



Understanding new media, social media and the business of photography

Why should you care?

If you are or wish to be a professional photographer you need to care about the people who are part of your community. The business of photography has changed and survival is dependent upon appealing to the people who care about you.

The competition is fierce and it will not let up. The great thing about the world of digital, social and new media is it has democratized consumer choice, your choices. It has created better applications and products. At the same time, it has lowered the barriers to entry in many professions.

In the case of photography, the digital age has turned many types of imagery into a commodity. The ability to create “good enough” photography is now as simple as the press of a button. This has eliminated the need for a professional in the minds of many buyers.

The business has changed. But the business has not died.

In the world of social media, professionals have a better opportunity to gain a following. These followers don’t always care about you personally. They may care about the company you work for, or your profession, or the views you represent, or the subjects you present.

As a photographer it is important to create images few others can, that are desirable and ultimately in demand. Average work will not pay the bills and “good enough” is not good enough anymore.

More than ever, the world of new media offers opportunity to gain and share knowledge. Today’s photographer must take advantage of the information offered by the online world. New media outlets allow

serious photographers to advance their craft, increase knowledge and share results.

Digital technology will continue to advance. Image capture, workflow display and delivery methods will continue to improve. But, the photographer must continue to advance if he wishes to remain relevant in the new media world.

Photography is not the only industry affected by the digital revolution. Newspapers, printers, photo processing labs, illustrators, the U.S. Postal Service, travel agencies and book publishers all have seen dramatic changes. New technology has made many older technologies more accessible and cheaper to the average person. Once complex tasks have now been made easy, thus, less valuable.

The reality is all companies have been affected, because new media has amplified communication opportunities to a new level. The consumer is empowered – by the press of a button or a mouse click - with easy access to a vast wealth of information. Again, it's the democratization of consumer power and choice.

Today the consumer has the opportunity to seek quotes from local, regional, national and international companies. The result is that pricing for many products and services has become very competitive. The consumer can order furniture from North Carolina, have post cards printed in Canada, digital prints processed in Montana and order clothing from just about anywhere in the world.

Information is in the hands of consumers and reputation has never been more important. Word of mouth has been an important part of the human experience for thousands of years. But, it wasn't until the 20th century that mass media was created and offered marketers the opportunity to shotgun messages to large numbers of people.

Mass communication allowed businesses to play the percentage game. Personal interaction was not so important anymore. A general message delivered to large numbers of people would usually offer a predictable result: **You** don't count anymore. **You** are replaceable with another round of advertising.

This mass advertising allowed average to become acceptable. New media is changing the dynamics. Now people are talking one-on-one again in a big way. If you do wrong or do not follow through on promises, the word will get out.

As a photographer you are now competing with local, regional and national photographers. Even if your prospective clients cannot hire a photographer from another part of the country, they will still want the highest quality and the lowest pricing they can find on the Web.

The goal of today's photographer is to develop a style that removes her from the commodity market and develops an authentic story and reputation that is worth sharing through word of mouth.

Creating your story

Everyone has a story. If you don't know your story and are not sharing it, others will create one for you. Maybe the story is "average", "cheap", "amateur" or "unknown." Chances are, it's not the story you wish to share.

To build a career in photography you must have a story for which buyers are willing to pay a premium. Often it is the photographer's style and ability, but in many cases that is not enough. What about experience? Have you worked with noteworthy clients? Such projects are a powerful part of the photographer's story.

Embrace what you have. Your client list doesn't have to consist of Vogue, Google or the New York Times to be story worthy.

Have you photographed for any noteworthy local companies or prominent people in your community? Have you won any awards? These are noteworthy stories. Other story topics worthy of sharing are shows participated in, service priorities and business practices. Perhaps the most important story of all is: Why you are different.

You need to collect stories. I recall when I was in my first years of business I shared every advantage I could. Every client I earned was an accomplishment; every photograph published was an achievement. I shared them with friends, family and associates. Maybe I shared more information than some would have preferred, but it worked. The word spread and opportunities continue to build. Collect your achievements no matter how large or small and share them.

In my early days, my photographic achievements were limited to my community. Today the world is only a computer mouse click away. But, the world is not who you need to impress. The people who matter the most are within communities interested in viewing, partnering and buying your brand of photography.

Building your community

The best way to engage is to focus on building a community of people who care and place them around you or your company. Then, take actions that will encourage people to refer you. Give them the ammunition to tell your story enthusiastically.

Building a community around your photography sounds self-centered. It is. But, you already have a community around you. Just like ignoring your story, ignoring your community will have negative consequences.

First you need to identify the people in your community. Start with the obvious: family, friends and business associates. Centralize their names, addresses and emails.

If you are like many creative people, you don't have an organized system. Some names are listed in software programs, others in a Rolodex and even more can be found in the form of business cards at the bottom of your desk drawer. It's time to organize these names in a central location.

Next look for patterns that might offer a clue as to what communities you should target. As an example, you may represent yourself as a people photographer, but a large number of your *repeat* clients and referrals may be requesting product photography or have very specific requests such as model comps.

Track the most popular destinations on your web site or look for the most popular searches related to photography with Google's "insight for search" (<http://www.google.com/insights/search>). Use this service to find underserved niches for which you may offer solutions.

Next, develop a central location for your activities. Usually a Web site or blog serves this purpose well. After you set the foundation, it's time to build your community.

The tools

For the new media photographer, the ultimate tool is still the same. It's the portfolio. Except now this tool is on the Web. Another advantage a new media photographer has is the abundance of tools in the social media space. The photographer who uses them well will be rewarded.

The idea behind using social media is to add dimension and to expand your brand. In most cases your brand is you, represented by your story.

A Web site is static, nothing more than an Internet brochure. A blog offers the opportunity for easily updated dynamic content that will attract regular views and encourage interaction. Although blogging is the best way to begin building a community, it's not the only way.

The web offers some great tools designed to help you communicate with and build a community around your brand. Sites like Facebook, MySpace and LinkedIn allow you to share happenings and keep track of what others are up to, an advantage only dreamed of just a few years ago.

Twitter and social platforms like it are excellent locations for sharing content and attracting new community members. Don't underestimate the power of Twitter. Remember it's not about how many followers you have, it's the quality of the followers. Although I have followers involved in politics, they are not my target audience and I don't seek them out. I only follow people I feel will offer content I am seeking or may be receptive to content I'm offering.

Hybrid web sites such as Flickr and YouTube offer opportunities for creating new content and community building. These sites may be used purely to build community or as a foundation site for original content.

A standard blog or Web site is the preferred display method for portfolios. Sharing your images through sites like Flickr, SmugMug and Photobucket are not considered professional and will not be taken seriously.

Advanced users can target prospects through Google key word alerts, Twitter searches, local social searches and advertising. Every social site has a surface use. But, I encourage you to peel back the layers and look deeper. Often you will find a unique and powerful path to new clients.

Keep in touch

Keep in touch with your community. Find out who is in your community and champion them. Comment on their blogs, Flickr images and YouTube posts. Let them know you care. People will remain loyal to people who care about them.

Take it to the streets. Now that you have an online community built, you will need to get back into circulation in the offline world. Network and speak with groups related to your target audience. Nothing builds bonds that last like face-to-face contact.

Share your story and encourage people to join your community. Add information on your business cards and e-mail signatures. Even your web site should offer direct links to your supportive community building sites.

The bottom line is business always has been and will continue to be about people. But, today the methods in which we connect are changing and maturing into new standards.

It is important to understand the new standards. Technology will continue to change the way we create and display our images as well as how we communicate with clients.

It's impossible to use every new startup, community or communication tool on the Web or in the market place effectively. You need to pick and choose wisely based on your clients and goals. But, you need to choose. Remember, not everyone consumes media the same. Everyone has a preference and it's not always yours.

Test and experiment. Keep what works and let go of what does not. Create clear goals and targets. You can create a successful photography business. But, you have to offer an excellent product and don't forget: It's all about them.

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Many of the ideas in the above e-book have been formed, influenced and shaped by reading blogs, listening to podcasts, and videos from numerous new media and marketing experts. These ideas have been considered, tested and applied to Rosh Sillars' own businesses. The writings and conclusions in this e-book are solely those of Rosh Sillars.

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