

7 Tips for Growing Your Photography Business

FOCAL



Photography is a **competitive business**.

It can be hard to break in when you're getting started. Not only does your work have to be top-tier — you also have to be a skilled marketer and excellent with people. There are choices to make: what to do with your website? What about social media?

It's a lot for anyone to juggle — but we want to see you thrive.



Photo: Marlboro Wang Photo

We've designed this mini-guidebook with your business in mind. Perhaps you're looking to book your first client. Perhaps you've had dozens of clients and are ready to take the next step. No matter where you are in your career, these principles hold true. They're sourced from the best photographers I've met and worked with.

No gimmicks. Just practical knowledge, time-tested and proven repeatedly.

Sincerely,

Lachlan Shum
Founder and CEO, Focal Inc.



Photo: Ooh Ooh Darling Photography



Photo: Marlboro Wang Photo

1. Connect with other photographers

This is one of the easiest, most transformative ways to build your business, but it's often overlooked by photographers getting their start. As wide-open an industry as photography is, it's also a small one. Photographers know each other. Unless you're in Tokyo or New York City, the degrees of separation are few.

Maybe you're not a natural networker. That's fine! Be authentic with who you are. But building relationships with other photographers in your area is a long-term investment. What you're really building is trust and a support network. These are the people who will send you their clients when they're too busy for a shoot.

3 tips to connect with photographers:

1. Don't be afraid to send an email

Admire someone's work? Tell them! Be specific about what you admire, and ask if they wouldn't mind a phone call or coffee. People love to talk about the things they're passionate about. You'd be surprised how easy it is to meet willing mentors.

2. Ask to be a second shooter

This is a great way to build your portfolio. Done plenty of portraits, but never a wedding? Tagging on as a second shooter for another photographer's gig can build your confidence and get you the photos you need.

3. Look for meet-ups and social events

The best way to meet your peers and build your network is in-person. Meetup.com is a good starting point to find those common interest groups in your community.

2. Treat your website like a storefront



Photo: Marlboro Wang Photo

Imagine you walk into the most beautiful art gallery. Everything you see on the walls is brilliant, but there are no prices next to the paintings. Are you going to want to buy anything? Probably not. You'll browse around, say, "wow, these are great," and then leave.

Too many photographers treat their websites like personal art galleries. They're beautiful to look at, but there's nothing to buy. Instead, you should think of your website as a storefront.

Stock your shelves! But it's not enough to list items for sale — you need to tell the story behind your work. (We designed Focal's portfolio system to make this super easy.) Why should customers book with you when another photographer offers the same number of photos for less? What makes *you* stand out? Answer this question, and you're set for success.

Want an easy and effective portfolio and booking system for your website? Consider Focal. [Learn more here.](#)

3. Use free shoots strategically

Nobody wants to work for free — and you deserve to be paid for your work. But there are times when offering free photo-shoots is in your interest. If your portfolio is slim, free shoots give you a chance to build your body of work, while also offering practice in how to shoot and work with people.

There are ways to do this smartly. Let's say you've never shot a wedding before. There are always new creatives — designers, models — who want to collaborate. Look for the fashion designers in town who have dresses they want to promote. Find models who are looking to build their portfolios, too (a good resource is modelmayhem.com). Buy a fake bouquet and plan a sunset session in a beautiful spot. It takes work to arrange, but you'll get the portfolio shots you need.

You could also offer giveaways — but don't let your giveaway winners go too easily, says photographer Marlboro Wang: "Ask them to at least write you a review on WeddingWire, Facebook, and Google. Then, you're not giving your work away for free. And if they enjoy working with you, they're a potential client in the future."

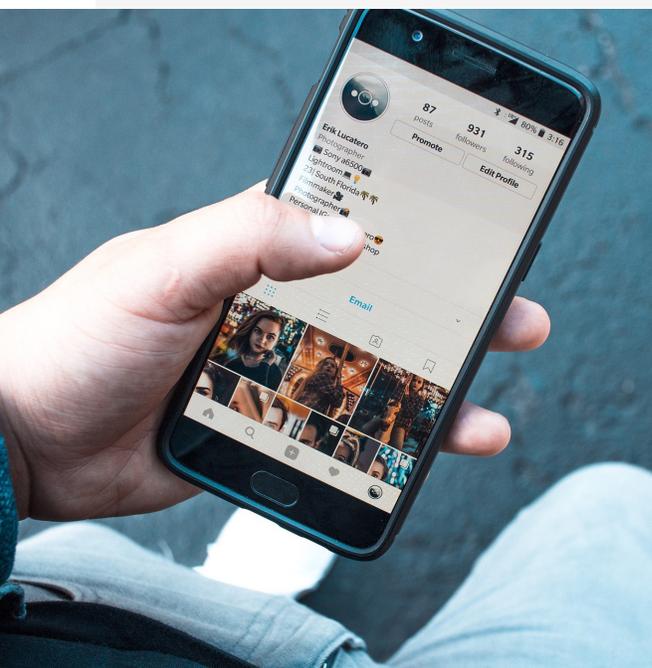
Pro tip: convey your value

Even when you're offering a free shoot, there are ways to indicate to clients or contest winners the value you're providing. Send them an invoice as you would for any regular client and include the cost of your work (making sure to account for your time and the shots you provided).

For example, if you're offering a free half-hour mini shoot, you might value your time at \$275.

Then, you can add a line for your discount (e.g. "Free shoot: -\$275) and your clients will get the true sense of the value you've offered them.

4. Don't spread yourself thin on social media



Social media is a highly valuable tool as a photographer and businessperson. But it's not the only tool. And you shouldn't spend all of your time trying to maintain a presence on every platform. If you did that, you wouldn't have any time left for taking photos. And too much focus on social media can distort your brand as a photographer.

"On Instagram especially, there's so many trends that [come and go]," says photographer Rob Wilson. "Even spots. One [photographer] posts a picture of a certain spot, and then all of a sudden, everyone's taking a picture of that same spot."

"At one point in time, I was really [caught up in] that," he says. "I am more focused now on creating a portfolio that really speaks to me, versus a portfolio that just speaks to trends."

5. Build an email list

Unlike social media platforms where algorithm changes dictate how many of your followers see your content, email campaigns are still among the most effective methods for reaching your target audience. As per Data & Marketing Association, for every dollar spent on email marketing, you can expect an **average return of \$42**. Now that's good ROI.

Email is so effective because of its engagement rate. Customers are far likelier to click and open an email than they are to interact with a Facebook post or favourite a tweet. And because with email lists, you have a direct link with your audience, you don't have to worry about pesky changes to Facebook's algorithm. You can share your work, promote your business, and focus on building your relationship with clients.

Need ideas for your newsletter?

Try including one (or both) of the following:

Perks

Everyone loves to be given special treatment. Give your subscribers the opportunity to sign up for exclusive photo giveaways or promotional deals. Looking to build on your headshot portfolio? Offer a contest to subscribers for a free shoot, and you'll grow your skills at the same time.

Behind-the-scenes content

Bring your subscribers into your world! Show them what an afternoon of shooting with you is like. Offering a look at the process that leads to your beautiful photos can also help in conveying the true value of all the time you put into your work.

6. Offer mini-sessions

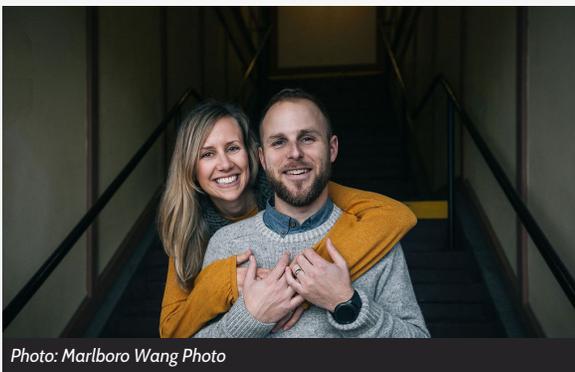


Photo: Marlboro Wang Photo

For mini-sessions, stick to a **single location** and set clear expectations on how many photos your clients will receive.

Sometimes, people don't have time for a two-hour photoshoot. Offering clients the option of mini-sessions (e.g. single-location 30-minute shoots) can increase your client base. For customers with lower budgets, it can still be a great option for booking shoots at a rate that's affordable for them. And the more happy clients you book, the more people you have to sing your praises to their friends, family, and colleagues.

Mini-sessions are especially popular around holidays, when families are getting together. Consider promoting the sessions on your social media platforms around Thanksgiving and Christmas. The other bonus? They're quick and easier to fit into your schedule — always a plus when you're looking to fill the calendar between bigger shoots.

7. Focus on the experience



The biggest difference between professional photographers and amateurs isn't in the gear, the photo composition, or how talented they are with Lightroom. It's the *professionalism* that separates the two: the experience they're able to provide clients.

It's ironic, but when I started Focal, I thought there was a market demand for hobbyist photographers who could offer their services for half the price of professionals. All it took was a single botched photoshoot to see what I'd overlooked.

"It's people skills as much as photography skills," says photographer Naomi Maya. "You can't just be there in the background and take photos; you have to really connect with and direct the people you're with."

Learning how to guide your subjects will not only lead to better photos, but a better experience for your clients. And that, in turn, will build repeat business. Remember: people before photos.

BONUS: Don't splurge on expensive gear right away

When starting a business of any kind, it is prudent to keep your costs to a minimum. There is certainly a case for buying good equipment that will last, but that doesn't have to be the latest, most expensive gear.

You can find a good quality, reliable camera secondhand. (Photographers' groups on Facebook are a good place to search.) Same with good lenses and a sturdy tripod. Stick to the basics. You can opt for fancy later — and anyway, it's more important that you focus first on your technique.

There are some things you will need to buy: a website and editing software are must-haves. (Adobe's Lightroom is considered the industry standard.) Beyond that, stick to this tenet: don't spend your money until you can afford to.



"A camera didn't make a great picture any more than a typewriter wrote a great novel." - Peter Adams