Introduction

About six years ago, the notion of becoming a professional photographer crossed my mind. It took half a year or so to build the courage to mention it to my wife. Another 2.5 years passed before I left my corporate career of 18 years to pursue a full-time career in photography.

With my background in business, I probably knew better than most that a serious set of photography skills and products would not be enough to launch a successful business. I would also need some targeted and skilled business acumen. This business acumen is the most common ‘missing ingredient’. It separates the photographers who make it to a level of success from those that do not.

I can’t tell you how many photographers I’ve met and been blown away by the quality of their work. Yet despite their desire to succeed, they weren’t even making ends meet. On the other hand, I’ve met many photographers with mediocre skills who are always fully booked. These photographers make more than enough money for photography to be their full-time profession. They are the ones who use business acumen.

At the start of my journey, I used an eclectic mix of resources, research, and trial and error to achieve success. This was during the first three years of full-time operation for my business. I can tell you that it takes a lot more failure than you might expect to create success. After all, it’s common knowledge that success only comes from repeated failure.

When I began conversations with the good folks at ExpertPhotography, they wisely said to ‘write a guide that you wish you had when you started’. This book is intended to be just that. It focuses on the business elements needed to launch a thriving photography business.
I have structured this book according to what I believe to be generally correct for what to do and in what order when launching a photography business. There are a few exceptions, and I’ll try to point those out when they occur.

**There are two effective ways to use this book:**

**Option 1:** Read it from start to finish, then return to sections as needed for reference. This method is the best approach if the phrase ‘business acumen’ makes your stomach hurt (even just a little).

**Option 2:** Use this book as a reference to gain knowledge in specific areas. This option will be better suited to those that aren’t new to running a business but want to improve and learn more.

I’ve put a lot of energy and effort into writing this book, and I hope that you find it useful. It was quite a reflective process and forced me to dig deep on how to boil down the very best advice I could muster. So let’s get started!
PART I

PHOTOGRAPHY NICHE DEVELOPMENT
Groundwork and Definitions

What Is a Photography Niche?

First off, what is a niche? Well, it’s a term that you’ll find quite a few times in this book. I thought it fair to put some contextual meaning to it before we get too far.

I consider a photography ‘niche’ to be: ‘A reasonably targeted and focused segment within a photography market, supported by appropriately targeted photography products’. Your niche will be the type of photography you shoot, and the reason why clients come to you for that product.

It is important to note that products don’t always define the niche and vice-versa. You can have a family portrait niche in one area that thrives on outdoor sunset photography. This family portrait niche can also exist in an editorial studio portrait market. You must head into your niche targeting and development with an open mind.

Photography Niche Categories

I like to divide photography niches into two broad categories: consumer and commercial. The consumer category means that you are selling a product to a private individual. Commercial means that you are selling a product to an organisation, agency, or other business entity.

Two easy examples: wedding photography is a consumer niche. Editorial fashion is (almost) always a commercial niche. However, the type of photo you take doesn’t define whether it’s consumer or commercial. You could take the same picture of the same people in the same location. In one instance, it might be consumer wedding photography. In the other case, it might be sold to an ad agency to help their client sell wedding dresses. Thus, ‘product’ development is photographically almost detached from the market niche.
What Is a Photography ‘Product’?

Speaking of ‘products’, what does that mean within the photography business context? I define a photography ‘product’ as: ‘A photographic result that is consistent, repeatable and valuable. It may include many photographic deliverables – both digital and physical.’

Niche Before Product or Product Before Niche?

Now that we’ve covered a couple of critical definitions, a chicken and egg type of question seems to emerge. Niche before product or product before niche? This area of discussion is one that I struggled with a little bit. There’s an argument for those that have developed a strong photography product to search for a corresponding market niche. There’s also an argument for diving into market niche research and data before spending time and energy developing a product.

The best answer is that it depends. It depends on factors specific to where you are skill-wise as a photographer. The size and condition of your local market is also a factor.

When coaching photographers, I use the following extreme example to illustrate where product before niche is a bad idea. You’re a cake smash photographer (a VERY targeted niche) that lives in Buford, Wyoming. Buford is the smallest town in the United States. You wouldn’t have any potential clients in that market. It would be wiser to choose a general photography area.

On the opposite end of the spectrum, a generalist photographer in Los Angeles will find it difficult to stand out in a sea of competitors.

There’s a balancing act backed into the process of determining your niche and product. You may find either approach to work best for you based on cir-
circumstance. I believe that the best approach is to survey your market viability first. Then develop your products for that market — niche before product. The process of developing photographic products is tied to the market niche that they serve. You may find that all the mom’s in your area want prints of their family photos, which is excellent for sales. In other markets, you may find digital products trending a little stronger.

You will probably never stop adapting your product offerings and pricing to the market niche that they serve. It is still a good idea to survey the market niche before you develop the product. You must always adapt your product development to the niche it serves.

Portfolio development (which I will cover in greater detail later), is also tied to niche research. It is an integral part of product development. So there are several reasons to find your niche before investing too much in product and portfolio development.

**Factors for Finding Your Niche**

From here, I’d like to discuss a series of balancing factors in choosing your market niche. These points may carry different weights in your decision process. I encourage you to consider each of these topics before settling in on market niches:

**Technical Difficulty**

A significant factor to consider when selecting a market niche is the level of technical difficulty.

Let’s face it – some photography skills are easier to develop to the point of market viability than others. For example, lighting, team management, and licensing knowledge are critical to success in commercial advertising. The bar for selling lifestyle photos for Instagram accounts is lower than for commer-
cial advertising.

It is essential to consider how difficult it might be to achieve a level of skill for success in your market niche. Making consistent progress in learning technical expertise may not be your strength. In this case, choose a niche that doesn’t need as much technical prowess. If you enjoy learning and have a technical mind, you may gravitate more toward technical niches.

Unsure of how difficult or technical something is to pull off? The best way to find out where you stand is to start shooting samples of that type or style of photography.

My technical skills have progressed a great deal since I started as a professional photographer, but I still tend to oversimplify things in my head. I then find myself in various amounts of trouble during shoot planning.

To avoid this, you need to test as much as possible. For a high-stakes commercial shoot with unique portrait lighting, I might test-shoot the lighting twice before I settle on the exact method. If I’m hired to shoot something I’ve already done 100 times, it wouldn’t require the same amount of prep.

Using this same method to test niche waters is a reliable approach. Testing will illuminate areas where you may need more work and identify gaps in equipment.

### The Complexity of Business Support Models

Business support models involve closely examining things like required team building, leadership, and photographic productions as well as the more mundane fields such as accounting, insurance and studio expenses.

You should begin to think like a business owner when it comes to accounting practices. As such, it’s important to note that from a business expense perspective, we have 3 main categories:
• **Operating costs** are the (generally) fixed costs that don’t vary much from month to month. Things like studio rent, business insurance (at least your base policy), internet access, etc. fall into this category.

• **Capital investments** are generally equipment purchases such as laptops or computers, perpetually licensed software (monthly subscriptions tend to fall into the first category), camera and lighting equipment and more.

• **Cost of Goods Sold (COGS)** are expenses related to your product sales. These include prints, framing, and contractors hired to support specific shoots.

We tend to find less variance within the topic of business support models across niches. For example, whether you’re a family portrait or product photographer, you’re going to have accounting to do and insurance to buy. You should document as many of the nuanced differences as possible between niches. This way, you can understand the differences in complexity and cost in this category.

The complexity of business structures and processes is also an essential factor. As a general rule, you will find more complex business processes in the commercial niches.

Consumer niches will have slightly simpler methods. If you don’t enjoy or have any desire to manage teams of contractors, then you probably don’t want to get into niches of photography that require you to do so.

**Passion and Motivation**

The only difference between ‘passion’ and ‘addiction’ is the target of the obsession. I once heard passion defined this way, and it struck a chord with me.

When people obsess over socially unacceptable activities, we tend to call them addictions. If you apply that same obsessive behaviour to acceptable activi-
ties, you’re passionate. In both cases, there are similar impacts on our families, friends, and finances. Passionate hobbies can cost as much as addictions.

Passion and motivation are vital elements in picking a niche. If we have no motivation or passion for learning about our chosen niche in photography, we can become stagnant. Stagnation is bad for our creative minds. It will often lead to burnout and market irrelevance as our competitors continue to adapt and innovate. Thus, select a niche that fits your passion.

**Market Viability**

Market viability will take a bit of research. The two primary data inputs to this equation are census data and competitor research.

I’m a big advocate of a niche before product approach, but there are challenges that you will run into with this method.

You will need to complete your market viability analysis more than once as you explore potential niches. Some of the work you complete can be recycled (such as census and income data), but you will need to complete competitor research for each niche for it to be valid and reliable.

Census data can tell you useful things like how many people live in your area. One of the most critical areas to look at is their median income. Disposable income is a significant part of determining what someone will pay for professional photography. You should not take this lightly when choosing a niche and determining your pricing.

In my coaching program, I walk my clients through a more complex process in which we use a few equations based on census data to generate metrics. For example, we might compare the census data of employed people to LinkedIn job listings in the same area. This method would help to validate and confirm how weak or strong the job market is. It makes it easier to identify trends that tell us more about whether the market is growing or shrinking. This is a
significant factor for whether it might support a luxury photography brand.

Another use for census data is to examine the number of employers to capita. You can calculate this by dividing the population of an area with the number of employers listed.

It’s important to keep sight of the fact that using census data to determine market viability is an input to the evaluative process. It shouldn’t be the sole indicator of market strength.

The other significant input to the question of market viability is competitor research. Here’s a general workflow you can follow to complete competitor research:

1. Determine the top 5 search keywords for the niche you are researching (for example, ‘wedding photographers near me’, or ‘wedding photography Memphis’).
2. Use these keywords in separate Google searches. From the results, document top 10 business listings in Google Maps as well as top 10 non-ad google positions in the search results. Document these businesses in a spreadsheet. There may be overlaps between the business listings and the search results – that’s ok.
3. Use their websites, business listings, social presence, and whatever else you can find to determine as much of the following as possible. Document your findings in a spreadsheet:
   - Name of business and name of the owner(s)
   - Reviews – how many and average ratings
   - Years in business
   - Physical address
   - Whether it is a legitimate business site/studio or home operation
   - Niche notes – everyone targets a little differently. Document as much as possible about the specific niche they seem to be targeting. Add notes about quality, style, etc. You can use ‘Niche Strengths’ and ‘Niche Weaknesses’ columns in the spreadsheet to make these
observations.
• Packages and pricing – this one can be difficult, as not all photographers list their pricing, but do your best while keeping things ethical.

You will need to determine your comfort level when developing an approach to market research. Here are some examples I consider to be ethical vs. a few that I don’t. You’ll need to develop your own ethics compass for this exercise.

**Ethical Research:**

- Viewing public information including pricing and packages via websites, social media, and business listings.
- Searching for their business online with the intent of establishing their search rankings.
- Reading their reviews.
- Joining business networking groups which contain other photographers, even if competitors.

**Unethical Research:**

- Requesting quotes or making any contact under the guise of a legitimate client.
- Contacting known clients of theirs to collect market data, or even worse, trying to make them your clients.

There are plenty of other ethical and unethical things that one could do, but these few examples are here to get you thinking about your own compass.

Once you have your competitor research documented into a spreadsheet, you should start to see some pricing patterns and variance emerge. It’s important to note that it’s the combined and averaged data that you’re looking for here, not the outliers.

Assuming that you’ve been able to find 10 businesses serving the same niche you are researching, you can start to calculate the following metrics for refer-
ence and input to your market research puzzle:

1. General sales models – packages vs a la carte and IPS.
2. Physical products offered (if any).
3. High, low, and average pricing for similar/same products.

You’re ready to complete your competitor matrix. Here, you’re going to need to utilise a bit of subjectivity. I think it’s a great idea to examine your top 10 competitors. Rank them on photo quality along with the rest of the factors you’ve been able to dig up on them. Put them in order of most to least competitive.

You will use this matrix regularly, and you’ll want to keep it up to date. It can be used to track the market and product changes happening around you. It can also help you determine things like future price adjustments.

**Repeatability**

The importance of repeatability within the context of photography products cannot be overstated. Repeatability is what allows us to create the same photography result and products for our clients. It’s one of the key reasons that people hire you. They see something that you created that they like. They assume that you can create something similar for them, and they expect you to deliver on this.

Repeatability is what ties our portfolios together. It takes different forms for different photographers, but it MUST be present at some level if you’re looking to build a photography business. Think about the last time you looked through your favourite photographer’s portfolio or Instagram feed. You probably at some point stopped and thought to yourself ‘Wow. There’s just something about these photos that I can spot from a mile away.’

Repeatability is why we’re able to look at a famous photographer’s work and know who took the photo straight away. It has that ‘signature’ look that the
particular photographer is known for. This look is still in development for most photographers; the journey never really ends. However, the great ones have put a painstaking amount of thought and design into their ‘signature’ look.

When launching a photography business, the goal isn’t to create something that’s never been done before. This would be a rather tall order. Instead, you should focus on your creative process and what photographic styles resonate with you. Aim to create consistency at some level. This style will naturally change over time. As long as you’re aware of the importance of repeatability, you should be able to keep a consistent enough portfolio to attract the right clients.

Consistency can also be overdone. Like many things in a creative field like photography, there are areas of subjectivity. You’re going to need to strike the proper balance for your niche when it comes to consistency and repeatability. However, I’d warn that most new photographers are not consistent enough. They often rely on the crutch of ‘subjectivity’ when they can’t create consistency. In reality, this often illustrates a lack of technical skills, and the photographer needs to continue to develop until they can create repeatability.

As we’ll discuss later, the concept of repeatability must be front and centre when developing photography products. For now, understand that repeatability of some level must be the goal. Therefore, you need to evaluate repeatability when considering entering a particular market niche.
PART II

COMMERCIAL NICHES
Business Portraits and Headshots – The ‘Unexpected’ Niche

In some ways, I fell into this niche early in my photography business. It was slightly unexpected. As many new professional photographers do, I was dabbling in various niches around the time of my business launch. I had tried a lot of different things: event photography, sports, products, weddings, real estate and more. I was also seeking out training through online resources.

During this time, I came across Peter Hurley, a headshot specialist based in Manhattan. His video showed an approach to headshots that caught me off guard. His lighting setup was something I’d never seen before. He was coaching, directing, and manipulating his subjects, and the results were stunning. I was an immediate follower and began to seek out more training and insights from him.

It turned out he was teaching one of his two-day workshops right around the corner from my home in Costa Mesa, CA. Peter had become a Canon Explorer of Light and was using the Canon facility in Costa Mesa to host his workshop. The workshop was a bit pricey for me at the time. Nonetheless, I decided that the cost was justified, so I signed up.

Peter’s workshop consisted of about a day and a half of lecture, followed by a half-day of applying his techniques under his supervision. My eyes were opened to this new and exciting niche of headshot portraits. I was blown away by how involved and skilled his craft was. When I realised the challenge involved in mastering headshot photography and the potential upside of the business, I was hooked.

As much as I learned in that initial workshop, it was just the tip of the iceberg. There was so much more to learn, apply, and master within this niche. I immediately began seeking out extra guidance, practising and building a headshot portfolio.
It’s critical to recognise that we can all benefit from a good mentor or two, regardless of what technical or business phase you may find yourself. Peter remains a mentor and friend of mine to this day, and I’m incredibly thankful for the guidance and training that he and his Headshot Crew (www.headshotcrew.com) have provided. I’m now an Associate Photographer and designated mentor to others on his Headshot Crew. Ultimately, the knowledge I gained through the study of Peter’s methods had a powerful and direct impact on my ability to launch a thriving headshot photography business.

This brings us to an important point when developing your niche, style and products: you don’t always have to be original. I know this doesn’t sit well with everyone. It is easy to assume that to be a successful photographer, you need to bring a unique style to each client or niche that you develop. This isn’t the case. There are 1,000’s of photographers making a respectable living by recycling ideas and techniques.

In some cases, there’s not even much of an attempt to stray from another photographer’s style. When it came to the launch of my headshot business, I openly based it on Peter’s headshot methods and style. I’ll tell you what, those kinds of headshots sell like hotcakes. They have brought a ton of business to me through high quality, consistent headshot styling. I have diversified my portrait offerings a bit more now, but this style of headshot is still central to my business model and product offerings.

As you develop your eye and personal preferences, you will have the opportunity to create more of a targeted, unique style of photography. This is a desirable goal, but it isn’t required to start operating a photography business and make a good living.

Photographers often oversimplify the concept of the headshot, writing it off as a tighter portrait of a person. They see it as a niche that relies only on solid technical elements like good lighting and proper camera settings. Some even consider them a boring or redundant niche in photography.

I’d make the argument that solid technical skills are only a small part of what
goes into a good headshot. The vast majority of the ability required is more to do with understanding micro-expressions and their impact on our subconscious minds. Making a human connection, coaching and directing people to their best expression are vital ingredients. The reason my clients pay a premium for my headshot services is due to my ability to get them looking relaxed, confident and approachable. Those who assume a headshot is just a tighter portrait tend to overlook these skills.

The skills and lessons learned in headshot photography can also be applied to other products and niche development. For example, my ability to coach and direct expression allows my portrait work to be more powerful. Headshot photography has also helped me to develop an eye for detail. This skill can be used in so many other areas.

I regularly speak with potential clients that describe specific backdrops as ‘friendly’ or ‘warm’. I always find this odd since backdrops don’t create those sorts of moods in my mind. They’ve become a crutch for people to lean on when they don’t understand why one headshot is better than another. They can often SEE the difference; that’s why they contact me. Helping them understand why they like my work better than others takes a little explaining.

I know that one of the main reasons people like my headshot work has a lot more to do with good expression coaching than backdrop selection. There’s only a certain amount of this that is worth explaining to a potential client. Your clients will hire you for the result that you can consistently produce. They may not really understand the reasons they prefer your work. It’s not always easy or advisable to try to explain the reasons your work is so different from others. After all, they’ve already chosen to engage you – make the process of hiring you easy and straightforward from the start.

As for consistency, it’s hard to beat a well-lit studio headshot since it can be repeated over space and time. This allows for corporate teams to create a consistent branding presence over a period of years, and across different geographical areas. This is a strong selling point when guiding a client to select a headshot style. It often helps sway their hiring decision in my favour since not all pro-
Professional photographers are capable of delivering this level of consistency.

The (unexpected) niche of headshot photography that I fell into has played a critical role in building and funding my photography business. I would advise that in most markets it could do the same for you. It represents a surprisingly strong niche, with almost everyone with a job or looking for one needing a solid headshot.

A good lesson all photographers can take from headshot photography is that finding a way to differentiate your work in a value-focused way can lead to a commanding presence in the upper pricing tiers of a market. Writing off a niche because you don’t see anyone else making much money from it isn’t always the best way to assess said niche. Think outside the box. Explore alternatives. Identify ways in which to drive higher value and a better experience for your clients. You might find yourself blowing past the perceived competition in your local market while they scratch their heads.

**Editorial / Magazines**

Another mentor of mine is John Keatley – a commercial photographer based in the Seattle area. A few years ago, I took a workshop from him called ‘The Keatley Survival Guide’, and it was invaluable. We didn’t take one photograph during that workshop. The entire weekend was devoted to the business matters of photography and not the taking of great photos.

One thing that has stuck with me was his training on bidding commercial work and his explanations of typical pay structures for commercial photography of various types. He didn’t attempt to tell us what specific photography was worth in a particular market – this is probably not even possible given that so many variables in each market affect pricing. However, he provided us with the tools and thought processes to quote sizable photography projects accurately. He stressed the importance of understanding the expenses and time that go into a large commercial shoot. One of these types of commercial bids is the editorial or magazine shoot.
Most magazines need a steady flow of high-quality photographs that support their features and stories. Strong visual support is one of the tried and true methods to draw attention to the publication, boost subscribers, and bring advertisers to the magazine. Whether online or print, magazines still primarily make their money through ad sales.

Although print may be fading away, it certainly isn’t gone. I still regularly shoot for local publications in print. There’s something special about seeing your work in print, and I always get a bit of a thrill when everything comes together. As a photographer, I appreciate a publication that still puts effort into generating a printed magazine. That said, there are plenty of online publications as well, and they still need high-quality photography.

What you need to remember when considering editorial work is that it is priced and bid a bit differently than other commercial niches. This is partly because of photo credits. Photos credits are a form of currency in the editorial markets – and for a good reason. If a publication with a large reader base uses your photos and places a proper photo credit near your work, it stands to reason that this is a method of advertising your services. Publications know this, and they offer payment for shoots factoring in the photo credit.

You will generally find that it is a steep proposition to garner full commercial creative fees and wages for an editorial photoshoot. Instead, they will offer a modest creative fee and usually cover your shoot expenses. Smaller publications may only provide a small flat fee to cover the shoot. That fee is intended to cover your pay plus all necessary costs.

For me, bidding editorial work comes down to a few questions:

• Is this a publication that would put my work in front of potential buyers of my photography products with my name in clear view?
• Are they willing to cover at least the costs of the shoot plus something for my time?
If both of those answers are yes, then I may decide to get involved with such a production. Magazines that don’t offer photo credits, or place them in unexpected and less prominent places diminish the value of working with them. They should be approached cautiously and with a clear view of other goals or reasons to work with them.

Generating high income through editorial work alone may be a tricky proposition. You’d need to work very hard to become a go-to photographer for well established publications. The small, local ones sometimes pay almost nothing or don’t even cover your shoot expenses. The primary reason some of us work with them is the photo credit. It also allows networking with the celebrities, influencers, and business owners that we shoot for feature articles.

If you’re considering editorial work as a source of income, keep in mind that you can usually make more money shooting the same types of photos and selling them to other entities.

So how do photography products fit into the editorial conversation? Well, that depends on the publication. You will find a market for all sorts of photography – product, sports, automotive, editorial portraits, etc. I like to think of working with a publication as a way to promote products that I’ve already developed. An approach to getting started in editorial work is to find the publications that match the type and style of photography that you have already developed.

You’ll have to consider the size of the publication and how many photographers they have. Large, national publications are going to be a lot harder to get in with than a smaller, local one. The quality of your work and your resume in working with other publications will be the most significant factors in being selected for editorial work. Starting with smaller publications and working your way up is a good approach.

Another great reason to do editorial work is to push yourself creatively. There is almost always an opportunity to try something a little different and be creative in your approach to an editorial shoot. They may have hired you for your
skills and style that you’ve shown in your portfolio, but it doesn’t mean that you can’t branch out and pitch new ideas or concepts to them. You need to manage risk and run the project effectively, but you’ll often have the chance to be creative. Often you’ll have the opportunity to shoot on location in dynamic situations that can hone your technical and creative skills. These shoots can be fast-paced and challenging and force you to deal with problems on the fly – all excellent skills to develop as a photographer. I really enjoy this element of editorial work. It helps to keep my work fresh and the creativity flowing.

A publication can ask for almost anything in the licensing and contract arena. A typical editorial contract requires that the photographer doesn’t use or share the work before publication. Also, the publication usually requires non-exclusive usage rights for print, web, and any standard or planned use they may have for the images. They should not normally ask for buyouts/copyright transfer, or exclusivity. Terms and usage will vary by publication. If these terms or language confuse you, don’t worry – I’ll be covering copyrights and licensing more thoroughly later in this book.

Advertising

Advertising work – the holy grail of commercial photography. Why is this? Well, shooting for ad campaigns can be a lucrative career in photography. When a company needs to sell something and plans for an ad campaign, they often plan to spend a substantial amount of money to run the campaign. They only do this when there is a strong potential for ROI (return on investment) from their campaign. In other words, they plan to spend $10 to make $100 through sales of their product or service (as an example). The cost of your photos tends to be calculated into the ROI, and the budgets can be substantial.

Licensing fees are often based on the intended use in conjunction with the potential upside of the ad campaign. In other words, if a company stands to make millions of dollars in sales through the use of your photography, it
stands to reason that they should pay more for that usage. It also would probably mean that they will be spending a substantial amount on the ads themselves. This is another reason that a proportional amount of pay goes to the photographer.

A photographer can create a photo that goes into a magazine for certain pay, and in theory, the same picture could be worth 10 times as much in an ad campaign. This doesn’t sit well with some, but usually, it’s through lack of thorough understanding of US copyright laws and practices in licensing creative works for commercial uses. Ultimately, photography is worth what people will pay for it, and terms of use don’t always need to be perpetual. You can and should charge for the terms of use in the advertising world. This is a good thing since if we all reduced ourselves to an hourly employee sort of role, it would be quite a bit harder to make a living as a photographer. This is one of the very few areas that can help generate additional revenue for work already completed - otherwise known as passive income.

The advertising market has likely been watered down in recent years with less experienced photographers that are too quick to give away the farm in negotiations. Nonetheless there are still a lot of opportunities for the skilled photographer.

Shooting for ads can mean managing sizable projects, and can require a unique set of project management skills. On larger shoots, you may need to hire lighting techs, digital techs, stylists, catering, and other contractors to pull off a proper shoot. You may need to scout locations, perform lighting test shoots, hold casting calls, and more. You can charge a ‘production’ fee to coordinate such things. At other times, the ad agency that hired you might produce the shoot or even hire a 3rd party as a producer. This leaves you with fewer responsibilities and a bit less pay.

My experience in the advertising world is limited, but it always pays to learn proper bidding for such work. I have plenty of experience bidding commercial jobs and I know that it requires a knowledge of common and standard practices. You also need an understanding of what team and workflow are
required to create the images your client has requested. This means that to bid for a job that requires (for example) a lighting assistant, a digital tech, studio rental, equipment rental, and a test shoot, you need to itemise those things and bill your client for them. The following expenses are commonly itemised in bids, quotes, and invoices to commercial advertising and corporate clients:

- Assistants / crew;
- Digital Tech;
- Digital capture and processing fees;
- Wardrobe and stylists;
- Hair and Makeup Artists;
- Travel fees;
- Shipping fees for props or equipment;
- Scouting days;
- Seamless paper;
- Insurance (when additional or specialised is needed);
- Per Diem (for multi-day shoots);
- Equipment rental;
- Studio rental;
- Production fees;
- Casting;
- Models / Talent (if you’re hiring them for a shoot);
- Prop rentals;
- Catering.

There are two methods of itemising these sorts of things – with backup (receipts/documented) and without. In a lot of cases, your client will expect you to itemise these expenses so as not to mark them up. In some cases, you can mark up what you resell to them in exchange for the management of said items. If you’re charging a ‘production’ fee, then it becomes less ethical to mark up itemised expenses. Think of it this way – if you’re going to find, hire and manage a crew on behalf of a client, then you should be compensated for the work that goes into those efforts. This is why it’s fair (and even expected at times) to mark up your itemised expenses. However, there are times when you may be specifically asked to bid with backup. In this instance, you can add a
production fee line item when the burden to manage these things on behalf of your client is substantial.

We’ve covered some everyday expenses in a large shoot. There are a lot of shoots that don’t require these items, and that’s fine, but don’t give things away for free – whether time or expense. You will find that you have made no money after itemising and billing your client for these expenses. So what do we add to the quote to actually generate income? Typically, this is your ‘Creative Fee’. It’s the line item that is designed to compensate the photographer for their hard work in creating the images. Without a creative fee or production fees, we’d be reselling stuff to people at zero markup, or marginal income. This is not a very profitable way to run a business.

What should we charge for our creative fees? That’s the million-dollar question – and there’s no simple answer to it. For now, understand that experience, quality, skillset, and demand are significant factors when a photographer sets their creative fee. Later on, we’ll look more closely at pricing different types of photography products. Also, be aware that the creative fee does NOT usually include any licensing, usage, or any copyright manipulations. Those things should be itemised and negotiated separately from creative fees.

Speaking of copyright manipulations, the term ‘buy-out’ is an industry-standard that means that the purchaser wants to take your copyright. This is almost never a good business option for photographers, but there are some exceptions. In the case that it makes sense for all parties, there’s often an additional and expensive line item to compensate the photographer for the sale of their copyright, as well as a fee for the actual administrative transfer of said copyright.

In the United States, the fee is currently $55 for registration of one ‘work’ which can include multiple images. Once a copyright is transferred, the original copyright owner (the photographer) loses any and all interest or ability to further license or receive income from their work. Instead, the new copyright owner would be the sole dictator of where, how, by whom and for how long the photographic work is used. No further demands by the photographer re-
garding watermarks, photo credits, payments or usage terms will be respected.

Remember that everything is negotiable. However, don’t negotiate away your income and your ability to make a decent living. To protect from doing this, understand and calculate your costs and expenses for an elaborate shoot. If you’re bidding a type of work that you haven’t done before, pause and think through the full production process before bidding.

It’s far too often that a photographer doesn’t even understand their own expenses and ends up taking a job (probably won due to underbidding). They will end up working tirelessly to complete the project without the proper resources required to do it thinking that they made a bunch of money. The realisation comes at the end that they actually LOST money after they accounted for their time and expenses. This is no way to run a business, and businesses that operate this way for any extended period of time won’t flourish.

A safe approach to bidding larger commercial jobs (when you can find them) is to challenge yourself and take slightly bigger jobs than you’ve done before. Be careful jumping from small, no assistant shoots to a large production that you have no experience with. You’re likely in over your head in this scenario, and you should leave that type of project to more experienced photographers. Working as an assistant or digital tech for those that regularly work these types of jobs is a great way to gain experience. The commercial advertising space is still alive and well. It can be a lucrative career path if you dedicate your efforts to developing high-quality products and project management skills.
ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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