

Creating a Plan for Your Business (End of the Year)

Before you launch any business, it's essential to have a strategic business plan in place. First, start with these questions: What is my goal? What am I hoping to accomplish with this photography business? Why am I doing this? Where do I see my business and myself in five years? When you set those goals from the get-go, it's easier to navigate your way there. If you already have a successful business up and running, it's always a good idea to reevaluate your goals and reorganize your workflow. Here, we outline the questions you need to answer in order to achieve your business goals.

Define and specialize your niche

The first step in establishing yourself as a photographer is carefully selecting your niche. While you may enjoy all genres of photography, a niche is highly recommended if you want to set yourself apart. If you try to master everything, it may communicate a lack of focus and failure to specialize in any one area.

Once you have chosen your niche, it's important to delve a bit deeper. If you're a wedding photographer, what kind of wedding photographer are you? What types of weddings do you want to shoot? The first things to consider are your strengths. If you love shooting in natural light, or if you prefer everything in black and white, start from there to bring something valuable to the table.

Once you have established what kind of photographer you want to be and what business you want to run, don't be a stick in the mud. It's important to be flexible and even more important to grow in the process. Keeping yourself educated or offering different types of styles and packaging will attract a bigger crowd.

Determine your audience

Who are your clients? You can't do much for your customers if you don't know who they are. Take demographic inventory before you work. Are your customers mostly male or female? What age group are they? What are their hobbies, etc.? Once you know their likes and dislikes, you can curate your marketing specifically to them.

When you have completed this step, do the math. Is your target market large enough to sustain you financially? If your focus is shooting headshots for actors, for example, you need to find out how many working actors there are in your area, how often they need headshots, and how much revenue you'll generate from each session. From there you can figure out your expenses.

Polish your persona

You've determined what kind of photographer you want to be and who your audience is; so now it's time to set up shop. Building an online portfolio is the first step for any professional photographer. The best way to do this is through Zenfolio, which not only offers you a website to host your photos but also a complete online store. You can upload an

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unlimited number of galleries, host a blog to show off your latest content, and have client proofing with the option to sell. This part is simple; you create your own price lists, and the integrated shopping cart makes it easy for clients to navigate through your site and purchase prints and products. And to top it off, this is done without any coding or designers needed.

Get discovered through SEO

Once your website is up and ready to go, you will need to get the word out that it exists. Implementing a search engine optimization (SEO) strategy is a great tool to make your site more visible to potential visitors searching online. That way, when someone types in "wedding photographer in San Francisco," for example, your website is much more likely to show up on search engine sites.

An easy way to start implementing SEO is by entering in applicable keywords. When uploading photos, be sure to take the time to provide relevant titles, captions, and keywords whenever possible, and be sure to add your geographical location in the text to attract local clients.

Linking back to your site on other websites is also a great way to increase exposure. The more times a link to your website is clicked, the better your site ranking will be, and you'll appear higher in search results. How do you get more people to click on your link? Share it everywhere: on your email signatures, photo forums, social media, or on friends' websites are all good places to start.

Create a Marketing Plan

The more you market your website, the more you will sell. Now that you have defined your audience, you need to come up with ways to market to them: email blasts or newsletters, direct mail, social media, events, and paid advertising are some great options.

Adding social media buttons to your photos is the easiest and quickest way existing or potential clients can share your work. Also, be sure to have your social media pages highlighted on your contact page and encourage clients to like or follow you so they will have a fluid stream of updates coming from you. Social media is also a great way to share your successes or latest shoots; just provide a quick description, photo and link to your latest shoot or recognition received. This is a quick and free way to share relevant information to a large audience that they can also easily share.

Once you have social media set up, sending out regular emails is cheap, easy, and generally effective. Send several throughout the year; you can send seasonal promotions, reminders of products purchased, or product reviews. Also, plan to send a regular newsletter highlighting your latest work, the newest products available, and any announcements. Be sure to provide a way for people to unsubscribe if they choose not to receive emails.

If you have the budget, spend a little on advertising. Paid advertising has become easier in recent years with companies

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like Google lowering the barrier to entry. Google AdWords can be a great way to try out online ads without spending a lot. If you wish to send out physical collateral, also called direct mail, you will need to take your budget into consideration. Consider creating a well-designed but inexpensive postcard to send to all clients while reserving more expensive promo pieces for your top 20 leads. This will be effective for people who may not be online or who prefer something they can touch.

Marketing yourself online and through the mail is great, but nothing beats an in-person meeting. Events in your area are a great way to get in front of your target market. For example, if you shoot weddings, find out if there are bridal fairs in your area and get involved. Or, you can approach bridal stores in your service area and other vendors that may have events or promotions you can be a part of. Meeting potential clients in person or through other companies can be a huge help in selling your services.

It is important to measure the return you're getting from each channel so you can make necessary adjustments and avoid wasting time. If social media is working great but direct mail isn't showing much success, it may be wise to stop sending mail. Measure what is working for your business so you can reallocate where you spend your time and money to get the most bang for your buck.

Are you ready to get started?

As mentioned at the beginning of this article, the most important thing you are doing by creating a business plan is setting achievable goals for yourself and your business. Over the course of a year, it is very easy to get caught up in the day-to-day madness of running your business. That's why we recommend evaluating your existing business plan every year. By taking the time to carefully plan where you are going and how you will effectively get there, you'll be able to avoid bumps in the road and track the progress you've made. Now it's time to take the first step.

Get started

- [Workbook PDF](#)

Check out this Photographer's Corner article on creating a business plan from the ZenBlog: <http://bit.ly/1aChHl>

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Discussion Questions

1. Have you created a business plan for your photo business? If not, what is holding you back?
2. How often do you update or change your business plan? For those of you who have created a business plan, how many of you have stuck to it?
3. For those who have created a business plan, did it help you and how?