

Matching Caliber Clients to Your Business:

Jeff Smith's Senior Sessions

By Michelle Perkins

Some time ago, portrait photographer and prolific author Jeff Smith received an email from one of his readers. In it, the photographer asked Jeff why he doesn't put prices on his website for senior portraits. "I responded that price doesn't matter," he says. "She was shocked and told me that price is the most important factor to her clients." Jeff noted that in this competitive market, very few studios are priced far above other studios that produce similar quality output. "I feel it is the photographers' own overemphasis on pricing that attracts bargain shoppers," says Jeff. "After all, people who want beautiful portraits don't respond well to businesses that promote themselves as bargain-basement operations."

According to Jeff, this episode was a good reminder of one major reason why many photographers have a hard time controlling their sessions: They have a hard time controlling their businesses.



"Just like the woman who sent me this email," says Jeff, "photographers often make it hard on clients by not providing them with the proper information and by failing to define their business so the potential clients know what to expect from the studio. You have to make the process as easy for the client as possible—do everything in your power to accurately define your business so the only calls you get are from clients who are a good match for what you do."

Establish a Consistent Image

Many photographers invest in high-quality mailers and marketing pieces—materials that suggest they produce top-quality images and offer high-end services. "In many cases, the location of the studio, the photographer's experience and the overall business don't live up to that more prestigious





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feeling,” says Jeff. “Some photographers do the exact opposite—they have cheesy ads and marketing pieces going out to clients, despite the fact that the studio location, photographer’s experience and prices charged are very upscale. In both cases, the phone rings a great deal, but few callers turn into clients,” he says. Jeff rightly points out that you don’t see McDonald’s advertising itself as a venue for formal anniversary dinners, and you don’t see fine restaurants installing drive-through windows. “These businesses define their market and let those who see their advertising know what to expect,” says Jeff. “This reduces problems for the client and builds the needed respect for the business.”

Another problematic inconsistency occurs when you show work that you cannot recreate for future clients. “I can’t count the number of photographers I’ve seen displaying wedding photos taken in exotic locations where their clients hired them to travel. Instead of impressing potential clients, this can lead to uncomfortable discussions about why you can’t provide the same looks for them,” Jeff says. “As I was

finishing my last book, I did a shoot at the Alumni House at our local university. I was so impressed with the images that I wanted to include some of them in our studio displays.” He continues, “Then I realized that I would be showing potential clients portraits they could never do. The people running the Alumni House thought it was cool to let us use the house once, but they wouldn’t appreciate working around full-day sessions several times a year.”

Again, the key to avoiding problems is to create a consistent message. “At my studio, we go for an upscale (but not intimidating) feel,” says Jeff. “The studio itself is located near the most exclusive shopping area in the city. When seniors arrive at the studio, they can select from backgrounds and sets such as a Dodge Viper, a Harley-Davidson motorcycle, and high quality sets by Scenic Designs and Off The Wall.

“They also have an experienced professional photographer (me!) who is the author of nine books and numerous articles. And I always look the part; I dress in a suit in winter, a shirt and tie in summer, and a nice pair of khakis and a shirt for

typical outdoor sessions. Additionally, I speak clearly and respectfully to my clients and my subjects. I know what I’m doing, and it’s clear in every facet of how I present myself.”

The result of these efforts is that Jeff’s clients know his services are not going to be cheap. Still, the style isn’t so over-the-top that it scares people of average means who want nice senior portraits without breaking the bank. “This feeling is echoed in our marketing and in all of our contact with clients,” says Jeff. “We are clear about who we are as a business and who they should be if they want to use our service.”

Educate the Client

Ensuring that you present your studio in an accurate and consistent manner is a key factor in establishing your client’s respect. That leads to the next important step in preventing problems: educating the client. “When our phone person makes each appointment,” says Jeff, “they explain everything the client needs to do. This includes paying for the session in advance, at the time of scheduling, and planning



to place their order immediately after the session is over. They also discuss how to dress and point the client to our website for additional help on getting ready for their session. Finally, they ask the client to arrive 15 minutes early for the session so they can select their background ideas.”

Jeff then follows up by sending the client comprehensive information about the process of taking and ordering their portraits. The information emphasizes that the people in the portraits they have seen (presumably the reason they called to book their session) look great because they took the time to prepare correctly for their sessions. “We use a simple scenario to explain how a bad choice of clothing can ruin an otherwise beautiful portrait. This shows a young lady in a shirt or sweater that is too fitted and demonstrates some of the problems this creates—and how much these types of corrections usually cost the client,” says Jeff. This is also a good time to discuss solids as opposed to patterns. “While the type of correction shown in the tight-shirt example is costly with a solid-colored shirt, with an intricate pattern it might not even be possible,” he notes. Jeff finds that once they have explained these issues to the client (and what can happen

if they don’t listen), people generally follow the advice.

Don’t Be Afraid


Throughout the entire portrait process, Jeff addresses the same questions and concerns that every studio in the country has to deal with, but with a difference. “I am not afraid,” says Jeff. “In fact, I want to send some business away. My studio is not for everyone. If I wanted it to be, I would have set up shop in a mall. There are many potential clients who don’t have the money to pay my prices, even though we are competitive with other quality senior studios. Others don’t care about taking creative portraits. For these clients, our studio is not a good match, and that’s fine. It lets us keep our focus on those clients whose tastes and goals suit our own.”

The Long and Short of It

“Until you take control of your business, you will never take control of your sessions or subjects. You’ll tell them what to do, they’ll ignore you, and then, when things go badly because of their choices, they will blame you,” says Jeff. “The root of virtually every problem is a lack of communication. You didn’t know something about your client, or they didn’t

know something about you. Every time we have a ‘problem’ client, we get together and discuss the missing information that caused the problem. I can honestly say that 90 percent of the time it is information we neglected to provide to the client that created the problem. Even if the problem is rooted in a lack of information from the client though, it’s still your fault; you never took the time to ask what they wanted.”

In the end, purchasing portraits shouldn’t be an arduous experience for your clients; if it is, you won’t have very many. “If you make it easy to work with you, your problems with clients will be reduced,” says Jeff. “You will also work with clients who want to work with you and who truly understand why you are the best studio for them.”

To learn more about Jeff Smith, visit www.jeffsmithphoto.com or check out his latest book, *Jeff Smith’s Posing Techniques for Location Portrait Photography* (Amherst Media, 2007). 

Michelle Perkins is a professional writer, designer and image retoucher. She has written for PC Photo and is the author of Beginner’s Guide to Adobe Photoshop, The Practical Guide to Digital Imaging, Color Correction and Enhancement with Adobe Photoshop, and her latest book, Professional Portrait Lighting: Techniques and Images from Master Photographers (all from Amherst Media).