How to Run a Successful Wedding and Portrait Photography Business

Featuring NIKON AMBASSADOR BAMBI CANTRELL

According to Bambi Cantrell, who founded her eponymous wedding and portrait studio in 1986, it was during this time that nuptials photography was a male-dominated, logic-driven business practice. Back then, more often than not, it was a male photographer who dictated what was shot and how subjects were posed within the frame.

Commenting on that “at the time” market climate, she reveals: “I saw an opportunity to create a photography business plus presentation that squarely appealed to a bride’s emotions. I geared things to attract a woman: her sensibility and her way of thinking. I created a business identity and image products that were elegant, playful and resonated with the female customer.”

The result—Cantrell fashioned a business that was entirely customer-centric whereby photos captured were driven by what the bride wanted. Style, personality and variety were hallmarks; emotion and passion were also huge parts of the equation. To position her services she decided to think like a bride, not a photographer. She asked: “What would I want my wedding photographs to look like? What kind of experience would I want if I were the bride?”

In her own Words: Creating a Wedding and Portrait Studio Business

To find the answers to the above two questions and more, I decided to use bride and fashion magazines as my textbooks to determine what brides were looking for. Advertisers spend billions of dollars trying to appeal to the same client I am, so
I decided to study what kinds of images and experiences they employed, and then emulate that. One thing that screamed out at me right away was that the imagery used in fashion and bridal magazines to sell products, such as wedding rings and wedding gowns, were lifestyle images. They weren’t necessarily perfect from the traditional professional photographer standpoint, but they were interesting and the people in the photos looked like they were having the time of their lives.

An ad that still stands out in my mind is one that was done by a premier jeweler. It shows a very tight shot of a couple hugging, and the woman has her hand intertwined in the hair of the man. You can barely see the ring, but that’s when it dawned on me that the advertisement wasn’t selling the ring, but the experience.

What was the climate like for women when you started your business?

Much has changed from the time when I began working in this business. In the early 1980s there were very few women in the wedding photography industry. As a result, the presentation, marketing, product, even the way prices were set were all very different than what we see today. A male-dominated industry at the time, my peers operated with a highly product-driven approach. Business decisions, photo and album presentations, even interaction with customers was logic-based.

I felt there was a better way to operate, especially when marketing to brides. So, driven to differentiate, reach and better resonate with women, in jest I say that I threw logic out the window! A wedding is seldom a logical event. It’s incredibly driven by emotions. It’s also all about the bride, so why not appeal to her emotions?

Before starting my studio I did a lot of market research by looking outside the wedding photography arena. I picked successful companies that were promoting to women, specifically those firms striving to appeal to her emotions. I studied how top European fashion design firms presented themselves—their advertising, style, language, store decor, products. All traded on a high aspirational value. I asked myself how I could emulate these luxury firms and put my own spin on things.

The business opportunity I recognized was one that squarely appealed to a bride’s emotions. I geared things to women: a woman’s sensibilities and her way of thinking. I created an image that was elegant, playful and resonated with the female customer. I shifted the status quo, essentially turning a male-dominated logic-driven service into one that was customer-centric. I found that brides weren’t as interested in the number of prints they got, but more so in the image captured on those prints.

How have things changed versus when
you started?

Women now make up roughly 60 percent of the wedding photographer pool. That’s a huge shift in balance. One of the most profound changes is that today’s wedding photographers more completely understand their clients and communicate with them far better than in the early 80s. As an example let’s look at photographing the event. The norm used to be that the male photographer would position the bride and groom, then wedding party, then families, then maybe guests, through a series of non-varying and traditional poses (the 120 poses on the checklist). Today, the sky’s the limit. The customer is being photographed according to her needs and wants. There’s so much more variety.

How do you differentiate your wedding/portrait business?

You have to keep growing; to adapt and pay attention to styles. Just like a bride’s gown, each decade has its trends. In the 80s it was all about photographing with backgrounds, group poses inside the church and techniques such as double exposures. In the 1990s brides put a brake on extravagance. It became: “No beads, no sparkles, no sequins.” Things had to be simple. Wedding PJ (photojournalism) came to the fore. For the 2000s things grew playful and took on lots of personal expression.

If you wish to stay vital you must allow your business to evolve. Keep fresh and maintain a unique expression. Stay in touch with trends—not only what’s happening in magazines, but knowledge of new products and services. Back in the 80s there was one style wedding album; it was oversized and white. Then we got black books. In the 1990s textures and fabric covers were all the rage. We then saw a sizable increase in the number of album vendors. From this came a greatly expanded product array with new shapes and sizes, colors, styles, cover materials and ways to design interior pages. The market will continue to evolve. If your customer doesn’t already know what’s in style she’s going to ask you.

How do you attract new clients?

Two words: be present. In a society that spends so much time on the Internet, I truly feel there’s no substitute for personal contact—whether with clients, prospects or industry peers. Get out and meet with people. Second, look the part. Dressing professionally really does matter in an industry based on impressions.

For obtaining new clients, one of my most effective strategies is to land referrals. Invent a clever cross-promotion program. Invite a peer to lunch. Find ways to earn a referral. A second strategy that’s been incredibly successful for my portrait business is donating to charity auctions in local public schools. We provide gift
cards which include the session and a print. The school gets the auction money and we get a new client. Try to be present when your donations are auctioned. This is a terrific way to get to know your new client and also their friends. Think through any donation campaigns that you may run to be sure you’re reaching a target clientele. Create programs where you can determine and meet both financial and goodwill ROI objectives.

Heeding her own advice to evolve and thrive, Cantrell points out that her studio’s focus has shifted somewhat. “I will always love photographing weddings, but in recent years I’ve thrown more attention to portraiture,” she enthuses. “I welcome the variety. Portrait work is profitable and fun for the studio, and there are many similarities between brides and babies.”

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How do you decide what to charge?

First off, don’t price to what you think you can afford. Secondly, have a complete understanding of your costs. For my business, I operate on a Good, Better, Best pricing plan for wedding coverage.

A few words about my pricing methodology, in particular the Best plan. This level of coverage is priced ridiculously high and is not meant to be booked. It was designed for the person who equates a high dollar amount to quality. Sometimes it makes people feel more secure to spend more for a product. Two, anyone who truly values a product will find the way to acquire it, and we are very capable of delivering this top level of service. I should also mention that the Best plan is an exclusive. For any geographic market, after I sell a Best level of coverage I no longer consider if unattainable for that region so I increase the price.

How do you determine profitability?
I treat photography as my business, not as my hobby, so when I started out I took a look at all costs that went into a job. I calculated my time, including marketing, meetings with the prospective client, phone and Internet communication, photographing the event, time to edit, retouch and build the products, etc. I look at hard costs such as printing, the albums, payroll for my staff and sales person. I then factor in my “opportunity cost.” By that I mean what is the value of my time when I am sick and would rather be at home in bed? What do I need to be paid if I am sick and still have to shoot? Lastly, I determine what my time and talent are worth and add that to the equation.

What is your game plan on the wedding day?

A phrase that I follow is: “Early in the year, early in the month, early in the day.” When it comes to working with a bride it’s beneficial to keep her informed. Early in the year (“year” equating to a length of time in advance of her wedding) I personally reach out and remind the bride to prepare for and book the engagement session. Early in the month (no less than two weeks prior) I reach out again to help her plan for the day. It’s at this time that I hear about timing for things—not only does this help me arrange the best shoot plan but, having gone through so many wedding events, I can plant the seeds for improving the event day flow if I foresee any challenges.

Early in the day means that I begin photographing the bride’s preparation no less than three and a half hours in advance of the wedding. I observe and photograph as she prepares. Having built a good rapport with the bride over the months of planning she is receptive to my suggestions, so if I feel things are straying from the schedule I can corral everyone back on track (of course working cooperatively with her event coordinator).

After capturing the bride’s time dressing, I head to the ceremony site and arrive at least 45 minutes in advance. The balance of the day is spent capturing what the couple desires—the vows exchange, family pictures, reception, etc.

Do you ever say no to potential clients?

Yes, I have. Another wedding photographer wanted me to photograph her wedding. I listened to her lengthy list of instructions on “how I was to photograph,” which cameras, lenses, film, etc. Basically she wanted to drive the bus, and be the bride. That was something I just wasn’t comfortable with so I declined the opportunity.

Do you have a business manager or do you run your own business?
I have a studio manager who is in charge of setting appointments, sales and is a terrific photographer in his own right. When I photograph children he does magic tricks and is my wrangler. He joined the studio in 2002 and I would consider him my most valuable asset. I also have an operations officer who has been with me for 15 years. She makes sure the clients pay on time, makes sure I don’t spend money and pays any bills.

Has social media changed the landscape of wedding photography?

The mind of the photographer has changed the landscape, not social media. Admittedly there are uses for social media that may enhance a professional photographer’s business, but in my opinion photographers have forgotten the personal touch. There needs to be a happy balance. This goes back to what I mentioned earlier—about being present. For me, what gets the client in the door are my physical efforts. It’s not just what I post on the Internet.

Why did you choose to use Nikon products?

I have been taking photographs as a profession for more than 25 years. As a result, I’ve had the opportunity to work with many cameras and lenses. I choose Nikon because I am amazed at the clarity and super sharp focus. I love how precise the NIKKOR glass is. And the camera’s dynamic range is awesome. You can literally shoot in the dark. Prior to working with the Nikon system I used another popular brand. However, I was continually dissatisfied with the lack of sharpness in the focus. A quick focus and tack sharp image are critical to making images I want to put my name on.
Featuring

BAMBI CANTRELL

NIKON AMBASSADOR
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Wedding and portrait photographer, Bambi Cantrell, is one of the most decorated and celebrated professional photographers of our time. Bambi is highly regarded in the photographic industry as the foremost expert on lighting and posing and spends a great deal of her time educating photographers from around the world. She speaks regularly around the world and has had her work featured in dozens of magazines and hundreds of blogs. Visit her website at http://cantrellportrait.com and ambassador page.

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