

BREAKING INTO **COMMERCIAL PHOTOGRAPHY**

An educational guide by  **PHOTOSHELTER**

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PART I

What Is Commercial Photography?

What is Commercial Photography?

Commercial photography is photography that is used by a client to sell a product, service or idea. It may well be the largest area of professional photography, and probably the most lucrative. Companies or organizations hire commercial photographers to create everything from simple catalog images to billboard-ready campaigns in Times Square. Magazine ads, product packaging, website branding, brochures, tour bus wraps—commercial photography can end up anywhere a marketer can dream up.

As the commercial photographer, you're responsible for showcasing products and merchandise in a way that will compel an audience to buy. Without those sales, both you and the client are out of luck, so it's no wonder why the world of commercial photography is often associated with high stress situations, characterized by big budgets and big pressure from clients.

Types of Commercial Clients

Opportunities to get hired for commercial work abound. From small businesses in a small town to multi-national corporations in big cities, businesses everywhere need photography to help sell and promote what they're doing. Even if your niche or focus is more topic-driven, like nature photography, for instance, there are likely commercial clients out there who are looking for your type of work.

Here are some ideas of how to parlay different niches into commercial work:

PRODUCT PHOTOGRAPHY: If you excel at taking crisp, clear still life shots, companies that sell products through websites and catalogs can keep you busy. Even some big-budget ad campaigns often cut through the clutter by focusing on simple yet creative product shots.

Examples: Fashion brands or any type of product manufacturer.

FASHION PHOTOGRAPHY: If your focus is fashion, this is a big, glamorous category, but competition may be fierce.

Examples: Clothing and footwear brands, retailers.

FOOD PHOTOGRAPHY: It takes special skill to make food look good in a photo. If you can do it well, there are lots of opportunities beyond editorial photography.

Examples: Restaurants, food manufacturers.

ADVENTURE/TRAVEL PHOTOGRAPHY: At first glance, the style might not seem to translate to commercial photography, but any brand that wants to inspire a sense of adventure could use a photographer that knows how to get good shots.

Examples: Outdoor gear brands, departments of tourism, sporting goods, travel companies.

PORTRAIT PHOTOGRAPHY: If taking photos of people is your thing, commercial opportunities abound.

Examples: Service-focused companies, organizations or universities; small business owners; musicians; artists; authors; professionals.

Pricing and Negotiating Commercial Photography

Despite the demand for commercial photography, competition for work can be tough. One reason? It's among the highest-paid areas of photography. Yes, a plum commercial campaign can bring in a lot of money, but until you get to that point, you'll probably work for smaller businesses with smaller budgets.

When it comes to structuring your fees for commercial photography, Bill Cramer, founder and CEO of [Wonderful Machine](#), a curated directory of photographers, says that each project a photographer works on will come with a unique set of pricing requirements (for both the production and licensing) and therefore it's important for the photographer to know what to consider before delivering a quote.

Here are key questions to ask before sending an estimate to a client:

- ▶ What needs to be photographed? Will there be people involved?
- ▶ Will the photos be taken in a studio or on location?
- ▶ How many shots do you need in a day?
- ▶ Will you need to scout and find new locations? Will a studio need to be rented?
- ▶ If the shoot is on location, will a production RV be needed?
- ▶ Do you need a stylist to shop for clothing or props and return it after the shoot?

For any assignment, says Cramer, you should be prepared to answer questions about creative and production expectations. "Learn how a client plans to use the images, and detail all of these items in a thorough cost estimate to be delivered with a terms and conditions document," he says.

Negotiating Contracts & Licenses

Once you have a full understanding of what the client needs, you can put together an estimate for the job. Here are some categories to consider:

PRODUCTION COSTS: Do you need to rent a studio or equipment? Hire a stylist or rent props? Buy the crew lunch? All of the expenses involved with producing the shoot should be accounted for and estimated.

CREATIVE FEE OR DAY RATE: While this sounds like an arbitrary fee based on what you think your creative skills are worth, it should actually be more precise than that. This category should include calculation of your overhead expenses and what you need to be paid for your time to earn a living. NPPA has a [good calculator](#) for working this number out.

LICENSING FEES: As the photographer, you hold the copyright to the images you create; a licensing fee is what the client pays you to use those images. This is where it's important to find out exactly how the images will be used and for how long. Will they be used on collateral, like in a brochure or packaging? Will they be used in an ad campaign? The licensing fee should be based on the amount of exposure your images will have and how much revenue they are expected to bring in.

Toronto photographer [Peter House suggests](#) basing this fee on a percentage of the client's "media buy," or the amount they are spending to buy advertising space. For more info about licensing, ASMP has a [good guide](#).

The next question to ask the client, says Agency Access photographer consultant Andrea Mauro is, "do you have any wiggle room?" And then explain the reason for asking. "The more you can explain your needs, the better. That way a photo editor can go back to his or her boss and justify why you're asking for more money," she

says. If you've gone through the above list and can point to specific job requirements that the quote won't cover, you're much more likely to come away with what you need to do the job.

Marketing & Pitching Commercial Clients

As with any area of photography, marketing your services to commercial clients is an important part of your business mix. Potential clients are everywhere, but when you're just starting out, figuring out how to connect with the right ones can be daunting. Here are some tips:

DEFINE YOUR FOCUS

A good place to start is with your own work. Chrissy Lynn, a San Francisco-based commercial photographer, stresses the importance of figuring out your own niche and point of view in order to attract clients. "Pick five words that you want to describe your work," she says. Then let those words guide everything you do, from choosing photos for your portfolio to targeting clients. "Once you have a point of view, then there's value," she says. "Then people are coming to you for your style and ability and are willing to pay for that."

BUILD A STRONG BRAND AND PORTFOLIO

Whether it's your website, portfolio or a mailed promo, "everything should be put through the filter of your brand identity," says David Walter Banks, an Atlanta-based commercial photographer. "If you want to shoot edgy youth culture, you should not include photos of seniors laughing on the beach. But if you want to target drug companies, then your seniors laughing on the beach may be just perfect." Check out our free guide, [10 Branding Secrets for Photographers](#) for more tips on how to build your brand.



BUILD YOUR NETWORK

“People make deals with people,” says Kareem Black, a New York-based commercial photographer. That’s why he recommends getting out and meeting people, whether it’s informal networking with friends of friends or attending professional photography events in your area. “Show your work to as many people as possible,” he says. In a competitive market like commercial photography, the adage “it’s who you know” often rings true.

TARGET A RANGE OF POTENTIAL CLIENTS

If you’re new to commercial photography, start-ups and small businesses could be good starter clients as you build your body of work. When Chrissy Lynn was building the fashion side of her businesses, she targeted local designers who looked like they could use better photography on their websites. “Of the five or six people I reached out to, one of them is still a client,” she says.

While you’re targeting smaller clients, Chrissy Lynn recommends making a list of your dream clients. As you gain more confidence, “reach out to [those dream clients] directly when you have work to show.”

REACH OUT DIRECTLY

“You have to be brave,” says Emiliano Granado, a Brooklyn, N.Y.-based photographer. “You have to learn to put yourself out there and not get a response.” When he comes across a new agency that piques his interest, he tries to find out who the art directors are and sends them a postcard or email to try to set up a meeting.

FIND A WAY TO STAND OUT

In a competitive landscape, blanket email blasts and one-size-fits-all promos won’t cut it. Chrissy Lynn hand-selects each potential client, and she tries to create promos that an art director would want to prop on their desk, “so when that project comes around that your work could be a fit for, you will be remembered,” she says.

When bidding for a job, Frank Meo, creator of thephotocloser.com, a search engine that promotes photographers, recommends writing a creative brief about why you want the job. “This is an unfiltered way of showing how dedicated you are,” she says. “Going that extra mile will help you stand out.”

DO YOUR RESEARCH

“If I’m sitting with an art buyer, I should really know everything about her ad agency and what accounts she has, if I can find out, so that when I’m sitting with her I can actually talk business,” says Meo. “Use LinkedIn or Twitter to get a little information without being a spy. You want to know whether so-and-so is always tough or whether so-and-so always gives good feedback. If you shoot animals you don’t really want to talk to someone who is on airlines. You want to talk to someone on the Purina account. It’s all part of that due diligence to find out.”

FOLLOW UP AND KEEP IN TOUCH

Once you secure a client—or even just make a connection with a potential client—don’t think you can stop marketing to them. Make sure to show your appreciation, keep in touch and show them how your career is evolving. “Existing and past clients are your very best source of work for the future,” says New York-based photographer Steve Giralt. “Not keeping in touch means you don’t care about getting more work from them in the future.”

PART I

6 Takeaways for Staying Authentic in the World of Commercial Photography

We talked to one of our favorite commercial photographers, [Alexa Miller](#), whose focus on relaxed yet vibrant lifestyle photography has made her a success in the commercial market—and a stand out in the helter skelter world of commercial photography.

Alexa's clients include big names like Polaroid, Columbia Sportswear, *Ski Utah*, *Men's Health*, *Cosmopolitan*, *Outside* magazine, and more. She's been able to conserve her knack for capturing real moments and authentic emotions, which is likely why these clients keep returning to her for repeat business.

What's the secret to breaking into such a high-profile industry and still maintaining a sense of authenticity? Here are her six takeaways:

1 You don't have to start out living in New York City or L.A.

This is definitely the notion among commercial photographers looking to "make it". Because of that, everyone goes to those cities and then the markets become over-saturated. On top of that, many companies no longer have the budget to send photographers on location. That means they're seeking out commercial photographers in their destination of choice. Take a hint from Alexa, who, before relocating to Venice Beach, built up a portfolio of Western U.S. landscapes while living in Montana for years. Then she took that book to New York and clients seeking that type of imagery were suddenly ready to hire.

2 Make your dream client list—and make sure it vibes with your style.

Alexa suggests that commercial photographers make a list of dream clients they'd love to work with, and put their energy in working toward that goal. You might not get the cream of the crop in the end, but the exercise will force you to think about where you might be a good fit and who would value your skills. "Tenacity, perseverance and forcing myself to make those calls and emails, on a schedule, no matter what" is what keeps Alexa moving forward.

3 Get used to cold calling & asking for in-person meetings.

No one likes cold calling. But for better or worse, it can be an effective marketing tactic. That's how Alexa got her first gigs: "I'd sometimes call 10-20 times before the client picked up the phone. It's nerve-wracking! But you have to catch them live. Then I do a quick intro, and just ask if they are interested in meeting with a new photographer."

4 Start using story or moodboards to set expectations before the shoot.

Storyboards give you and your client a direction. It also gives you a sense of security on the shoot, without making the process too rigid or contrived. And perhaps most important, it helps ensure that you and the client are on the same page. "Make sure that you understand the client's needs and visions, beyond just your own," advises Alexa. Once Alexa feels that she's fulfilled the client's needs, she lets the shoot "run wild," which is sometimes when she gets her most authentic looking shots—the ones that bring viewers right into her space, and also the ones her clients love.



5 Don't be afraid to outsource some of your business.

Sometimes you just can't do it all—at least not everything at full force. Outsourcing parts of your business, whether that's marketing or editing or accounting, can be a smart decision for busy commercial photographers. Or simply because it's smarter to let the experts handle it. Alexa uses [Agency Access](#) to help build new lists of clients to reach out to, and also design her email promos. This helps her stay on track and focus on the other aspects of her business.

6 Make a commitment to developing a brand that reflects who you are.

We can't say it enough—creating a unique brand that speaks to your style and personality is key to a successful photography business. For commercial photographers, Alexa suggests doing some soul-searching. It might sound cheesy, but figuring out the truth of who you are as a person and photographer will help you communicate that to clients.



Photo by Alexa Miller

PROFILE

Breaking into Commercial Photography

Featuring Chrissy Lynn



🏠 chrissylynn.photoshelter.com

Chrissy Lynn got her start in photography in 2000 shooting her friends' bands in Washington, DC. From there, she spent several years dabbling in documentary, editorial, fine art, interiors and, well, anything else that struck her. "I've done everything," she says. After some soul searching, she realized she shouldn't keep being a jack-of-all-trades. Now based in San Francisco, this sought-after photographer has found her niche in lifestyle and fashion shooting for brands like Google, Salesforce, Rainbeau, and Rand + Statler. Here, she reveals how honing her focus helped her build a successful commercial business.

How did you find your niche and discover your focus in commercial photography?

About five years ago, I looked at my website and realized I was really struggling to put together a cohesive body of work. I'd done some portraits here, a corporate job there, and nice interiors. I was under the impression that I had to put all my jobs up so that people could see who I've worked with and what I've done. There wasn't a point of view at all. The work looked like five different photographers shot it. I wasn't happy with that, but I didn't know how to fix it.

I tried to read some articles and talked to everyone I knew. I got the advice to pick five words that you want to describe your work by and five words that actually describe your work—and try to make those lists match. I like to think my work is authentic, light, intimate, believable, and inspired. Another photographer might

say "dark, moody and dramatic" to describe their work. Write those words down and keep going back to them. Change them if you have to, but find your point of view. It has been a helpful way to find my voice and figure out my style.

How did this change your business?

I get hired for that now. It's a magical thing. A big tech company just hired me to shoot seven of their top executives. The words that the client kept using were "backlit," "full of light," "authentic," "natural." They looked at my portfolio and reached out to me directly because of my style. That doesn't happen that often, but when it does it feels really good. I have a point of view and someone sees it. It makes me feel like I'm doing all right.



Photo by Chrissy Lynn

How did you find the time to work on this career reboot?

When I realized I needed to step back and refocus, I took a break from shooting and took a retouching job at The Gap. It put some money in my pocket. It let me focus on my photography and not just take on every single job to pay the bills. I took only jobs that I liked and worked on building my portfolio and finding my photography voice. Then I started shooting for The Gap. That propelled me into fashion. I started picking up local boutiques and start-ups in San Francisco. Now I'm shooting for some bigger brands and tech companies.

Why is it important to find a niche?

I think finding a niche is key. Your niche will define your style, which will define your niche. If your style is minimal and crisp, you probably gravitate more to product photography, for example. My style is more authentic, intimate, believable. I can really get people to warm up and ease up fairly quickly. Maybe that's a strong suit of mine and maybe it's not a strong suit of others. We all offer different things. Maybe



Photo by Chrissy Lynn

you're a lighting genius. I'm really good with natural light, but some clients need more than that.

Once you have a point of view and a focus, then there's value. Then people are coming to you for your style and ability and are willing to pay for that.

What are your tips for new photographers who want to break into commercial photography?

It's really hard, so your mantra has to be "stay diligent." It's impossible to fail if you work hard. I told myself as long as I'm diligent and I don't stop working for it I'm not going to fail at it.

Set goals. Put all sense of doubt aside and define your dream job. What would you like to be shooting that's going to make you happy every day? No one ever gets that all the time, but it's good to know and define that. Then you can take steps in that direction.



Photo by Chrissy Lynn

How can you build up your portfolio before you have clients?

One thing you can do is reach out to a local modeling or casting agency. You'd be surprised how great that can work out. Tell them you're a budding photographer and want to build your book in executive portraits. Ask if they have talent that needs examples like that for their portfolio. It's totally worth it because then you're building a relationship with an agency and other professionals out there are seeing your work. I still do testing with new models to try concepts I want to work out.

Do you have any tips for finding clients that may be open to working with new photographers?

When I was building my book in fashion photography, I Googled "San Francisco fashion designers" and looked for websites that could use better photography. If I really liked their brand, I reached out to them. When I reach out, I'm super friendly, but with a purpose, and I think people are receptive to that. Of the five designers that I reached out to, one of them is now a client. It's important to reach out directly to people you want to work for because they're not looking for you.

There's not a lot of money in editorial work, but you can get a lot of experience working with editors and writers. You'll meet interesting people and get tear sheets.

I also think it's important to pick your dream clients and reach out to them directly, when you're ready, when you have the work to show. That comes with gaining a level of confidence behind your work. When you're creating photography that is from your heart and you truly love doing it, it comes through in the imagery. When you love what you're doing, you stand behind it and you're more confident about your work. And then you're more confident to reach out to that dream client that might seem unreachable to you. Just reach out to them, you have nothing to lose.

What promotional tools do you use to reach out to clients you'd like to work for?

I use email marketing lists and targeted promos. I hand-select every one of my clients as opposed to sending lots of emails to a big list from a database. I think it's important to make it personal. Then it's real.



Photo by Chrissy Lynn

“When you're creating photography that is from your heart and you truly love doing it, it comes through in the imagery.”

I use an email template with one hero image that's my favorite at the moment or something that's tailored to them, and then three links to galleries with smaller thumbnails of recent projects and a link to my website. I send emails through [MailChimp](#), which lets me see who's opening and clicking through them. If they're clicking around, they've spent a little more time. If I really want to work with that person, I send them a direct mail piece.

When I create direct mail promos, I try to visualize what's going to happen when they open that package. Are they going to want to hang this up or prop it on their desk?

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You want them to have that picture by their desk so when that project comes around that your work could be a good fit for, you will be remembered. Occasionally I get a call from these pieces, but no one ever calls you right away.

How do you prepare for a meeting with a new client about a job?

I usually do a lot of research on the company to see who the people are and get an idea of what kind of revenue the company is generating. The meeting often involves educating them a little bit about usage licenses and image licensing. I learned that the hard way early in my career.

What happened?

I shot some product photography for a little company before they were anybody. They bought the shots from me for a very fair price. Later, the company contacted me wanting the high-res images for a billboard spot. I drew up a new purchase order for the new usage, and I never heard from them again. I found out that they had blown up my images to use on the side of three tour buses. There was tons of usage that I didn't get compensated for.

I think that it's really important when starting out to realize the value of your work and be sure to have the terms-of-use clearly stated. Don't be afraid that you'll lose a client because you're standing behind the value of your work.

What are your tips for quoting commercial jobs?

No two jobs are alike, so I definitely say research the client, get a clear understanding of the scope of the project, and never give a quote in the first conversation. I've shot myself in the foot before by giving a quote too early without a real understanding of the scope of the job. Ask a lot of questions. How many images do they want? What is the usage for those? Are we going to be indoors or outdoors? Can I have a scout day or do I need a scout day? Do we need hair and makeup or a wardrobe stylist?

A lot of times, asking people to give me a clear understanding of the job prompts them to ask more questions within their teams. A lot of times people don't always think about the total usage or if they will ever want to use the shots for a billboard,



Photo by Chrissy Lynn



Photo by Chrissy Lynn

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for example. Most people want unlimited use, unrestricted, but they don't realize that they never need that. Usually I find out what they want and I'll send them a quote for unlimited usage for them to share. Then I'll give them a quote for what they will likely use the photos for so they can see a range of what photography is really valued at and what it really costs. I'll give at least two estimates for a big commercial job.

Are there any other mistakes you've made that photographers could learn from?

Don't sell yourself short. I've done that so many times. There was a steady client I had for a few years, but I was working for a rate that wasn't really making me any money. At that time I was still building my fashion portfolio so I looked at working with her as a way to build that, but when she couldn't wiggle up to a reasonable rate, I eventually had to fire that client.

Not giving away your photography is very important to the integrity of the industry. It's really important to understand the value of photography, and that's a really hard thing to define when you're starting out.

How do you decide which jobs to take?

There are three things I like to consider for every job: Is the money good, is it good for my portfolio, and will I make a good connection with a person or company that's in the direction that I want to keep going in. If I can hit on two of those three things, then it's a solid deal. Sometimes it's just for the money, but if you're just starting out, it would be good to hit on at least one of those three things.



Photo by Chrissy Lynn



Photo by Chrissy Lynn

PART II

How to Make Your Marketing Hum

Featuring Emiliano Granado



emilianogranado.com

Emiliano Granado picked up a camera in 2001 as a hobby. He was working at a New York advertising agency and didn't like it at all, so he decided to take a class at International Center of Photography. It snowballed into a new career, and he was able to quit his job in 2005 and start freelancing as an assistant while shooting personal work. He got his first assignments in 2007.

Today, the Brooklyn, N.Y.-based photographer's portfolio includes work for commercial brands like Converse, Nike and Smirnoff. Granado is also a founder of [Yonder Journal](#) and [Manual for Speed](#), two creative projects partially underwritten by brands.

"I don't think of myself as specializing in one thing," Granado says. "I do quite a bit documentary style work, but also commercial and lifestyle stuff, portraiture and more humorous and youth culture stuff."

Here, Granado gives insight into his marketing strategy, which he describes as a "constant, pleasant background hum. Not a series of loud pops and bangs."

What types of clients are you trying to attract? Who are some of your favorites or ideal clients?

I'm kind of all over the place. I think it's great that I speak many languages, but sometimes it can be difficult to market yourself. Since I do so many things, I'm trying to attract a bunch of different clients. I'm definitely interested in portraiture. But I'm also looking for lifestyle/youth culture clients, as well as sports, athletics, and

outdoor stuff. And because I think I'm pretty versatile, spontaneous and shoot a lot compared to other photographers, I'm well suited to shoot large image libraries for brands.

I have a long relationship with Outlier Clothing that exemplifies the type of client I like. I get to shoot portraits, fashion, outdoors, in-studio and athletic style images for them. They are fusing tech, fashion and motion into one brand, so I get to flex different muscles.

Where do you focus most of your marketing efforts? Why?

You can choose to market yourself with big, loud tactics. I've chosen a slower approach with my marketing; I'll call it "white noise marketing." The secret for me has been to continue to produce quality images and quietly remind people about them. To do this, I like to send people anywhere from five to eight postcards a year and usually write something funny and personalized on the back. I'd hate to be the photographer version of a used car salesman with loud gimmicks and cheap suits. That's not the association I want people to make when they think about my work.

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The focus for me has always been and will always be “make good work.” Of course, I can do things to help promote that work, but if it sucks to begin with, then I’m failing. I’ll continue to self publish and create personal work—that is essential to me as a human and as a brand.

How does this translate into new and returning clients?

Every year since I started getting work, my business has progressively improved. The assignments get better. The budgets get bigger. I can’t really say any one thing is getting me new clients. But the cumulative efforts of producing good work and showing people that work over the last 10 years is yielding results.

What’s your digital marketing strategy? There are so many outlets these days; what do you find the most effective?

I’ve given up on several digital formats recently. I simply don’t have the time to make them compelling or interesting. They become a “Hey, look what I shot” thing, and that gets boring.

So I’ve honed it down to Instagram, a (almost) quarterly newsletter, and very infrequent Facebook and tumblr posts. Also, when I have a new project, I’ll share it with blogs or content aggregators. Depending on the project, I would share it with the editors at the photo blogs for The New Yorker, MSNBC or Time Lightbox. For press I try to share everything with PDN, but then I try to cast a wider net and have built relationships with design and art blogs like [It’s Nice That](#), [Coolhunting](#), etc. There are several cool small-scale photo blogs/aggregators that make sense for me like [Flak Photo](#), [Lintroller](#), [Paper Journal](#), etc.



Photo by Emiliano Granado

How much time to you devote to marketing efforts? What’s your workflow like for fitting it all in?

I think about marketing quite a bit. I like to send emails and introduce myself to potential clients and influencers. You have to build your network in order for that network to pay off for you.

I don’t have an established workflow for it. Between travel, shooting, family, trying to ride my bike and everything else, you find some time here and there to try to reach a new potential client. If I find out about a new agency doing cool things from a blog or Instagram post, I try to find out who the art directors are and send them postcards. Maybe I’ll email them and try to set up a



Photo by Emiliano Granado

“You have to be brave. You have to learn to put yourself out there and not get a response from someone.”

meeting. It depends on how much free time I have and how brave I'm feeling that day.

And that hits an important point. You have to be brave. You have to learn to put yourself out there and not get a response from someone. In general, you'll reach out to 100 people and only 20 of them will respond, and of those you'll only ever meet five of them in person and maybe one of those people hires you down the line two years from now. So you just spent several hours trying to reach 100 people and you failed 99 times. But that one person . . .

Can you explain your online \$10 print sales?

I published a new photo every week in 2014 and made 3 prints of it and sold it for \$10 each. Just enough to break even. You can still see all the photos on www.quesofrito.com. It was about forcing myself to publish work that was sitting on my hard drives. It was also a way to get people excited about the work that I was excited about. I had to honor those images by putting them into the world. Otherwise, no one would have ever seen them.

Can you point to some specific successes that have come directly from your marketing efforts?

I can think of two really specific successes. Many years ago, I found a cool new agency somewhere on the Internet. They had just started out and were doing some cool small projects. I found their address and sent them a postcard with a funny message. They really liked it and posted it on their blog. I eventually met them in person to say hi. We stayed friendly for years, and last year they asked me to shoot a really great project for a big athletic brand.

Back in 2008, I published a newsprint publication called “Thank God That’s Over.” It was a humorous photo es-

I say taken on a five-day cruise from New Jersey to Bermuda. It was every bit as awful as you can imagine. To this day, people still reference that newsprint thing. I learned that to make good photos is not enough. You have to package them up nicely and deliver it to the world in a format they will enjoy.

What marketing dos and don'ts have you learned along the way to attract the clients you want?

I try to engage potential clients the way I'd want to be engaged myself. Don't be annoying, don't be pushy, don't be irrelevant. Be entertaining, be yourself, speak candidly, don't be a robot, spellcheck, use pretty colors.

What advice do you have for new photographers about how to market to commercial clients in today's changing photography landscape?

You have to approach this whole thing as a long-term thing. Just because a photo editor followed you on Instagram doesn't mean you're going to get a job. Just because they responded to your email doesn't mean you're going to shoot the cover. You're going to bid a thousand jobs and not get any of them. You're going to strike out a million times before you get any jobs. No one owes you a damn thing. It's a slow, slow process, so bunker down for the long haul. The only thing that you can control is your creative output. Make sure it's fire.

"The only thing that you can control is your creative output. Make sure it's fire."



Photo by Emiliano Granado



Photo by Emiliano Granado



Photo by Emiliano Granado



Photo by Emiliano Granado

PART II

How to Make Shoot Day a Success & Keep Clients Happy

Featuring Steve Giralt



stevegiralt.com

Now based in New York City, Steve Giralt is a first-generation Cuban American photographer originally from Miami. He shoots for a variety of commercial and editorial clients including Starbucks, PepsiCo, GE, Smucker's, Captain Morgan, Johnston and Murphy, and Victoria's Secret. Here, he shares how he expanded his original focus as a travel photographer into a well-rounded client base, and other tips on making shoots go well and keeping clients happy.

How did you get started as a photographer?

I started out in photography working for my high school newspaper, then after graduation got a job at a high school portrait studio in Miami where I worked for four years. I eventually transferred to Rochester Institute of Technology. At RIT I explored many different genres of photography from fashion to still life, but my senior year I decided to try to pursue travel photography.

I moved to New York City in 2002 and started working as a photo assistant, digital tech and photo retoucher. A few months later I got my first shooting jobs for *Savueur* magazine and *Budget Travel*. In 2005, I was selected as one of PDN magazine's 30 emerging photographers to watch. After three years working as an assistant, I transitioned into shooting full-time.

How did you leverage your travel photography to get commercial work?

Over the next few years I slowly moved away from travel photography and instead started breaking down the work into separate portfolios and showing my work in a different way. As a travel photographer I would photograph people, architecture, food, still life and landscape. I decided it would be better to market myself in these different genres individually instead of grouping them all under the label "travel photographer." I had clients who would hire me to shoot food, some who would hire me to shoot portraits, some for still life, etc.

I now shoot for a mix of advertising, editorial, catalog and corporate clients in the genres of food, still life, portraits, motion and interiors. I really don't have a niche, which is rare for a New York photographer, but if I had choose one, I'd say it's always coming up with creative solutions to problems for my clients.



Photo by Steve Giralt

What are your tips for making shoot day a success? How do you solve problems or anticipate issues that may come up?

It really depends on the shoot but in general, communication is key to make sure that the shoot day goes successfully. I find many photographers, especially young photographers, are scared to ask clients questions. It is important to think of every “what-if” scenario before a shoot to make sure you know what you’ve agreed to. Most of the hard thinking and problem solving for a shoot is done before shoot day so that shoot day goes smoothly.

Putting together a great crew is also really important and making sure everyone on the team is aware of what they need to do. This is why we have conference calls and pre-pro books that lay out all the info for the shoot.

A pre-pro book is a document which, depending on the job, is either made by the producer on a job, the photographer himself, the photographer’s agent, or the producer at the agency. It contains all relevant information to the job that is going to be shot: the creative brief, call sheet, layouts and swipe related to the job, production schedule, and more depending on the job. On big jobs, a few days before the job, the client, agency,



Photo by Steve Giralt



Photo by Steve Giralt

photographer, and stylist all get on a conference call to go through the pre-pro book and make sure everyone is on the same page as to what will be happening on shoot day.

On shoot day the job of the photographer is to make sure that the client is happy with the images made, and that they enjoy the experience of making those images as a team. For repeat business I find it is important that not only the images made were great, but the experience was great.

How do you manage working with stylists, make-up artists, producers, etc., and getting the best work possible from them?

When one gets their start in photography, they usually begin as a one-man team. The longer I shoot, the more I have come to learn the importance of a great team. I'm constantly looking for new stylists to work with as every new project I take on has new needs. For example with food stylists, some may be great for food, but not great for beverages, or some may be great for editorial stories, but not great for advertising.

Knowing how to assemble a great team is vital to a photographer's success in the world of commercial photography. I find getting the best work out of a stylist is usually a matter of hiring the right stylist for the right job. This is where having a good network of friends in the industry is great. I usually hire new stylists almost entirely based on referrals from people I know or from agents I know well and know the way I work. It's hard to know how good a stylist may be from just looking at their portfolio, often times I'd rather meet them in person first before using them on a job.

What's the secret to great customer service and keeping a new client coming back for more after a shoot?

Be grateful! Very, very grateful! I frequently send thank you notes to clients after shoots, even clients who I have worked with for a decade. Just because someone has hired you in the past doesn't mean they will hire you again in the future. Treat every job as your first job with the same level of dedication and importance. Make sure you spend more time listening to your client than talking at them.

Also, I thank my clients twice a year for their generosity. Once a year I throw a big party and invite all my clients and people who have been good to me, and then at Christmas time I always send a gift to all the clients who hired me that calendar year. I try to get

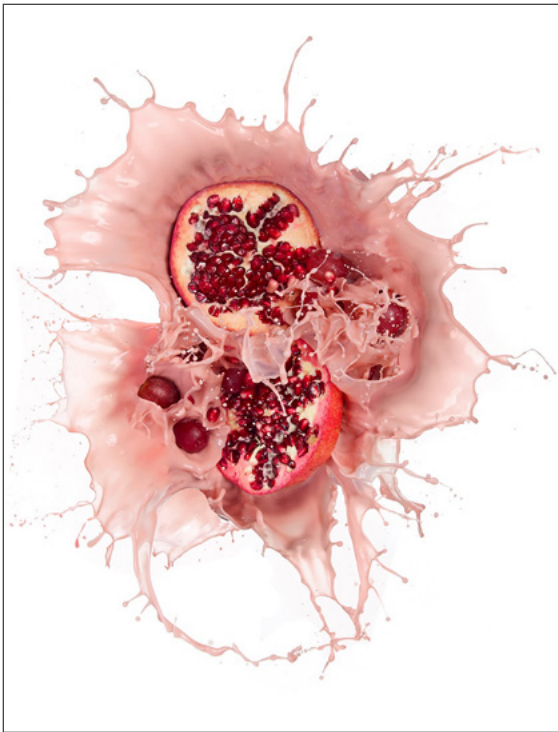


Photo by Steve Giralt



Photo by Steve Giralt

“The world often throws curve balls at you on a shoot, but a good photographer hits those curve balls out of the park every time.”

really creative with the gift I send to show I really care, and often there is a hand-made aspect to the gifts. One year I made cutting boards in my woodshop for each of them; another year I sent framed prints.

Do you have any shoot day dos or don'ts you can share?

The photographer must always be confident and in control of whatever is going on. The world often throws curve balls at you on a shoot, but a good photographer hits those curve balls out of the park every time. Plenty of unexpected things have happened to me on shoots, how I handled those things is why I get hired.

No matter what happens, as a commercial photographer you need to think fast and come up with solutions to difficult problems. Whether it means sending someone out

to buy a new table-top oven when the oven in your studio stops working, or renting a car and driving when a flight gets cancelled (both of which have happened to me), the client expects you to do everything possible to make sure a shoot happens as planned. If you fail to do that, you may not get hired again.

What are some mistakes you've made in the past others could learn from?

Losing touch with old clients would have to be the worst of the mistakes I regret. The fact that someone took a chance to hire me, I shot the job they hired me to do, then I lost touch, is horrible. Existing and past clients are your very best source of work for the future, and not staying in touch means you don't care about getting more work from them in the future.

PROFILE

Integrating Your Personal Style into Commercial Work

Featuring Kareem Black



🏠 kareemblack.com

Kareem Black graduated from the School for Visual Arts in 2000 when the economy was flush, and he quickly found work for clients like *The Fader*, *GQ*, *Elle Girl*, Sony Music Entertainment and Atlantic Records. Featured in 2005 as one of *Photo District News*' 30 Emerging Photographers, Black is now known for both his top-notch studio abilities as well as his talent for capturing the frenetic energy of New York's party scene. This New York-based photographer had a lot to share with us about marrying personal work with commercial clients.

How did you get started with commercial clients?

When I graduated in 2000, the economy was really great. I started to shoot for a lot of people that, if the economy was otherwise, I wouldn't have been able to. I was getting hired for a lot of jobs that I wasn't really qualified for. I was shooting for a lot of music magazines and websites. From those connections, I started to shoot for *The Fader*, which was more artsy.

I was going out a lot and meeting people. A lot of my business has come from just meeting people out. My first ad campaign came from a connection I made out at a function. I showed him my book. We shot a small smoking-awareness campaign. After that we shot a Cingular campaign that was my first big campaign. Then I started shooting for Verizon based on a friend of the person who I was shooting Cingular for. That was all from word of mouth.

Now that photography is more competitive, how do you stand out?

There are so many good photographers that it almost doesn't matter how good you are. If you're good there are hundreds of photographers who are that technically good. So it's about finding your own vision. When I started, I didn't know what I wanted to say with my photography. But I was good at light, I was good with people, and that was really important.

How have you turned your personal work into something commercial clients will hire you for?

When I'm out and about, I find myself in weird situations. I started taking pictures of these situations, running around and catching moments. It's not so much about lights and composition, it's more about feeling and energy.

“My clients know I can actually shoot a campaign and be able to sell a product, while at the same time conveying that spontaneous energy.”

My previous agent was scared of it because they thought that a lot of it was unprofessional. My current agency is a lot more forward-looking and realized that this is where the industry was going. They said we should probably do something with this body of work. I thought they were crazy. Why would people want to see pictures of a lot of good looking people having a good time in groups? It turns out people like that.

So I started to make a body of work, and I called it *Feels Good Let's Go*. Lights can be blown out or imperfect, compositions don't have to be perfect. Expressions don't have to be perfect, and people's heads can be cut off. I think that as long as the story is clear for the viewer, then that's sort of mitigates the aesthetic perfection.

A lot of what I get hired for now is in the vein of *Feel Good Let's Go*. With that said, I was just in LA shooting the cover of *Cosmo*, and it was me with a bunch of lights. The photos turned out really beautiful. I think it's important to be able to do both. I enjoy both.

How do you market these two different styles?

I used to have two websites, my photography site and a *Feel Good Let's Go* site. My name wasn't even on it. The contact info was my agent's email. Now it's integrated into my site. It's the first thing you come to. I'm really proud of that. If someone's hiring me to do that, that's awesome because I was doing that for free already.

How do you translate this personal work for a commercial client?

No one's going to pay me an advertising rate and send me out with a camera to do whatever. Coming from a more structured background, I understand that we're here to do a job. I

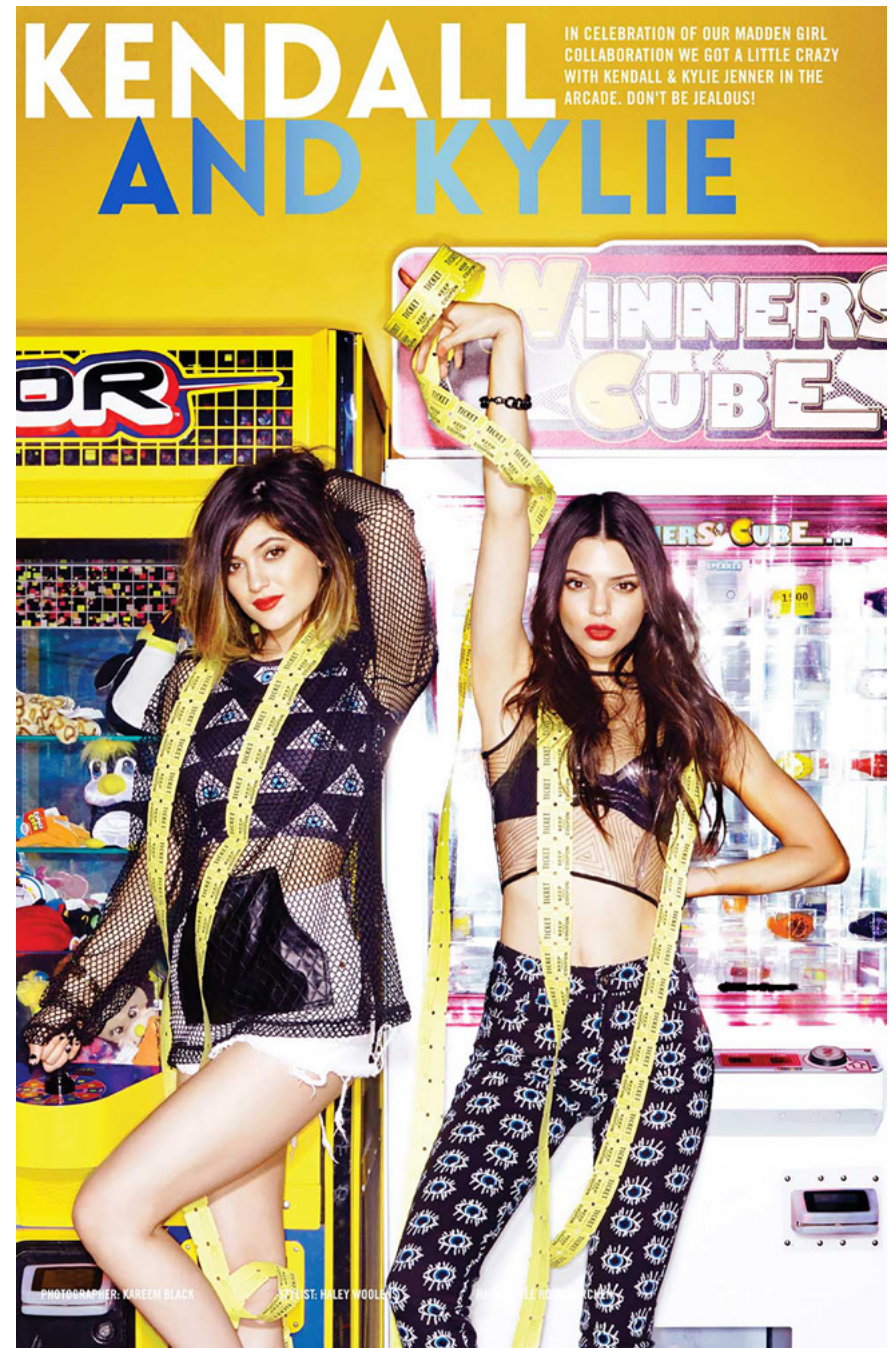


Photo by Kareem Black



Photo by Kareem Black

think I'm pretty good at finding that line of "let's get crazy" but "what do you guys need?" I make sure to know what we are selling and what are the important bullet points to hit.

My clients know I can actually shoot a campaign and be able to sell a product, while at the same time conveying that spontaneous energy. It looks like there's not a lot of thought, it looks like all kinetic energy, but there really is a lot of thought. We are partying, but the party must stop if the label's not facing the camera.

What advice do you have for a photographer who wants to leverage a personal project into commercial work?

I think people should shoot what they like to shoot, and they should show it to as many people as possible. You'd be surprised—there are applications out there for everything. If it is really personal work, then that means it's not everyone's thing. This is your thing. In a lot of ways, we all have to wait until your thing or moment is up. Feel Good Let's Go happened at the right time. This is what's happening right now in photography. It's sellable now, but it might not be five years from now.

My other suggestion would be to learn the commercial, technical stuff. I'm happy I know how to use lights and light ratios and retouching because maybe there's a day when my personal work isn't going to be selling and I'll have this other thing to do also. Being a technical photographer and understanding how photography works is really, really important.

What are some of your biggest challenges of being a commercial photographer?

In a perfect world, a photographer would come on set and take pictures, but there are a lot of things that happen before that point can be reached. There's a lot of stuff that we do that doesn't have anything to do with making pictures. I'm on a lot of conference calls, and I write a lot of treatments explaining what I want to do and how I'm going to do it on a shoot. In most ways, I'm OK with being that sort of a politician, but it can be frustrating. But at the end of the day, it's our job. It's better than being in a cubicle.

How do you keep your cool and deliver under pressure when working with big clients?

The photographer is the captain of the ship. If something goes wrong, it's always our fault. It doesn't matter if the make-up artist is late or whatever. The stress level

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is higher, and it gets more intense the bigger the job. That's why we get paid more money than everybody else—because we have more responsibility. It can be fun but also so draining. You are on the entire day. You're not just taking pictures, you're wearing all of these hats, and making sure that everyone is where they're supposed to be psychologically.

You want the vibe to be cool and drama-free on set. Delegating responsibility to the right people and making them feel appreciated is important. If you want to have a power trip on set, that's going to kill the vibe of everything. If there's a conversation I need to have with the client—like if there's a difference of opinion or a question about how to solve a certain problem—then we're going to have that conversation, but we're not going to have it in front of everyone.

My mom's a doctor—she saves people's lives. Making pictures is easy compared to that. That's the vibe that I go with. Let's just take some pictures. Let's go. It's not a life or death situation.

What are your tips for someone starting out in commercial photography?

The rules have remained the same. Don't be a dick. Show up on time. Do your shoots under budget. And show your work to as many people as you possibly can. And always shoot what you love. Never lose sight of that. Keep in mind that this is a business and there are a lot of people out there who will take your place.

Find names in mastheads of magazines—it's an old technique, but it still works. Go to industry parties. Meet people. You have to, it's just not going to happen on its own. If you don't, someone else will.

How do you use social media?

Social media is vitally important. On many levels, Facebook is still essential. I feel like that's a staple. I think Instagram is super-important, especially right now for photographers. The rest of them, I'm not very into.

At the core of everything should be the photographer's website. The website should purely be work. Leading out from the hub, there are sites like Instagram and Twitter where you are doing behind the scenes or telling a little bit more of the story about yourself.



Photo by Kareem Black

I'm very careful about posting things that are controversial. I want you to know who I am. I'm telling the story that I want to tell and editing it the way that I want to edit it. If there's something that I really want to show my friends, I'm going to just text it. Social media is something photographers need to do every day, but we need to maximize how efficiently we use these things. It's easy to get caught up and be on it all day.

How do you recommend dealing with the inevitable rejection that comes with being a photographer?

I think it can never be taken personally. What I would say would be, again, show your work to everyone you possibly can. Just because it doesn't happen at that point in time, doesn't necessarily mean it was a rejection. Maintain those relationships. If you meet with an agent, ask them what they think about your work. Do you think there are other agents that would like my work right now? Agents see a lot of photography, and they know what sells, so asking them can't possibly hurt.



Photo by Kareem Black



Photo by Kareem Black

PROFILE

Buyer Interview

Featuring Cali Capodici

DIGITAS

Based in Philadelphia, Cali Capodici is the Art Producer at Digitas Health for the New York, Philadelphia, and San Francisco offices. She handles all photography, illustration, CGI and retouching requests, and works with creative directors as they come up with visual concepts to find photographers and artists who are appropriate for each project.

What photography marketing tactics get your attention?

I work heavily on relationships, people that I know do great work and work well with clients, but really interesting promos are always eye catching. I tell photographers when you are doing your marketing remember that agency people get tons of promos each day, so think outside the box and do something that would stick out, don't be afraid to push the envelope. Also, when you choose your image for your promo think of something that someone would want to hang on their wall at their desk.

What elements of typical photographers' website do you like or not like?

I love when I can see all the thumbnails and it's very user friendly. For photography agents I really like when they have categories broken out for their artists so you know who shoots food, lifestyle, interiors, etc.

Where do you typically go to find new commercial photographers?

I love following and finding photographers on Instagram, I also love when PDN puts out the 30 under 30. I'm a member of a forum for Art Producers where people are always giving advice or providing names of great photographers they have worked with. It's a great way to try someone new, but also get some background info on how they work.

What kind of images/style are you looking for?

I really look for every type of image, I love all styles of photography. Typically what catches my eye is great use of light, interesting angles or shots, if it has people I really love when the shot looks natural, not posed or contrived.

Any advice for new photographers trying to get your attention?

I keep going back to this, but I really believe it's so important to build and nurture your relationships. Get out there and network, and be genuine. This business is a lot

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about who you know and how you treat people. A photographer's rep that I have known for years once said to me people and the relationships are the real currency of your life, it's not always about money.

What advice would you have for new photographers trying to break into the commercial market?

I would advise photographers to work really hard and be nice to people. It sounds simple, but it's true. So many people are talented, but not everyone wants to work hard. If you outwork the person to your right and the person to your left you will be the one that gets noticed. It's also really important to network like crazy. Email people, ask questions, ask for advice. If you are genuine and show ambition and curiosity it will take you very far.

Do you have any dos and don'ts for photographers when working with an agency?

I recommend being flexible. Things may change, requests and shot lists may get larger, but understand that building that relationship with your producer and creatives at the agency is really important. Keep your cool, but don't over promise something if you aren't sure you can get everything they are requesting.

When you're working with a new photographer, what are some qualities that make you want to hire them again?

I'm really big on relationships, so if we work together and you really go the extra mile and are fun while doing it, I will come back to you time and time again.



Photo by Gus Butera

I worked with a photographer recently on a really difficult shoot. He made it easy because he was so flexible, and also very honest about what was attainable and what he thought we may not be able to get. He never said no off the bat, but offered solutions of ways we might be able to get the best product. He was great under pressure, and I genuinely enjoyed my time with him. I will always think of him for jobs in the future and will give him the highest recommendation if anyone asks me about him.



Photo by Jeremy & Claire Weiss



Photo by Erik Umphery

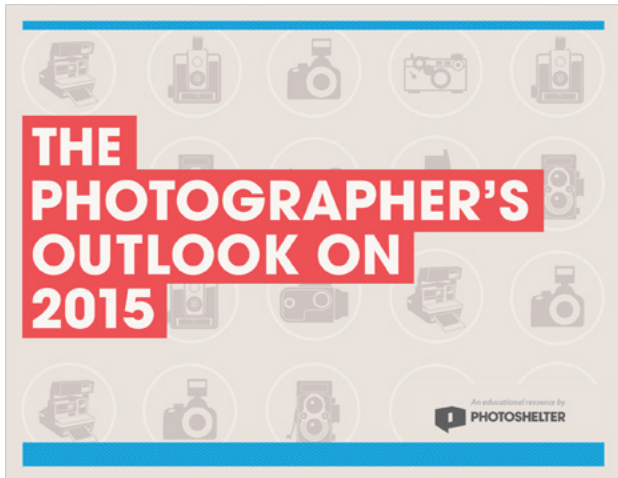


Photo by Melanie Acevedo

PART III

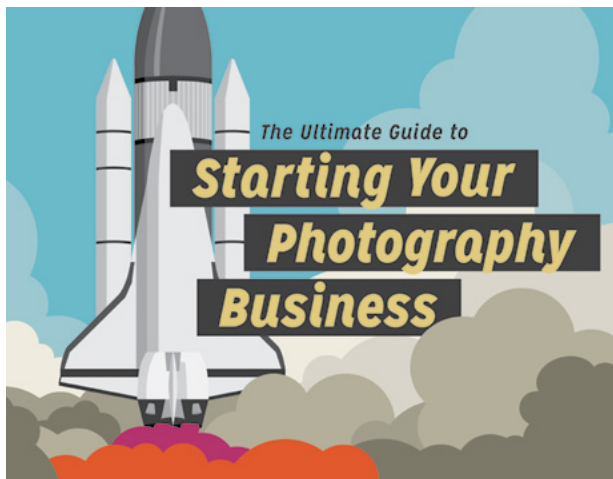
Conclusion

As you can tell from the photographers we interviewed, a successful commercial photographer must wear many hats. The best have a healthy mix of creative vision and savvy business sense along with the ability to get along with a range of personalities. If you're inspired to take the leap into commercial photography, use their tips to start honing your skills building a portfolio, and reaching out to clients. Soon, you'll be on your way to an exciting, challenging and rewarding career. Ready, aim, shoot!



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