

Studio Operations & Management

The following are responses to an email that I sent to graduates asking them what their biggest challenges were when they first started their businesses, and what subject(s) should be address in Studio Operations & Management.

"I think first and foremost you need to believe in yourself and your work. It is easy for people to say that they can be a photographer and take amazing photos and you have to be able to do that at every event and not just get "lucky."

"You need to find income to support your passion. I know that when you graduate you have these big ideas of what you want your studio to be or the clients that you want but you have to work for that. It doesn't come overnight. I still work a full time job to bring in money for the new computers, cameras, albums, lens, printers etc. I have battles everyday to go to work since it is not photography related but that is the struggle I make to support the passion. I could have done photography for someone else but I don't want my passion to be for someone else I want it to be for me.

"For starters you are the new kid on the block fresh out of school with not as much experience as the 'pros' that are already in your market. People are scared to take the chance on the new kid. That is something that I faced but I was passionate about my work and I believe in myself. It is frustrating when you don't have the phone ringing and you aren't even a small spec on the radar but you have to keep going. (This is when the people you went to college with may fall off but you have to find it from within to keep going).

"The main challenges, getting your name out there and getting the calls coming in. I am at a point right now where I didn't even plan to be for the second year in business.

"In Business 2 you talk about the market that you are in and that to me is the most important aspect of having a successful business. My area is very, very conservative. (Ever hear of the Amish?) My market won't allow for the \$5,000.00+ photographers and I know that. The max price people will spend here is around \$3,000.00 I did not undercut or low ball the market. I have learned to show clients what I want not what they want. I charge what I want not what they want. Know your market and adapt to that market. I came in at the same price as the other established photographers and I believe that my work is a good if not better than theirs and I am confident in myself to say that.

"Contracts!!! Making a contract that is specialized to you and your business. My terms and conditions are 7 pages long. And a two page contract. It works for me and my clients. Opening up the ASMP handbook and using that wedding contract won't help if you don't understand it yourself. You need to make it easy and simple for your client and in a way they understand and not a lot of legal jargon.

"Know who you are up against. Look at what the others do and see what doesn't work and make their flaw work for you. I researched my market carefully; I saw who I wanted to be compared to and did the research. Before I got engaged I went to bridal shows and posed as the bride (would work better for a female than a male) and saw my market. This also allowed me to "network" with other vendors. I researched the packages that other photographers put together and saw what I liked and didn't and then make it work for me. I also saw the booths for the bridal shows, what worked and again what didn't.

"Relate to your clients. I am young as well as many of my brides half the time we talk about current events (entertainment news, fashion, restaurants, shoes, etc.) and they feel like I am a friend not a photographer out to get their money.

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“One a personal note. When I graduated from AIFL I wanted to move to NYC and become a fashion photographer. Then I realized that wasn't what I wanted my heart wasn't there. So I took the fashion background that I have and made my own twist into wedding photography. A lot of the couples really like the "fashion flare" I put into the photographs. I love the weddings and there is so much more that I can do with weddings then with fashion. I didn't want to assist someone else for 5 years, I wanted to be my own person and listen to my own voice.” (A.K.)

“The biggest challenge is finding the motivation to look for work. During School the projects are commissioned by the teachers and the creative process is satisfied.

“A lot more marketing techniques where to get leads more research more study of what sells in S. Florida who is who everything is a little generic and I would have liked to be more in touch with the local details. For New businesses it is important to know where or how you can get the money to start it, small business loans, partnerships etc... I think that the business classes are complete in many ways but they are too short and the information does not sink in.

“Learning how to deal with Accountants, Lawyers, and how to hire people etc... would be more important depending on the projection of the business.

“The most important thing for a new business is where does the business want to go how does one project its growth what are the goals of the business and what smaller steps can one take in the meantime.” (H. E.)

The school MUST put more emphasis in the importance of internship as a way to learn more about the “real world”. “Starting your career” should be a class other than just a “read on” material. How to sell your services and products must receive more emphasis in order to help us better find work as we get in the “real world”. Bring more successful professionals to lecture during classes with emphasis on how to start the business, how to “hunt” for work, how to deal with customers. They should also talk about all the “portfolio” of services and products we should consider to work with. (A.C.)

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The biggest challenge was overcoming the first couple of months. Mostly because it takes a while to start off, things just don't happen overnight, so it's kind of hard to see the light at the end of the tunnel in the beginning. That tends to bring down your spirits, but you can't let it get you down.

Honestly, I think we pretty much covered a lot in school that you would need when you were fresh out of AI. For instance, knowing how to market your self. That is a HUGE part of everything I've done. Without it, I think I'd be going to FIU or something and studying what my mother wanted me to do since I was a kid. Marketing was very much stressed in class, so I don't think that should change much. (N.H.)

My biggest challenge was/is getting myself established. All the work I do is by word of mouth. I'd still like to mail out my promo-cards to the areas I researched and get my name really out there. But that probably won't happen for another year b/c my family is my priority and b/c they keep me really busy!!!

One subject I would have like to have covered more is the business aspect of selling your wedding packages and wedding albums. Just like anything else, I've learned if you market yourself right, it's easier to sell your work. So in this future business class, if you have students that want to go right into doing weddings you should have them do a mock interview with potential clients. Make them have everything they would need as if it was the real deal. Each interview I do with potential clients, I always leave learning something new and change the way I do the next interview - hence, practice makes perfect.

Another subject would be to establish your resources now. For example, have the students establish contact with wedding album suppliers and have them make an album. Even if it consists of 10 pictures, it's a sample of their work and an album and they have the experience of putting it together. b/c I had never put together an album, my first wedding album preparation w/ a bride turned into 3 days of meeting. I couldn't correctly guide her and it got a bit complicated.

One more subject would be to actively get one job by the end of the quarter and to have the consumer rate it. Have the students send out an evaluation sheet within a week of completing the job. It should contain questions that will give the students subjective feedback about their professionalism, quality of work and an overall rating. This will add to their experience and they'll learn more about what works and what doesn't work in the "real world".

My biggest challenges during the first year were not having resources. I had no problem when being called for portraits b/c I have my portfolio. But I had to white lie a lot about not having wedding pics or a wedding album. But somehow I sold a few jobs so now I have an album w/my work to show. (T.R.)
