

Some Thoughts on Marketing

By Fran Reisner

There are numerous ways to market your business, but in order to do so successfully there is one important thing you need to know; who are you marketing to? Who is your client? More importantly, who do you want your client to be? I think it's crucial to visualize exactly what it is you want from your business and set some goals you wish to attain in order to be effective in your marketing efforts. My goals were very specific, and for very specific reasons. The marketing ideas I'll share here are what worked in achieving MY goals, therefore I think it's important that I share some of those goals (and some of the thoughts behind them) with you. First of all, I wanted to keep my business low volume, focusing on the quality and style of my images rather than the quantity. It is my belief that in order to run a successful studio today you have two basic choices; low volume, where the style and quality are of the utmost importance as is your relationship with your clients. The other option is high volume, where the focus is getting as many clients through the door as possible and quality, service and style take a back seat. I'd have to say I'm an artist above all so I had no desire to go in this direction, but in the last year or so I've had two conversations that made me extremely grateful for having the vision to create the niche I had for myself. First was with one of the staff at Miller's Professional Imaging who had been in Wal-Mart over the weekend and saw a sign advertising a sizable portrait package for only \$4.95. He said, "We can't even print it for that at cost! How do you compete with that?" My response was, "Thankfully I don't." The other was a virtual conversation with an executive at a major digital SLR manufacturer who told me that two of the company's top DSLRs would be featured in a national magazine's list of top 100 Christmas gift ideas. I replied to him that while that may well be great news for the company it really wasn't good news at all for most professional photographers. Think about it, one of our biggest competitors today is our own client, and that's not limited to the portrait/wedding segment of the industry. Our clients have access to the same equipment we have, and quite frankly most of them can more readily afford it. Throw in a couple crash courses in digital photography and voila! If these two examples don't illustrate the importance of setting yourself apart in today's market I don't know what would. I chose to focus on a very customized style of wall portraiture. Not only do I enjoy creating this type of portrait, I thoroughly enjoy my clients. It is my belief that creating truly valuable images requires a fair bit of time with your clients. In order to do this I had to make a good return on my time investment and that meant marketing to a fairly affluent clientele who could not only afford to spend top dollar on my images, but also had a great appreciation for the quality and style I offer. With this in mind I developed the following marketing techniques. They have been tested and fine tuned over the years, and work beautifully for my needs. Notice also that although some of these require a bit of your time, they are relatively inexpensive forms of marketing.

Target your market. Figure out who your ideal client is and focus on marketing to that client. How do you reach them? Where do they shop? What are their habits? A simple example; if you want to focus on pet portraiture your client could be reached through veterinary clinics, pet shops, groomers and even publications about pets.

Put images on display. Say for example your focus is children's portraits. You will find them at such places as pediatric clinics, day cares and children's clothing shops. Set aside some time to go to these locations in your market area and be bold enough to ask if you can put some portraits on display. I make it a goal to get as many wall portraits up in these locations as possible, but at the very least a small album of some favorite images and post cards that showcase my children's portraits. Leaving a stack of business cards is not enough. We are in a visual business! You want those potential clients to see your images, and more importantly, go home with them! I would recommend that you keep track of these locations and check back with them from time to time making sure they are well supplied with your postcards. And by all means, keep your samples looking good and up to date. Remember image is everything. It says volumes about you and your business.

Develop strong relationships with the owners and employees of these locations and anyone else who is in the position of referring you. By nurturing these relationships and finding unique ways to make them feel special, you will be remembered and they will do your marketing for you! Consider dropping by with a basket of goodies now and then, send flowers, or take them out to lunch. And do not fail to remember them with a "thank you" every time they pass your name along.

Be visible in your community. Join the chamber of commerce. Get involved in civic activities. Say yes when your local high school asks you to do a program for Career Day. Give of your time when you can. It'll make you feel good. And remember, what goes around comes around.

Donate to fund raisers. I'm most interested in the high end charitable fundraisers, but in my own community I'm happy to donate to the smaller school and church events as well. This takes very little time and effort on my part because they call me. All I have to do is say yes! When you do, it is important to put your work on display at the event. This is something I think most photographers overlook. It is one thing for them to know your name, but I believe it is just as important for them to see your images. When I say yes it is with the agreement that I will have a safe place to display a wall portrait on an easel near my bid sheet. This is for their benefit as much as my own. I have tested and proven my theory that donations with beautiful wall portraits on display get higher bids than those without. And I want everyone at those events to see and remember my images. I also keep a stack of postcards by the bid sheet so that everyone there can go home with not only my name and number, but also a few of my favorite images.

Press Releases... something few photographers take the time to do. A little press goes a long way, and it's free advertising! Take advantage of every opportunity you have to get your business in the paper. It helps if you do something worthy of some press and civic involvement is a good place to start, but what about the print awards you receive, the degrees you earn, and the "masters" you study under? Take the time to get press releases out about these things, and if you don't have the time or the skill hire someone who can. If the cost is prohibitive find a PR person who can use your photographic services in trade.

Website, website, website! I can't say enough about the importance of a good website. I keep close track of where my business is coming from and the percentage of calls I get as a result of my website increases almost monthly! Again, we are in a visual business, and this is an ideal way to get your images in front of your potential client. My site has proven to be a powerful means in marketing my business, but in addition it has been a great tool for pre-qualifying my clients. Not only do they see the quality and style of my images, they can get at least a basic idea of pricing. If I'm well beyond their means I'm not likely to get a call from them. If you do not yet have a site, check out Marathon Press. They can help you with anything from an inexpensive template site to a customized site like my own. (Marathon Press is a great resource for a large variety of marketing materials. Check them out at www.marathonpress.com)

Keep your clients happy. Treat them like they are your best friends, making sure every experience they have with you is an enjoyable one and they will grow your business for you. And at the very least make sure they get a personal thank you for every referral they send your way.

I think it's vitally important to continue to market your business. Equally important is focusing on what works for you and eliminating what doesn't. Don't be afraid to try new ideas, but analyze your marketing strategies so you know where to focus your efforts.

Wishing you a prosperous journey~