

The Photographer's Guide To

Branding and Marketing in a Distracted World





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Left photo by Nour El Refai

Introduction

Over the last 14 years, we've built a media powerhouse. That means protecting over 15 petabytes of data, housing over 2 billion individual visual assets on our servers and enabling over 60 million downloads each year. Every day, we pore over an endless stream of gorgeous portfolio websites, discover new talent through habitual Instagram scrolling and get inspired at events. But I'll let you in on a little secret: sometimes it's hard to keep track of everyone and everything. Talent is seemingly boundless, and that got us thinking about how we remember some of our favorite visual storytellers and why we showcase their work.

At our core, our aim is to celebrate and educate the photo community by sharing the terrific stories and insights of both peers and mentors in order to help photographers learn, grow and succeed. Below you'll find a selection of the best tips and tricks we've picked up over the years and some advice from our award-winning members to help you (and your work) stand out in a competitive landscape that rewards the unique and memorable.

It's worth noting that this guide is not meant to be so much comprehensive as a jumping off point. It's intended to inspire everyone — established pros and newcomers to the industry alike — to do things a little differently. Shake things up, but make decisions along the way that are informed and purposeful. We'll be keeping an eye out for you.



Andrew Fingerman, *PhotoShelter CEO*

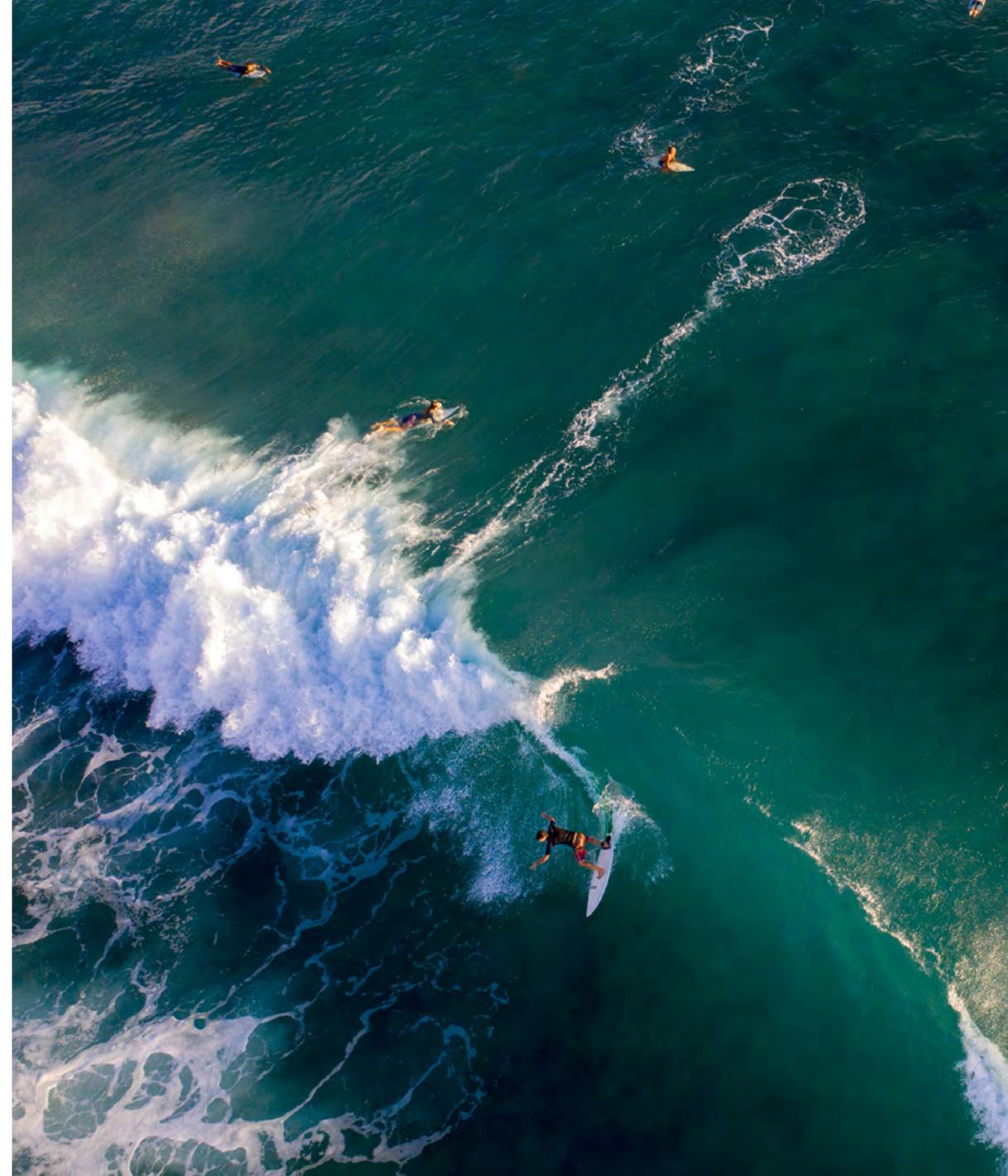
[@awfingerman](#)

Build An Audience

In the attention economy, we are confronted with so much content...that we are constantly asking ourselves: "Is this worth my time?"

- *Forbes, Aug 2018*

This has big implications for creatives. Knowing yourself and what makes you unique is the key to your success.



© Allen Murabayashi

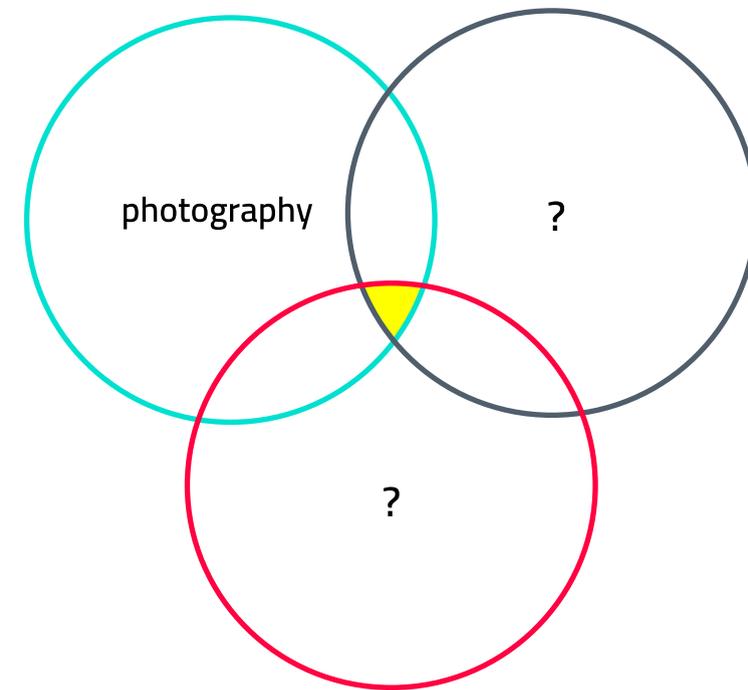
Did you know the average person checks their phone 52 times a day?

You can be pretty sure your ideal clients are consuming content all day long. They're also likely extremely busy and just don't want to be pitched to anymore. But it's not all bad news. This time-content paradox offers a great opportunity once you know your target market.

So stop selling and start building an audience!

- Your content is secret weapon #1.
- Your authenticity is secret weapon #2.
- So what else makes you unique?

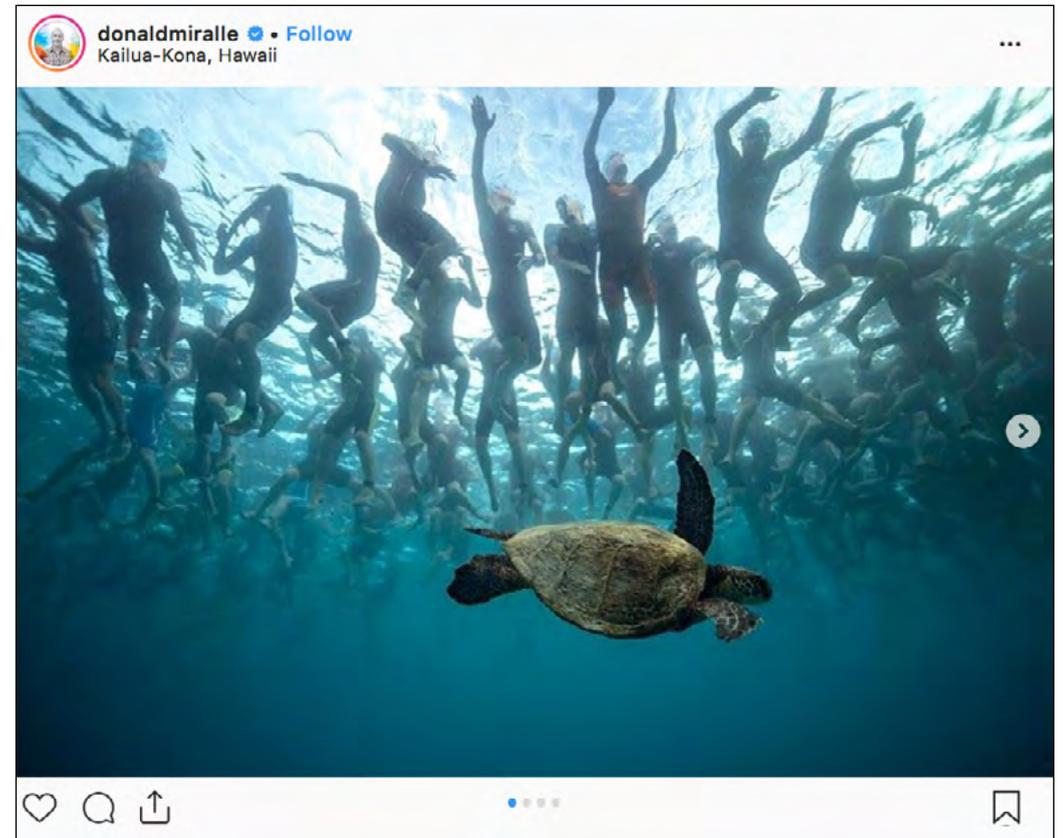
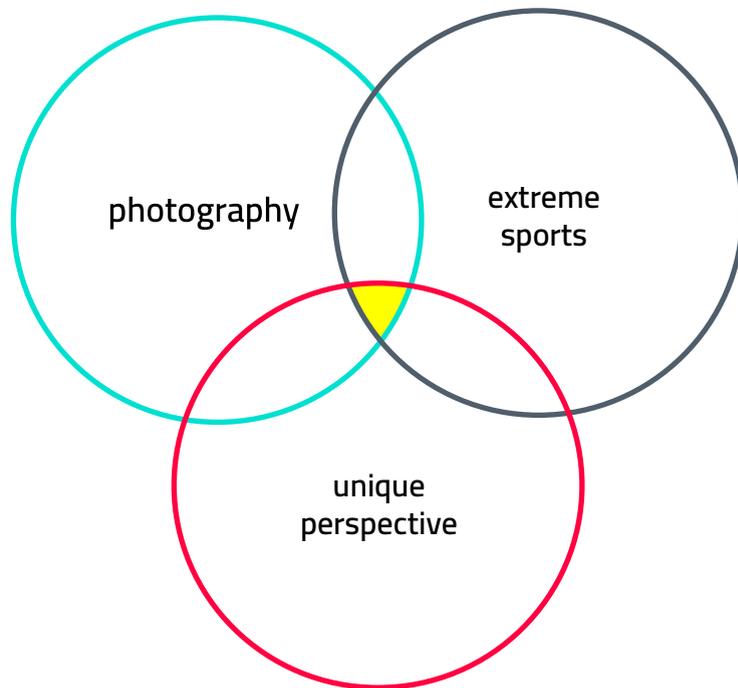
Dig deep and think about what's most important to you. It's helpful to note that this often isn't photography-related, so broaden your horizons and think outside of the box. **The confluence of your greatest passions and your photography — that's your sweet spot. That's what is going to catch people's attention.**



We've compiled some examples of world-class photographers who found their sweet spot to give you a bit of inspiration.

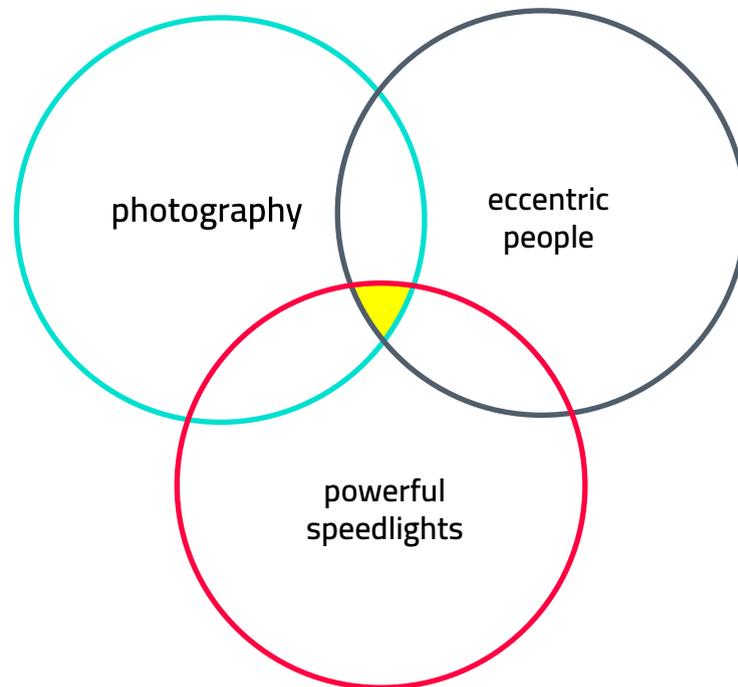
Donald Miralle

Southern California native Donald Miralle's sweet spot is where photography, extreme sports and a unique perspective converge. Without Miralle we'd never know how unphased a green sea turtle appears when innocently gliding under thousands of swimmers during the 2016 IRONMAN World Championships in Hawaii.



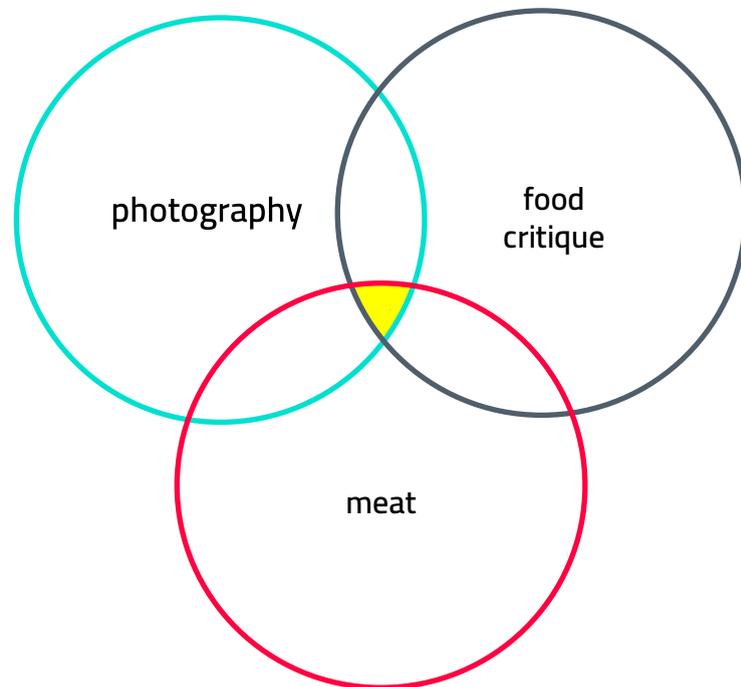
Amy Lombard

Amy Lombard shoots everything from portraits of Newt Gingrich to doggie fashion shows and everything in between. Her work is bright and dripping with personality; it's the epitome of when eccentric people, photography and powerful speedlights collide.



Nick Solares

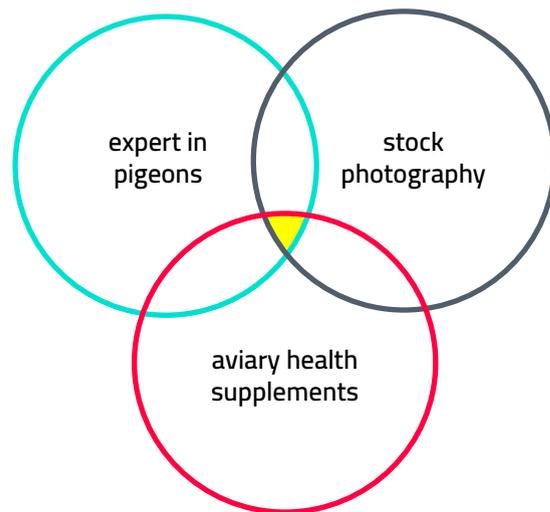
Meat. It's what for dinner. At least for Nick Solares, that's often true. He's made a career out of combining amazing food writing, photography and carnivorous consumption. Because of his relationships with famous pit masters and chef powerhouses in the industry, he and his camera have gained unlimited access.



If finding your sweet spot seems a little too daunting, another approach is to become an expert. The more unique the better. Make people think *Wow, I wish I'd thought of that.*

David Stephenson

Kentucky-based photojournalist David Stephenson has two passions: photography and pigeons. When he's not on assignment or advising for the University of Kentucky's student newspaper, he's racing pigeons. Racing got him thinking about aviary health supplements, and the rest is history. Now he's an expert in pigeon photography, which he displays on his portfolio website and also uses to promote his aviary health supplement brand [Kastle Pigeon](#).



Your niche isn't necessarily something you find. Think of it more as something you create by combining your talents and your interests.

Profile: **Ami Vitale**

Documentary photographer [Ami Vitale](#)'s unique blend of advocacy and education alongside incredible storytelling and lighthearted behind-the-scenes moments make her a world-class example of someone who found her sweet spot and ran with it.



© Ami Vitale

Ami's uncanny access to endangered animals and appreciation for the power of community has led to a Nikon ambassadorship, over a million Instagram followers and countless features in *National Geographic*.

On storytelling and personal style —

I like to think about the story first and then try and visualize how to tell that story. My approach is to take time, sometimes years, developing strong bonds with the people and creatures whose stories I'm telling. I've found that it takes patience and commitment to truly know one another, and only then can we understand and make sense of it all.

What makes you stand out in the industry?

I think committing to one story, one issue or one community over a long period of time makes a difference. It's important to be diverse in skillset but a dedication to a particular project or idea over years can help you stand out.



© Ami Vitale

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© Ami Vitale

What's the one piece of business or branding advice you wish you'd known when you were first starting out?

Be generous and share other people's successes along with your own. It's not a zero-sum game and the more we lift one another, the better it is for all.

What's the proudest moment of your career thus far?

Being able to see that the images I make have a powerful impact in the communities I work in. That is what motivates me to keep going.

Any career "a-ha" moments you want to share?

My "a-ha" moment was learning to let go of things that are not working. Not letting the little failures stop you from a larger idea is harder than it sounds. There was a story I was deeply passionate about that I spent years on. For political reasons I was not allowed back and it was devastating. I could not imagine what would come next but when I look back, I'm so grateful. Sometimes we get tunnel vision and look at the world through a myopic lens.

Without that push, I would still be there, and would have missed reinventing myself and finding so many other stories that have shaped my life.

A story of a big break?

I've had so many instances when I was trying to get access to a story and the only reason I was able to get in was because I ran into someone from another part of my life who coincidentally worked there. The moral of the story: be kind and try to help everyone.



© Ami Vitale

Tips and Insights

Just like the latest advances in photography technology — images of a black hole, mirrorless camera bodies, etc. — photography business basics are forever evolving. Being a good photographer is not enough to guarantee success, so we've rounded up some of the overall trends we've observed over the past 14 years. Whether you're just getting started or looking for ways to revisit which pieces of your business you prioritize, we've got you covered.



© Melissa Lyttle



© Adam Wamsley

Business acumen is everything. Not only are you an artist with a unique point of view, but it's important to remember you're also running a small business. Know your cost of doing business. Take business courses and always get insurance. Read up on contracts and tax laws in your area, get an accountant and be sure you learn to negotiate. Having those skills is paramount to succeeding.

Blogs and newsletters aren't necessarily a requirement anymore. Keeping everyone up-to-date is a must when building or maintaining your personal brand. Now that social media is ubiquitous you can effectively use it the same way photographers used blogs five to ten years ago. And the same holds true for newsletters. If you're worried you're not going to update a blog or remember to get a newsletter together, don't worry. Social trends suggest most news and connections come from social media anyway, so make the most of it. Get with the times and keep your accounts updated with your latest project or adventure.

Social media is key, but there's no magic formula. Whether you're an everyday poster or someone who prefers bi-weekly, just make sure it's helpful in building your brand and showing personality. Be authentic. Use Instagram Stories to take us behind-the-scenes. Do AMAs on Twitter to promote knowledge sharing. Post editing tutorials. But if your posts don't have a purpose, use that time to focus your efforts on something else related to your photography skills or business instead.

Practice, practice, practice. The best way to develop both skills and style? Shoot more. Be patient. Getting training and knowledge through specialized courses or workshops can certainly be life-changing and invaluable, but nothing compares to good old repetition. Also, experiment without fear of failure. You might surprise yourself.

Control your ego and manage your expectations. It's hard to remember at times, but you're not necessarily (and often aren't) the target audience. Weather, clients and producers are all factors that might affect jobs. The images you like might not be the ones the client loves. Manage expectations and accept that you might not always have full control. Nothing is worth losing your temper over, and nothing good comes out of it. Always be patient and ensure you learn how to roll with the punches, remaining professional and friendly through any unforeseen changes. Being easy to work with goes a long way.



© Suzi Eszterhas

Networking matters. Having a beautiful portfolio and website is one thing, but making connections is crucial. We can't stress that enough. Stick your neck out and meet people at events, social media meet-ups and through mentors. The pros we speak with say the same thing again and again: networking and word of mouth is or has been the most powerful and effective tool for marketing. So be prepared. Know your schedule. Get out there and be memorable.

[Salgu Wissmath](#) is a nonbinary photographer dedicated to decolonizing the field of photography who recently got their first assignment for *The New York Times*. They describe their personal style as the intersection of "journalism, art therapy and activism."

We recently asked Salgu about networking and other business and branding tips: "My biggest 'a-ha' moment is that networking is a slow burn. For example, I met Brent Lewis, the editor who hired me for the NYT assignment, three years ago at a conference. He wasn't even working for the NYT then. Last year he was one of my mentors at Eddie Adams. And this May is when he finally gave me an assignment. You are meeting people constantly. And it's ok if you don't get a job or an assignment out of meeting an editor only one time. Every time you meet that same person at another conference, or event, or portfolio review, you are building that connection. And you never know when they will be in a position to hire you."



© Salgu Wissmath

Profile: **Nour El Refai**

Architecture and documentary photographer [Nour El Refai](#) is based in Cairo, Egypt. With a background in architecture, he's been working in the Middle East and North Africa region since 2005. Also a teacher, Nour leads workshops in art and cultural centers and has also taught architectural photography at various Egyptian universities over the years. His work has been published in *National Geographic*, *The Huffington Post*, *Financial Times* and many others.



© Nour El Refai

What's the one piece of business or branding advice you wish you'd known when you were first starting out?

The one thing that is most important in my opinion is this: Understand the value of your work.

If you know the value you're offering, you'll be able to accurately price your work. And with time you'll be able to figure out how to maximize the value and increase your prices accordingly. If your work and price is similar to others then you can be easily replaced - this will always put you in a weak position if any negotiation happens with a client. However, if your work is actually irreplaceable, then you can set your price and not accept any negotiations. The client will get back to you when they can eventually afford your prices. It took me years to figure this out.

Any career "a-ha" moments you want to share?

Through experience and many trials and errors, I learned to never panic. In architectural photography there are so many things that could go wrong, so I learned to be flexible and focused enough to see the silver lining in each situation.



© Nour El Refai

In 2006, we were on our way to do a shoot in Alexandria (around 3 hours from Cairo) when we realized that my assistant forgot to bring a bag that carries all the cables for the big light strobes (that was before battery powered strobes). I was panicking and was thinking of canceling or postponing the shoot, but then we started to think about how we could use speedlights instead. I was way out of my comfort zone, but we kept trying different things in the shoot until we reached a result that was actually better than what I was used to doing. We not only survived the shoot, we actually created new techniques that I incorporated in future shoots. Later on I moved completely to speedlights, then battery powered strobes when they became available.

You don't have to forget your gear to throw yourself out of your comfort zone, just try new things more often and don't be afraid of change.



© Nour El Refai

The Wisdom Of (Really Experienced) Crowds

We asked a group of professional photographers of varying backgrounds and specialties for their best business advice. Longtime PhotoShelter members with countless awards and impressive publications under their belts, their answers have remained anonymous.



© Ami Vitale



© Julie Dermansky

What they wished they'd known earlier on:

Negotiate with clients. It's more doable than it seems at first. We feel like we have to do everything asked in order to please a client, so it's easy to forget that we need to have our own standards in order to conduct business and to survive.

Don't take rejection personally.

Don't be afraid to ask for more.

Get clear about what images you want to make and what stories you want to tell.

Perfection is crippling.

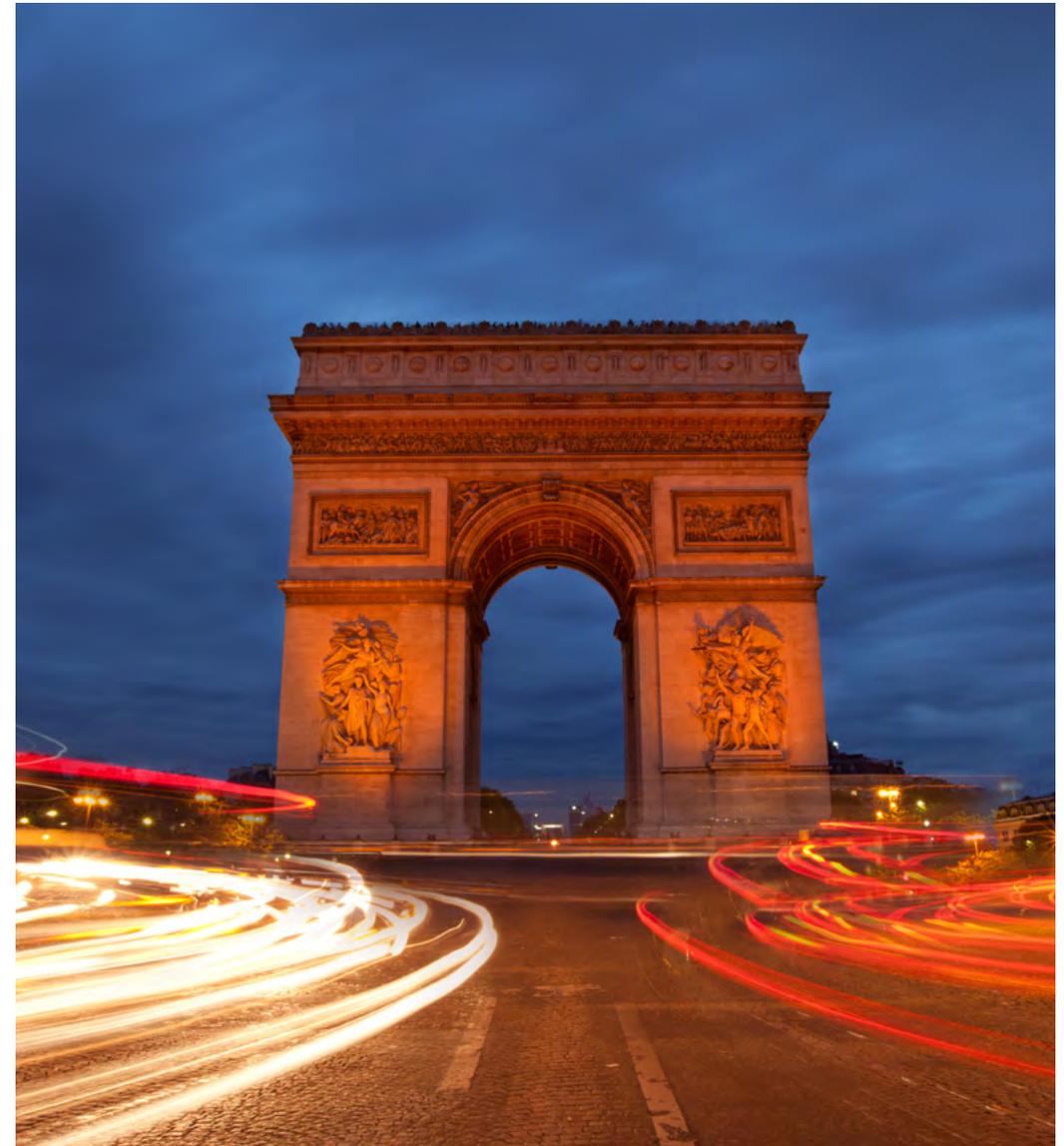
The best advice anyone ever gave them:

Keep your copyright.

Wear good shoes.

Make a separate bank account.

Think like a lens.



© Richard Bernabe



© Adam Wamsley

The most important tool they use besides camera gear:

Fostering connections with others.

PhotoShelter and my site.

Being a good communicator with your clients.

And one final reminder:

Remain passionate about your work and let photography be an extension of who you are.

Profile: **Melissa Lyttle**

[Melissa Lyttle](#) is an independent photojournalist who knows the power of good storytelling. Based in Washington, DC, she's also the immediate Past President of the [NPPA](#), a member of [Women Photograph](#), an [International Women's Media Foundation](#) US-Mexico border reporting fellow, and much more. Recently Melissa expanded into the commercial market too, with clients ranging from ESPN to Mother Jones, and with work published in *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *Wall Street Journal*, and countless others.



© Melissa Lyttle

What makes you stand out in the industry?

I'd describe my personal style as real, authentic, moment-driven photography. I tend not to rely on gimmicks or the latest trends, and just stick with the tried and true concepts of storytelling and intimacy and giving viewers a look at someone and something they can connect with. I'd like to think another thing that makes me stand out is that while I always try to give my clients exactly what they ask for, I also try to give them more than that. I always make pictures for myself on assignments and I think it's often some of those unexpected images that keep clients coming back for more.

On finding your personal style—

I think it just happens. I think it's a culmination of your eye and your heart. It's something that's developed over a career and is constantly evolving with me. It's not something that I think about or concentrate on, so it's hard to qualify what exactly it is. But I know what it's not. It's not a f/1.4. It's not putting colored gels over my lens. It's not a fad. I think if you're worried about what your style is, you just need to go out and make pictures and be yourself. It'll find you.



© Melissa Lyttle

What's the one piece of business or branding advice you wish you'd known when you were first starting out?

There's no right or wrong way of doing things. What matters is what works best in your particular market place and for your niche as a photographer. So try new things, see what sticks, and make notes on what people respond to. Each year I try to set aside a part of my budget for marketing. I'm constantly trying new things, from in-person meetings, to postcard promos, to zines, to getting my name out there on things like [Found Artists](#).

The one thing nobody tells you when you're starting out though (and I wish I could remember where I read it) is that most marketing takes between 12-24 months to gain the kind of long-term momentum you want. It's very rarely instantaneous. So it was an important reminder to me that you've got to keep at it and not get discouraged if the first round doesn't get the kind of response you want.

A story of a big break?

There's an old adage about showing the kind of work you want to get hired to make, and I really believe that's true. I was a little intimidated by using lights and it showed in my portrait work when I first went freelance, but in looking at the clients I wanted to work for I realized that's not only what they were looking for, but what they wanted to pay (well) for. So I invested in myself and my business and bought a set of ProFoto lights and some modifiers. It was a lot of trial and error, a lot of testing different looks out on my wife or our dog. And I wasn't getting calls for that stuff right away, so I'd take my lights with me on an editorial assignment, and pull the person I was photographing aside afterwards, telling them I'd also love the chance to make a beautiful lit portrait of them over here (and have my lights already set up, or a backdrop already picked out because I'd gotten there early to scout). Slowly, I started making lit portraits of people I was proud of and could add to my portfolio.

There's an old adage about showing the kind of work you want to get hired to make, and I really believe that's true.

Like Jackie Siegel, the Queen of Versailles, who I knew would be fun to photograph because she loves and is really comfortable in front of the camera. We were touring her mega-house in Florida which was still under construction, and at the end, I found a piece of muslin-like fabric hanging down and asked if I could make a portrait of her there. Her assistants were photographing her with their iPhones (behind me) and I asked them if they wanted to get in on the act in front of the camera, and it ended up becoming the first postcard promo I sent out.

In thinking back on it, I think I was initially worried that I wasn't this portrait photographer — that it wasn't who I was or what I did. But in retrospect, I don't think it's that much of a departure, because I'm still very much trying to get to something real and storytelling in my portraits. What it has allowed though is for me to add another tool to my tool kit; it gives me something more to offer to clients. And that's made a huge difference going forward, and helped me land clients I only dreamed of working for.



© Melissa Lyttle

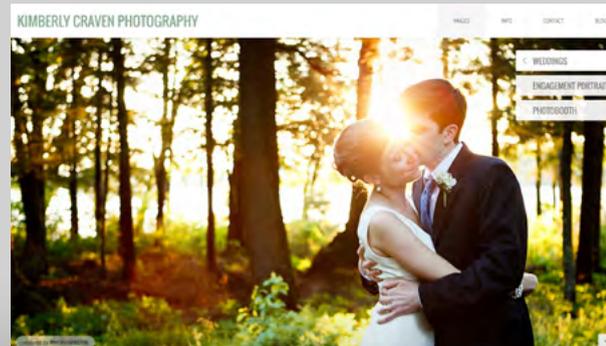
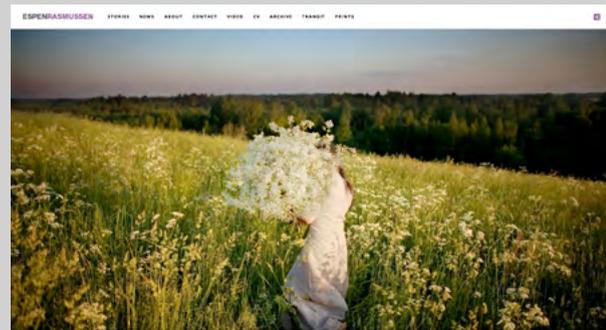
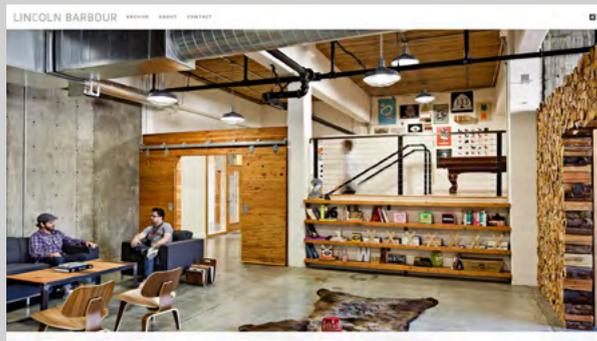
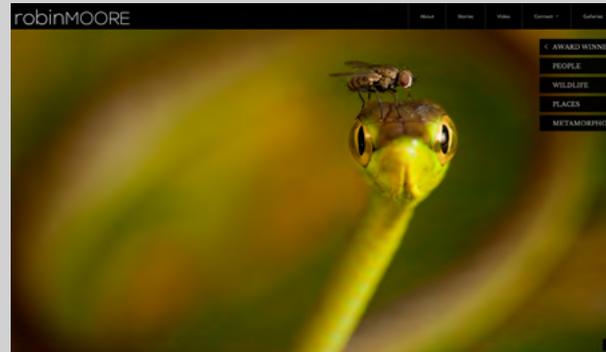
Conclusion

Our hope is that this guide motivates you to shake things up a bit with your approach to marketing and branding. If your blog or newsletter isn't working for you, maybe ditch them and focus on a killer social media presence. In this industry, it's imperative that you really hone in on developing your personal style and brand. It's what's going to make you stand out. Build a brand around what makes you unrepeatable. Marketing yourself is all about being memorable and knowing your strengths, be it combining your unique point of view and a personal interest or learning a new skill altogether.

At the end of the day, we also want to remind you to not take yourself too seriously. Have fun! Be consistently respectful and patient, too — that will help you with networking and make you top of mind for a call back or future job. Always be willing to try new things, keeping in mind that mistakes and unforeseen challenges will almost certainly crop up. The good news? It might help you land your next big break.



© Nour El Refai



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