



By Michelle Perkins

Tim Schooler's reputation precedes him—literally. In a market where all of the high schools are contracted to other studios, this senior portrait specialist, based in Lafayette, LA, does no advertising and still has close to 200 seniors on his waiting list every year. So what makes Schooler's studio such a success?

While he is too modest to pat himself on the back for his obviously outstanding images, there's no denying the attention-grabbing quality of his work. Vibrant colors, flawless retouching, fashion-inspired posing and creative

compositions are all hallmarks of his dynamic style.

Tim knows, however, that great pictures can only take you so far in a market where seniors have so many choices. "Photography is extremely important. You have to create images that set you apart in your area," says Tim. "But the experience—a lot of people overlook that. This is a once-in-a-lifetime experience that many of these girls have been dreaming about since they were freshmen, and if they don't feel like they've had fun and don't want to come back and do it again next month, you're missing the boat."

## *The Tim Schooler Portrait Experience*



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Tim's clients get this once-in-a-lifetime feeling from the moment they first see his images or visit his website. The sheer variety of the images, the upbeat music and even the quality of the graphic design all let you know that getting your senior portraits taken by Tim Schooler is something to get excited about.

For all but the most distant clients, Tim begins the process with an in-studio consultation—the first of four visits clients will make to the studio. This has two advan-

tages: First, it helps to eliminate problems on the day of the shoot (like girls showing up in unflattering outfits). Second, it kicks off the experience with a personal interaction that helps put the subjects at ease. "A lot of them are very nervous. They want to look beautiful. They want to look perfect. And they're afraid that the pictures are not going to look good," says Tim. "At the consultation, I have a chance to joke with them and get to know them a little bit. When they come back for the session, they

feel like they know me a little bit; they're not intimidated."

Tim also enhances each subject's experience by booking only two sessions per day. This allows him the time he needs to photograph each subject in multiple outfits, as well as both in the studio and on location. Allowing for a more leisurely pace at the session ensures that the subject can relax and really enjoy the shoot. It also allows Tim the time he needs to precisely refine every aspect of the pose and lighting so that the subject looks their best in every shot. That makes the longer appointments a win-win situation.

Throughout the session, Tim gets feedback from the senior, telling them how terrific they look and providing the gentle guidance needed to make them feel great about the session. "If you rush your clients or don't make it seem like you value their opinions, you're in trouble. You have to let them think things are their idea," he says. For example, if a client wants to use a background that he knows won't be ideal, instead of shutting them down, he'll say something like, "I like that one too, but how about this one? This would go really well with your outfit." Tim says they will usually readily agree—and feel good about the decision "they" made.

After the session, Tim prepares the images for viewing. He processes the RAW files in Phase One's Capture One. The default saturation setting in Capture One (a +7 percent bump) gives the colors a little extra vibrancy. As Tim takes the time to make each capture as close as possible to the final image while shooting, this is all that's needed to show a great preview.

After processing, Tim applies the Portraiture filter, a Photoshop and Aperture plug-in from Imagenomic ([www.imagenomic.com/pt.aspx](http://www.imagenomic.com/pt.aspx)) that smoothes and softens skin tones. The plug-in intelligently smoothes and removes imperfections while preserving skin texture and other important portrait details such as hair, eyebrows, eyelashes, etc. Tim uses it to "take the edge off" his images.

Tim's clients review their images within 24 hours of the session at a slide show set to music and projected on a 10-foot screen. After the show, clients take home a spiral-bound preview book of watermarked images (generated with John Hartman's QuickProofs, [www.jhartman.com/quickproofs/index.php](http://www.jhartman.com/quickproofs/index.php)). "A lot of photographers



say you have to do the ordering right after the session when the client's emotions are running high," says Tim. "Here, it doesn't work as well because of the big extended families that we have—they all want pictures. So, they take that preview book home, everybody sees it, and suddenly that \$700 order becomes a \$1500 order. Plus, the seniors always take the book to school and show it to their friends. We get business off of that—they're like a walking billboard with that preview book!" To keep the process moving along, Tim offers discounted pricing to customers who place their orders within 14 days.

Once the order is placed, a minimum of retouching is applied. Blemishes are removed, stray hairs are cleaned up—and that's about it. Tim used to have a staff member do this work, but now opts to handle the final retouching himself, another





level of personal service and attention to detail he provides to his clients. “This is a custom product and it has my name on it. It has to look perfect,” he says.

Tim also puts his images to work on social-networking sites like Facebook and MySpace. Seniors are encouraged to use their portraits (watermarked with the studio’s logo) on their own pages and receive a final file for this purpose. Tim also posts photos regularly to his own pages, making sure to tag each subject. This ensures that the subject and all of their friends will be notified that the image is up. When they click to see it, they’ll also see his logo. This has been a powerful tool for Tim because it makes his subjects feel special and lets their friends—who know how they look every day—see how incredible Tim made them look in their images. You can hardly build better word-of-mouth than that—and Tim noticed that he began booking more out-of-town and out-of-state clients once his social networking pages were up and running. One senior, who was fascinated with Louisiana, actually convinced his parents to fly the whole family from Alaska to Lafayette for a two-week vacation so that he could have his senior portraits taken with Tim!

While Tim is the first to admit this isn’t going to happen every day—or every year for that matter—it’s a good example of how excited people can get about portraiture when given a good reason. Tim’s clients are clearly excited, as evidenced by nearly two-dozen glowing testimonials on his site. What is most telling about these rave reviews, however, is that, while every subject says how happy they are with their images, most also make a point of noting how much fun they had at the session and how Tim made them feel. “That was an experience I will never forget. You made me feel so comfortable and beautiful,” writes one senior. “I had a blast working with you and every penny spent was worth it,” notes another.

Today’s senior portrait clients have more choices than ever and, in many cases, less money than just a few years ago. This makes it more important than ever to refine every aspect of your business. For Tim Schooler, success is not just about creating great images, but creating a great experience as well—one that will help turn your happy clients into your most effective tool for generating new business.

To learn more about Tim Schooler, visit [www.timschooler.com](http://www.timschooler.com).



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