

How to get a photography career rolling

© Craig Wactor 2007

Part I - Career models:

Freelance – most common. Can be very inconsistent work. Highest profit potential.

Staff – hard to land. Usually photojournalist/editorial in nature, but also fashion, portrait and product positions exist. Staff photographers are not highly paid in most cases, but they do have a dependable paycheck and sometimes benefits.

Stock – No one ever got rich selling stock photography, but every photographer should supplement their income this way. Provides a fairly regular source of passive income (the best kind!)

Fine Art – Selling prints is the hardest way to make money. Most artists have a day job. There is the possibility (albeit slim) to become an ‘art star’ and get rich and famous. There is a growing demand for fine art stock photography.

Part II - some common photography fields:

Photojournalism – low pay, but often this is a staff position. Travel is a bonus. Can specialize somewhat. Has the potential to be fascinating work. Not highly technical.

Fashion – potential for high pay, but extremely competitive. Both freelance and staff positions are common. Need studio access. Somewhat technical in nature.

Architectural – Very high pay, but is one of the most technically demanding fields. Usually freelance.

Product – High pay, easier to break into than some other fields. Technically demanding. Need access to a studio. Usually freelance.

Portrait – Pay can be very low to very high. Need access to a studio. Usually freelance. There is always work for a good portrait photographer. Easy to field to break into. Somewhat technical, depending on the photographer’s style.

Editorial – Most editorial photographers are well paid. It’s usually a freelance position. Fairly technically demanding, since ‘on location’ studio lighting is nearly always used.

Fine Art – A rare few ‘make it’ and live the rock star lifestyle. Most artists lose money, and have a day job. It is possible to make a living selling prints at art fairs and through galleries for those who find a market for their work.

Technical – fairly well paid. Highly technical. Includes medical photography, aerial photography, scientific photography, etc. Often a staff position. Need studio access.

Wedding – Well paid. Can be highly stressful for some personality types. Most common type of photography career. Many wedding photographers start out part-time and work another job.

Photographer’s assistant – By far the best way to get a foot in the door and make contacts. Low pay, hard work, but the best way to learn the trade. A rite of passage for photographers.

Part III - Steps to starting a photography career:

Learn – There are two tried and true methods to learning the trade. Apprenticeship as a photographer's assistant is the best way to learn commercial photography. You may need to offer yourself as an unpaid intern before you even land an assistant's position. Look in the yellow pages for photographers and studios in the field you want to enter. Network through friends, families, and teachers. Cold call professional photographers and offer your services. Do not suck up to them though – a good assistant makes a pro's life much easier, and recognizing your own value is absolutely essential in the world of commercial photography. Photographers' assistants get paid a day rate (8-10 hours), or a half-day rate (4-5 hours). Full-time assistants get paid hourly. Day rates vary depending on location and your skill level. Day rates in Phoenix should be in the \$150 range. Most of the work is hauling equipment, painting backgrounds, processing images on the computer, setting up lights, etc. As you gain experience, the photographer will ask you to shoot some of the images. After you prove yourself, the photographer will hand off overflow jobs to you. This way, you build your all-important client list as well as your portfolio and skills. Most photographers' assistants are freelance. Only large studios and very established photographers can afford a full time assistant.

A close second way to learn is by taking courses in photography. Usually these are college courses, but workshops can also be extremely valuable. College programs may have internship connections. Most programs are geared towards fine art photography, but those programs have a lot to offer the aspiring commercial photographer. Today's editors and advertising agencies are looking for artistic looking images. Art programs do not offer much training in the business side of things. If you decide to go to college for photography, I recommend that you maximize your education by taking extra classes in business, and tangent areas such as graphic design and photography courses in other departments (journalism, etc.). There are also many schools whose programs are set up for commercial photography. Many of these are private schools and are very expensive. Many scholarships are available though, and these schools offer one main advantage – help placing you in a job when you graduate. You will also have access to strong connections in the world of professional photography through a trade-based school.

Practice – There is no substitute for experience. Explore the field of photography you want to enter. Shoot as much as you can without burning out. Spend a lot of time looking at the photography found in magazines, newspapers, billboards, and everywhere else. Analyze what sells. Try to figure out how the photos were done technically. Try to replicate the ones you find most successful. The more you shoot, the more you will develop your 'voice' - the consistent variables found in your style (composition, contrast, color palette, distance to subject, mood, etc.). This is *very* important to the people who will be paying you. They need to know what your photos are going to look like before they hire you. If your portfolio is all over the place, they will not have confidence in you. If your work is very consistent, they will know what to expect, and will be much more likely to hire you. Your portfolio is your best marketing tool.

Build a portfolio – Build a solid portfolio of images that showcase your work. If you are an artist looking for galleries to show your work, build a portfolio of around 20 images that all belong to one series, or two similar series. Never walk into a gallery with a random, poorly organized set of images, or with too many or too few images.

If you are pursuing a commercial career, your portfolio should be more diverse, but should still be within the field you are aiming to work in. You need to pick images that showcase your talent. Technically difficult images, as well as striking images that have that “X-factor” need to be in your folio. You may choose to include 15-30 images. Tear sheets are the holy grail of commercial portfolios. These are examples of your work as they appear in use. An example is a magazine ad featuring your photography. Another example is a model’s comp card you put together. Another is a website using your photographs.

Portfolios may be in the form of prints, slides, or digital images. I prefer prints supplemented by a cd of the same images in digital format. If you choose to use slides for your portfolio, be sure to buy a slim, battery powered light table to take with you. You do not want the editor holding your slides up to a fluorescent ceiling light to judge your work!

Make the portfolio look very professional. Buy a nice folio from an art store or photo store. Fill it – don’t leave empty pages. I like to buy the 3 ring binder style so that I can keep exactly the number of pages I want in it. Do not get ‘creative’ with your portfolio. No one ever hired a photographer because they had ribbon and glitter paint surrounding their images. One exception is child portraiture. If you want to do kid’s portraits, your portfolio can be a well-made scrapbook.

Make a resume – Your resume or CV is not as important as with other jobs, but it is still necessary. Use resume-writing resources from your school’s library, or from the internet. As a photographer, the most important areas are awards and exhibits (if you are an artist looking to get in a gallery or museum), list of clients you have worked for (if you are pursuing a commercial gig), and equipment you are familiar with. An overlooked area of the portfolio is hobbies and skills from non-photographic areas. If you have talent or experience in other areas of life, these can come in handy on photo shoots.

Include your education, and any workshops you have attended. *Do not* use a non-standard font.

When writing a resume, you are selling yourself as a product. Be straightforward and showcase your strengths. Do not lie or brag though. Have someone with a lot of experience proofread and help you with writing the portfolio – this is a very important step. It will improve your resume, and it will also give you extra confidence in it. Others who know you will always come up with good things to add that you never considered.

Get equipment – You can only work with borrowed equipment for so long. Almost all of the money you make from your first few years as a photographer should be put into equipment. You need a backup camera. You need a full range of lenses. You need a computer. You need a top-notch flash. You may need a lighting kit.

Do not go overboard. Buy equipment that will last. Don’t buy cheap equipment planning to buy up later. Buy the essentials first. What is essential varies with the area you are pursuing. An architectural photographer needs a camera capable of perspective

control, while a studio portrait photographer needs a great lighting kit first. Insuring your equipment is a good idea. Camera gear is notoriously stolen and broken, especially if you travel for gigs. Treat your gear right. Make sure to buy very good cases for all of it – that is another good insurance plan.

You may be able to buy some equipment used. Only do this if you are very knowledgeable about the gear, and the seller. Lenses and high-end film cameras last for decades if taken care of. Expensive tripods can outlive photographers. I know several photographers (including myself) who use 150 year-old lenses to get a certain ‘artistic’ look.

Make contacts – There are several ways to do this. Network all you can. Have some classy business cards made. Build a website – even if it is one of the myriad of pre-formatted sites such as PhotoShelter or the gallery at photo.net. Online networking sites are becoming a great way to drum up connections. OneModelPlace is a fantastic site, and Myspace can be useful too. There are many sites out there, and the more you join, the more exposure you get. Just make sure you are not spending too much time on the internet, because there is a point of diminishing returns with this kind of advertising.

Use friends and family members to make contacts. Shoot weddings and family events for friends really cheap. This way you build up portfolio work, and they will become a great source of free advertising. It’s fun to photograph people you know anyway!

Join professional associations like NPPA, ASMP, and SPE. They are fun and informative if you participate, and often you will have access to lectures, workshops, and newsletters about your field. Most importantly, you will make contact with leaders in the field.

Cold call businesses and offer your services for a discount in the beginning. Offer to do some gigs “TFP” (trade for prints) or “TFCD” (trade for cd’s – digital images). This benefits both the photographer and the client, and is a great way to build up that folio! Most aspiring models are very open to this deal.

Advertise - Carefully consider when you are ready for this. If you commit to an ad, your phone number had better not change, or any of the information in the ad. Buying advertising is something I recommend only established photographers pursue, because of the endless possibilities of free networking. Definitely look into the free sources for advertising like Craigslist.org, and putting your card on local bulletin boards.

Get hired – You *must* hammer out all the details before you shoot. It’s difficult to figure out how to price your work. This is an area that students always ask me about. There are several models that are proven to work well. You may decide to bill hourly (plus expenses), or charge a sitting fee plus inflated prices for prints. The number one rule is to get paid for everything you do. You need to include the time you spent driving to the photo lab, the time you spent editing images in Photoshop, the time you spent cleaning the studio after the shoot, etc. That is why established photographers charge over \$100/hr. – there is so much work behind the scenes that needs to be covered. It’s tacky to put ‘driving time and gas money’ on the bill, so things of that nature are left out, and you add

the costs into the shooting time. Post-Production is an exception though. Some photographers charge a different rate for Post work.

You also need to charge for film, batteries, and a certain expense of equipment wear and tear. With the exception of wear and tear (which is added into the shooting cost), I like to itemize the bill as much as I can. Clients feel better if they see where their money is going.

You need to decide in advance exactly what the client will get. Do they get to keep the negatives or large digital files, or do they need to come to you to buy prints later? I recommend that in the beginning, you try to sell the original negs or files to the client. You need to charge a decent amount for them, though. If you sell them, you don't have to keep up with them – that is a bonus for someone just starting out.

You need to write a contract for each gig. You may be able to have one standard contract though. I usually like to get about 25% of the estimated cost up front, and the rest of the money when I deliver the final product. This motivates me to finish promptly. You also need to include a cancellation fee. If you block off a date for a customer and they cancel, you are losing money because of the other gigs you could have scheduled at that time. You need to include in the contract some kind of clause that protects the client as well. If you do not deliver what you have promised (like if you severely underexpose half of the wedding), you can't ask for full payment. This will build trust with the client and is a good ethical move.

Price structure is a very complicated area. I touched on it earlier, but I recommend that you do some undercover work. Call a bunch of local photographers pretending to be a potential client, and find out what they charge, and how they take payment. A few photographers will include their pricing on their website. Do some research. Ask the professional that you are assisting to explain it in detail. Also, ask them about those people who don't pay up in a timely manner, and how to deal with them.

Get re-hired – There are many tricks to getting repeat customers, but none work as well as knocking their socks off with the work you do for them at a reasonable price. Be very courteous and pleasant. Get to know the client as a person. This will help you and them feel more comfortable, and they will be more likely to call you the next time they need photos. Offer a discount for repeat customers. Occasionally, give them some kind of freebie. Send out Christmas cards to your clients. Interact with them. Tell them about your life – let them get to know you.

If they are not satisfied with a part of the work you did for them, go beyond what is necessary to correct it.

There are bad clients out there that will try to take advantage of you. You will get to know this type of person quickly. They talk fast and want you to commit to changing your own policies and price structure. They will justify themselves and tell you how easy it will be, while constantly adding more to the list of what they expect. They will offer to do parts of the job themselves in return for lowering the price – never say yes to this. You will end up doing that part of the work anyway. This is where it pays to have a concrete price structure. When you make it big, you can hire an assistant with a bulldog personality to deal with them. For now, politely tell them that you do not feel that you are able to provide them with what they need, and send them to a rival photographer. Lie if you need to, just don't get involved with someone who seems sketchy.

Specialize – Like most fields, photographers who specialize tend to make more money and are able to deliver a better product. This may take some time. In the beginning, you will have to take every gig you are offered. Do try to hone your skills in the specialty you are seeking, though. Do this by networking in that field, doing shoots at a discount, etc. Learn all you can about the field. Become an expert. If you want to be an architectural photographer, learn about architecture. Learn the jargon. Read architectural magazines. Study the photographs in them intensely.

Make friends with others in the field you choose. They can be a valuable resource. You can send them overflow gigs, and they can send some to you. They can help in a tough situation, and you can loan one another equipment. My professional friends and I will pay each other to be photo assistants on occasion. You will also learn by bouncing ideas off of one another.

Make friends with non-photographers in the field. Fashion photographers need to have a list of models that they can call in a pinch. Hang out with editors, gallery owners, models, venue staff, everyone. Networking is huge!

Protect yourself – Write a contract for every gig. Buy insurance. Don't be stupid – you will often have thousands if not tens of thousands of dollars of equipment with you. Be aware of where you are and what's going on around you.

Always get model releases – for people or property in your shots. Get a good filing system for releases. You may wish to staple small prints to the release so that you can reference which photos belong to which releases.

Of course, if you are doing darkroom work, use proper protection. Most pros outsource lab work though.

Outsource what you can – The less time you are delivering film to the lab, or making prints, or answering emails, the more time you can spend photographing. In the beginning, you will have to do most all of the work yourself. If you have plenty of gigs, analyze how much each service will cost you to outsource, and if that is less than what you would make shooting, then outsource it. This only works if you can actually fill that time with paying gigs. If you outsource work just to sit around with nothing to do, you are losing money.

Grow your business – Outsource, hire an assistant, and hire extra photographers if the demand is there. Advertise. Branch out into the art scene if you are a commercial photographer. Many famous fine art photographers can charge a king's ransom for commercial work because of their fame.

Join a stock photography agency. The extra photos you shoot from most gigs can be sold as stock, as long as you have the proper releases. Stock photography can generate tens of thousands of dollars per year in extra income. There are many different models of stock agencies, from low-end, low cost, quantity based, royalty-free "microstock" agencies (iStockphoto, Shutterstock, etc.), to high-end, prestigious agencies that can sell one image for thousands of dollars (Corbis, Getty, SwanStock, etc.). As I said earlier, *all* photographers should supplement their income through stock photography sales.