaller, giving you harder light than the same modifier placed closer to the subject. Make sense? Try it!



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Achieving hard light requires a combination of elements. Modifier size, shape, interior finish, and distance all play key roles. Here a medium sized umbrella with a silver interior is used to illuminate the subject from above with bounce back light. Despite the strobes indirect orientation the modifier's silver interior and the distance from the subject help create a medium hard light with dramatic impact.



Image © Michael Corsentino

So you can see, despite its name, hard light is easy. You have a ton of options, regardless of the modifiers you currently have on hand. You can easily convert any softbox into a hard-light modifier by removing its interior baffle and exterior diffusion fabrics and placing it farther away from your subject. There is no perfect distance—it all depends on the quality of light you want and the power of the strobe you're using. I often end up with around 10-15 feet between my key light and subject, but again, your mileage may vary. Every shoot is an experiment. Have fun, check your results, and season to taste. Post your hard-light images on Facebook and tag me. I can't wait to see what you come up with! ■

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Michael Corsentino is an Orlando, Florida-based editorial fashion and portrait photographer. In addition to his busy shooting schedule, Michael is a passionate educator, teaching workshops domestically and internationally. He is an author of two books, writes a monthly lighting column for *Shutter Magazine* and is a regular contributor to *Photoshop User* magazine and *JointheBreed.com*.
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photographer | lisa jones | ljonesphotography.com
image title | lilly



exposure | f/7.1 @ 1/160 ISO 100
lighting | paul c buff digibee db800 with a 36" octobox and westcott eyelighter
location | home studio w/8ft ceilings
gear | canon 5d mark iii
sigma 85mm 1.4 dg hsm art





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