

Joe Photo on Building an Extraordinary Wedding Business

by Ethan G. Salwen

“The positive side of this recession is that it is going to force a lot of wedding photographers to improve their services,” says Joe Photo, a respected wedding photographer based in Southern California, well known for capturing high-end weddings in luxury destinations. “Simply reducing fees is not going to allow photographers to stay in business,” Joe says. He is well aware of how challenging the business of wedding photography has become, and yet he insists that the most committed photographers can still thrive. More than anything, Joe believes that what is called for is thoughtful re-evaluation of personal goals and rethink-

ing business goals in relation to these.

While Joe broke into wedding photography 15 years ago and reached a level of stable success within a few years, he explains that his success was not as stable as he had once assumed. “In a way, I’ve been prepared for this financial crisis for about three years,” he says. “That’s when I started realizing that the large influx of talented wedding photographers was going to force me to work harder. I had thought that after the first few years of my business there would be a kind of snowball effect and that it would just get easier. But it’s getting harder for all of us.”

Photographers familiar with Joe’s career (he’s no stranger to covering million-dollar-plus weddings) might assume that he’s one of the few exempt from the increasing challenges of surviving in the business. In fact, it was because of Joe’s reputation that I turned to him in search of practical moneymaking strategies to share with other wedding photographers. “My response to your query is that, at this point in my life, it makes me uncomfortable to advise anyone on financial strategies,” Joe explained at the beginning of the first of two long conversations. “I am constantly in process, figuring things out





from trial and error, learning from other people.”

I appreciated Joe’s honesty and humility. Nevertheless, the longer we talked the clearer it became that Joe has invaluable inspiration to share with his colleagues, even if not the bullet-point business strategies for which I had contacted him. Joe proved to be incredibly upbeat and forthcoming. He shared a wide range of both personal and business experiences, and in them I came to see concepts that seem particularly useful for all manner of wedding photographers committed to achieving greater success.

These ideas are not easy, quick solutions. They are suggestions for ways that photographers can engage in their own version of an ongoing process like Joe’s. The most critical aspect of this process is to re-evaluate one’s personal priorities. This leads to re-evaluating business goals



with a clearer perspective. This, in turn, leads to making the best business decisions to build the most satisfying career.

Trim the Fat, Plant the Seeds

Joe made more money in 2008 than he did in 2007. This is significant because he photographed only 20 weddings in 2008, down from 30 in 2007, and his rates were equivalent. “I wish I could say that shooting fewer weddings was planned, but it wasn’t,” Joe admits. “The reason I made more money is because I had reduced my overhead.”

Joe strongly advises other photographers to “trim the fat,” looking for the smallest savings, such as killing an outdated fax line. Another strategy Joe advises is for photographers to diversify, either by offering more services or improving the quality and scope of current services. But he explained that this

strategy requires careful thinking (based on each photographer's unique personality) and that it will take longer to see results than reducing overhead.

Given the challenges facing wedding photographers, I asked Joe how he could remain so upbeat and positive. I also asked what he would say to those wedding photographers who are feeling scared, overwhelmed and hopeless. "I am completely sympathetic to such feelings, and I get them too," he says. "But, you know, there is a Chinese proverb: The best time to plant a tree is 20 years ago. The second best time is right now."

Know Yourself, Know Your Goals

Through stories about his life and business, Joe demonstrated how thoughtful thinking leads to positive action—the planting of those seeds today for the future—and that this is the only way to cope with pragmatic struggles. Joe suggests that for wedding photographers this thoughtful thinking should begin not with photography or even the business of photography, but rather, the self.

"To succeed as photographers, we need to know our goals," Joe says. "But we can only figure out our goals if we truly know ourselves." Such a statement might strike some as abstract and unhelpful, but for Joe this relates to concrete practices. For example, the cost cutting that led to his greater profits in 2008 was the byproduct of his realizing that, for personal and spiritual reasons, he wanted to simplify his life. Joe says this insight came from his ongoing process to better understand his core values.

"When I go to the WPPI conference and listen to all the great speakers I think, 'Wow! This would be a great way to make money,'" Joe says. "But then I ask myself, 'Would I want to make money that way?'" He almost always answers, "No." He remains clear that he wants to photograph "celebrity and over-the-top weddings." This is because it is what gives him the most personal satisfaction—from the face-to-face selling his services with his elite clientele to delivering them a "rock star" photographer performance, not to mention mastering the photographic techniques to create the images that match the aesthetic tastes of the demographic he serves. He calls it his "core purpose" in business, and knowing it has kept him on track, even as he continues to experiment with various forms of diversifying.



Figure it Out, Write It Down, Say It Out Loud

"There are tons of online resources for helping people establish personal and business goals," Joe explains. He has found it helpful to use the Myers-Briggs personality assessment to determine that he has an "INFP" personality type. "One aspect of this relates to the fact that I need a lot of time to myself," he says. "Because I know this, I make sure to get that alone time before I meet clients, photograph a wedding or network."

Joe is not suggesting that every photog-

rapher take the Myers-Briggs test. But he encourages other photographers to engage in a process to help them best understand their true personal needs. He offers, "This makes it much easier to set meaningful goals." For him the greatest tools for personal discovery and setting business goals are a pen and paper.

"I have absorbed a lot of books on goal setting," explains Joe, who tries to listen to one audio book a week on business, marketing and related themes. "They all say that it's critical to write down goals. I absolutely agree." As part of a business

seminar in January 2006, Joe was given a 40-page packet of questions to answer. “The first page asked us to list five things we wanted to accomplish and by what date,” recalls Joe. “How did I do? Well, some of the things I accomplished and some I didn’t. But simply writing them down brought me clarity and focus.”

Recently, Joe was advising a friend who is struggling with his wedding photography business. Joe suggested that he simply start with a piece of paper and make two columns, listing the things he loves about his work and the things he hates. Joe says that this type of simple activity can be a great catalyst for helping photographers get in touch with their underlying natures, noting that his friend’s loves and hates were very different than his own, and knowing

these goals with others.

“It is absolutely critical to speak our goals out loud,” Joe says, explaining the reason as twofold. On the one hand, it is yet another step in helping us better, more clearly understand what we want. Just as important, it helps people around us know what we are looking for. This, he says, creates opportunities. In the most solid sense, this can be seen as simply good, goal-specific networking. However, Joe suggests that the greatest benefit of speaking goals out loud is hard to appreciate. He speaks with excitement about how it creates a shift in energy, and then says, “I can’t explain it.”

To be frank, I couldn’t understand it either. So I asked Joe to clarify his ideas about goal setting and speaking them out loud. “We meet some of our goals and others we don’t,

zone and put Joe’s advice to the test. After we hung up I spent two hours writing my lengthy “obit” and emailed it off to Joe, thereby “saying it out loud.”

I was utterly surprised by the shift in the nature of my thinking over the next few days. Like Joe, I can’t really explain it. But I started thinking about the most important, overreaching goals in my life that I had never clearly articulated, that go far beyond the tunnel vision I usually have in regard to my life and career. This shift in perspective was subtle, mind you, but clearly powerful. I felt more positive about my work, and I realized that I want to reassess my long-term goals and consider ways to achieve them. With one simple exercise I was seeing the value of trying to get in touch with what Joe would call my core values. (I’ve done more since and I am feeling more optimistic and in control my own career.)

Addressing the Pitfalls of Ego

As you can see, Joe was taking me down a path much different than simply providing the practical business strategy bullet points I had originally hoped to gather for wedding photographers. But his energetic insights spoke to something more far reaching. I was seeing how “defining core values,” even if it’s an ongoing, elusive process, might serve photographers far better than a specific to-do item such as, “improve my website.” A great website is crucial for wedding photographers, but how do they know how to best improve their sites unless they truly

know what they want to achieve with it?

One theme Joe continually returned to was the sense of conflict he often feels when making business decisions. “I have just decided to get rid of my studio space I’ve occupied for over nine years,” he says. “I now do almost all of my work from home and the studio was costing me \$2000 a month. I only use it for about eight client meetings a month, and now that my kids are grown I can have client meetings at home.” Such cost savings might seem like a no-brainer. But it was a difficult decision



this allowed him to make the appropriate business suggestions.

“Almost no photographer has a business plan,” Joe says. “But we need to. It doesn’t have to be long or formal. But I suggest without this written roadmap, a suggested itinerary, we are not going to get where we want.” Joe emphasizes that an inflexible, formal business plan is much less useful than a “roadmap” that consists of ongoing planning in the form of soul-searching, writing exercises, the listing (and re-listing) of long- and short-term goals, and sharing

and that’s okay,” he says. “The real point is to see how you want your life to be.” Joe then challenged me to write my own obituary and email it to him, imagining myself looking back on my life, listing what I had accomplished, what had been important.

I had never done this kind of exercise before, and were it not for Joe’s contagious enthusiasm, I wouldn’t have. But his success is undeniable, his interest in helping others clearly genuine, and he was putting great stock in this type of exercise. So, I decided to break out of my own comfort



for Joe to make, and he believes that many photographers have a hard time making smart business decisions for emotional reasons inherent in the creative personality.

“For me, cutting back expenses and simplifying is really about addressing issues of ego,” Joe shares. He says that having a nice studio was always part of his notion of what it is to be a successful wedding photographer. While letting go has not been easy, he is making better decisions since getting in touch with his core value of wanting to live more simply. He says that while saving money is critical, the greatest benefit is greater freedom to focus on the aspects of his business that truly matter.

Consider Possibilities Beyond Photographing

Joe felt it important to mention the practical reality that struggling photographers should definitely consider part- or full-time work outside of photography. He’s well aware what a blow that can be to a photographer’s ego. But as he points out, “It can be completely depressing and incapacitating if the phone isn’t ringing and you don’t have money for next month’s rent.”

Far from a retreat, Joe suggested that temporarily taking a day job can lift photographers’ spirits and can lead them more opportunities in photography. “It’s not failing if you take time to regroup and experience greater financial security,” he says. “And even working full time, photographers can still shoot weddings on the weekends until things turn around.”

Joe speaks from personal experience. During his early years in the business, when times were tight, he returned to a job he had held at a frame shop. “Three times I went back begging for my job,” he recalls. “I had to do it. But I also learned so much about business during those times.” Joe explains that the shop owner was an amazing businessman with an impressive ability to make sales by building relationships. “He would remember each





customer's interests, and then buy them inexpensive and thoughtful gifts he would find at garage sales. That made them customers for life!"

Building Clients for Life

"One critical aspect of success for all wedding photographers is to build clients for life through the personal touch," Joe advises. He says that for some this can mean turning wedding clients into portrait clients. For him, it means building such good relationships that he now receives the majority of his clients through referrals. In either case, he says the critical factor is to focus on expressing a sincere, personal interest.

"Photographers can send out certificates thanking couples and offering them a complimentary portrait session as an anniversary gift or when their first child is born," Joe suggests. "Portrait sales will follow. And the best part is that the photographer will have complete creative control. They can shoot the couple exactly how they want. It's like being able to use them as models and building a value-based rela-


tionship at the same time.

"Give clients the element of surprise," Joe strongly recommends. "Send them a handwritten note with a bottle of wine or fancy chocolates. It is absolutely amazing how people respond to these thoughtful surprises." For photographers struggling to make ends meet, such strategies might seem too little, too late. But Joe insists his philosophy of "planting seeds today" has immediate, if not predictable results. Becoming more active—in keeping with core values—creates a greater sense of purpose and clearer sense of direction that quickly feeds off itself and builds momentum.

More Play, Greater Self Worth

Joe encourages all wedding photographers to find more time to play—both in terms of their art and enjoying their personal lives. "All of this relates back to establishing your goals," Joe says. "When you know what your goals are, you give yourself permission to play. It's that guilt-free play that actually improves the quality of your work and prevents you from burning out.

"Pay attention to the voice in your head," Joe offers. "We often attach our self worth to the success of our business and we think our business defines us. But that's not true. Your business is just one part of you. When we are not achieving the success we expect to, we feel bad about ourselves.

"Here's a suggestion," Joe says. "Step back, take a breath, and be grateful for what you have already achieved. Recall all the successes you've had and the clients you have served with your talent. Then, you are in a frame of mind to re-examine your strategy from a place of empowerment rather than defeat. Press on and be in control of your destiny regardless of the economy." 

Joe Photo will be teaching a platform class on Sunday, March 7th from 12:00 p.m.–2:00 p.m. in Room 319–320.

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