

# 8 Ways to Show Clients You're a First-Class Operation

By Alice B. Miller



▲ Shot in July as a promotion piece. Shares Blei, "I am continually shooting fresh work that ultimately pleases clients."

▼ Shot in February for Polaris Images. Comments Blei, "Photographers can only go so far by themselves."



**"You're hired for the style you bring to an assignment, so be authentic..."**

Good times or bad, your photography business can be positioned as a premier operation. One photographer who showcases his studio's pedigree is Phoenix-based photographer Tony Blei. A photojournalist for 20 years, Blei has photographed everything from fancy cocktail parties to CEOs to U.S. Presidents for top-flight editorial, corporate and commercial clients. With dozens of photography awards to his credit, he has also earned an award for his engaging writing style. His wit and wisdom delights followers of his blog and other social media—and earned him a speaking stint in 2010. Here, he shares his strategy for running and promoting a premier business.

**Stick with your style.** When you are hired for an assignment, listen to what the client has to say and get it right, but don't compromise your style. "You're hired for the style you bring to an assignment, so be authentic," says Blei. "And practice, practice, practice. I have an exercise I call 'Find the Picture,' where I take a camera and one lens into very difficult shooting situations. If it's bright sun, I'll blur my shots to create something interesting. If it's nighttime, I'll shoot handheld in available light and work to get sharp images. From doing this exercise in technical accuracy and spontaneity, I can go into any environment and create stunning pictures."

**Act like a serious business.** Structure your photography business like the professional business it is. "If your business grows from the hobby stage, but you continue to treat it like a hobby, you will end up with a full-grown business that will do more harm than good," says Blei. "Shoot, use contracts, pay your taxes, spend money on things like design and printing, and don't sacrifice quality to save money. I started out by creating an LLC. I also have a business bank account so that all funds don't get mixed. In Arizona, we don't have sales tax, but there is a Transaction Privilege Tax (TPT), which I am licensed to collect."

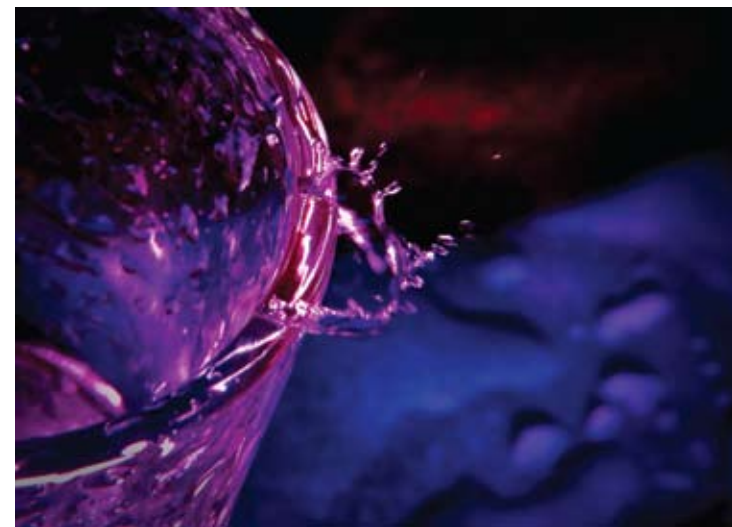
**Put it in writing.** Consider moving away from handshake deals and draft written agreements. "Photography can be complicated and it's nice to have all of the duties, responsibilities, terms and conditions spelled out," says Blei. "If you want the water delivery truck to deliver water bottles, you have to sign an agreement. When one client didn't like this approach, we parted ways. It was painful, but I had to decide whether I was going to let a client dictate how I was going to run my business. Letting a client dictate the terms is like having a day job without benefits."

**Pull out all the stops to satisfy clients.** With so many talented photographers competing for the available jobs, keeping existing clients happy is critical. "Some



▲ Shares Blei, "I shot this tail fin of a 1959 Cadillac in February for a direct-mail piece and an e-blast to clients. While Cadillac has marketed to me my whole life, I don't drive one. Photography styles, like individual cars, do not appeal to everyone."

▼ Shot in November 2006 for a gallery show at the Holy Click Gallery in Phoenix, which moved to Collins College, Su Vino Winery. Parts of the exhibition are on permanent loan to Tea Infusion in the Tempe Marketplace Mall, Tempe, AZ.



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▲ Counting Crows captured in 2008 for the city of Tempe, AZ, when it hosted festivities for Super Bowl Saturday.

photographers have big budgets and really know how to compete," says Blei. "Ask yourself, 'If you received two portfolios and technically the level of excellence was the same, would you hire the photographer who shipped his work in an elegant \$2500 case or the one who sent work samples on a 60-cent CD? There are ways to convey the level of your commitment to your art. Seriously, the Mona Lisa isn't thumb-tacked to the wall.'"

**Hire professionals.** To attract professional clients, hire respected professionals for your support tasks. "In Phoenix we have an organization called Creative Connect ([www.creativeconnect.org](http://www.creativeconnect.org)), which is basically a cocktail party for creative people in the commercial arts," says Blei. "At one event, a friend recommended Burns Auto Parts, a company run by Leslie Burns-Dell'Acqua, a creative-marketing consultant. She has written a couple of books—*Business Basics for the Successful Commercial Photographer* and *Tell the World You Don't Suck: Modern Marketing for Commercial Photographers*—which, in my opinion, are 'The Old Testament' and 'The New Testament.' Get them, read them, and read them again."

**Be prepared to spend money.** Starting a business is an expensive proposition. "If you start a photography studio with little or no money, sooner or later you'll either be out of business or have to re-invest a lot more money," he says. "If you are content with \$50 gigs, keep printing your business cards on the back of a paper plate. If you want clients with \$5000 budgets, re-invest some of your revenue so you can position yourself to be hired by 10 of these clients a year."

**Think long-term.** Building a business and nurturing client loyalty takes time, so be patient. "One night I went to an ASMP meeting where a member was complaining that he had spent almost \$1000 on a service that provides contact information for art buyers, but nobody had called him," says Blei. "Cadillac has spent billions of dollars while marketing to me and I don't drive a Caddy. Photography styles, like cars, aren't for everyone. Loyal clients aren't going to drop their tried-and-true photographers for the next guy who sends a postcard. Get to know your audience. Be polite; don't call every day. It will happen."

**It's all about people.** Of all the variables involved with photography, people are the most important—your subjects, the people who publish your pictures and the people who view your images. "We are communicators of visual ideas. We not only have to get in front of our audience, we also have to ensure that they understand what we are communicating," says Blei. "I've done some teaching and lecturing. I always tell my students that what I do for a living involves photography. And what it's all about is people."

For more of his images, visit [www.tonyblei.com](http://www.tonyblei.com). For his wit and wisdom, visit his blog ([www.tonyblei.blogspot.com](http://www.tonyblei.blogspot.com)) or follow him on Twitter @Tony\_Blei\_Photo.

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