

The Five Truisms of the Photography Business Text copyright Dan Heller, all rights reserved

Editor's note: The author first published this article around 5 years ago. A similar version of the truisms appears in the author's 2005 book, "Profitable Photography in the Digital Age." For more information visit www.danheller.com/truisms. Readers are invited to respond to the editors with their own experiences and opinions.

This article is directed towards the existing working photographer first, but obviously anyone considering going into the photography business will eventually witness the general culture of the members of the photographic community.

This culture is born out of certain attributes associated with this kind of business: photographers are independent, almost always working alone either as a small business owner (with or without employees), or as "freelance" workers. Usually, working photographers make their money either on assignment for a client who pays them to shoot a subject, or at their own expense where they sell their work as "stock" photography or as artwork. No matter what kind of photography you shoot, or how you conduct your photo business, what we all have in common are those attributes just outlined.

It follows that certain attitudes and behaviors would develop as a result of these unique working conditions, especially when it becomes more difficult to make a living as a photographer in this changing world of media, technology and communications.

In order to succeed in this market, one must recognize certain basic, unalterable facts about the industry, and adopt attitudes, paradigms, and business practices consistent with those facts. To better illustrate these ideas, let me start with a description of the current culture and background of the photo community.

In order to succeed in this market, one must recognize certain basic, unalterable facts about the industry, and adopt attitudes, paradigms, and business practices consistent with those facts.

Current Culture

Unlike many careers, photography attracts those from very diverse backgrounds. While some have post-doctorate degrees in everything from computer science to theater arts, others have never completed high school. Ironically, only a small percentage of working photographers went to school for photography or got a degree in it or a related field.

Because photography is an art and a skill in which many people learn, develop and excel, there's a perception among non-photographers that it's an unskilled labor/craft that doesn't really warrant a great deal of pay. The problem has been exacerbated by current high-end technology that has allowed novices and non-serious amateurs to take particularly high quality pictures.

And here's where the problem starts.

Because most photographers are independent, the very natural and predictable reaction to this perception is to band together to make a force stronger than themselves as individuals. Indeed, this is the defining characteristic of the community---photographers have summarily adopted a "unionist" approach to their business: the notion that the success of all photographers depends on the "all for one, and one for all" approach, where the chain is only as strong as its weakest link.

Accordingly, the following mantras have become the battle cry for the working photographer: "never work for free," "never give up rights," and the all-encompassing "just say no" [to bad contracts]. This is all under the grand umbrella of "you hurt yourself and everyone else with you if you break any of these mantras."

While these mantras appear to be good, sound bits of advice, all too often their adoption actually clouds one's judgment about making longer-term career decisions. How? Primarily because adherence embodies a combative, us-against-them attitude which perpetuates a division between the photographer and client. A very close secondary reason is that it misses the bigger picture about how to accomplish your goals within your career objectives.

Obviously, I'm not suggesting that one adopt the opposite approach—that is, **I don't advocate working for free, or giving your work away, or anything like that.**

However, there are times when a certain photo opportunity may give you new or advanced opportunities in the future that could clearly be more lucrative, or would establish a name for yourself, or credibility, not to mention visibility, which is the primary marketing factor in the photo business.

Regardless of the circumstances, everyone's career starts at the bottom rung of the ladder, and moving up often requires making compromises and a willingness to work for less than what you think you're worth. But remember, advancement and financial opportunity aren't necessarily found in the immediate payment for services for a given task. **It's your job to find the hidden opportunities associated with each photograph or assignment.**

Alfred Stieglitz once said about photography, "...if there is light, there is a picture." His point was that no matter what you are given to shoot, a good photographer will find a good picture in it. You may have to look really hard and get creative, but a picture is there, and your job is to find it.

***It's your job to find the hidden opportunities
associated with each photograph or assignment.***

The Business of Photography: Think Smart

I have a similar approach to the business of photography: if there is an opportunity to take a picture, there is a business to be made from it. You may have to look really hard and get creative, but one is there, and it's your job to find it.

The counter-point is that Stieglitz attempted to prove his theory by leaving his camera shutter open in his basement over night, and what he got the next day was a tiny streak when a mouse happened to run across the floor. Not much of a picture, illustrating that perhaps there may be an exception to his rule. Similarly, not every photo assignment may be a good opportunity. Smart thinking must be employed.

The point is that there is a paradigm here. And this new way of looking at business opportunities in photography may be new to some. Thinking in terms of "finding opportunity," you must look at situations in those terms, and check them against these new, unalterable facts about the photography business in today's new market.

The Five Truisms of the Photography Business:

1. **There will always be someone willing to work under lesser favorable terms than you, whether it's out of ignorance, or because it is a good deal for them.** You cannot change this; it will always be true, and you cannot expect clients or anyone else to look out for your business because of this Truism #1. There are two categories of people who fall into this truism, which further explains why there is nothing you can do about it:
 - a. More people have photography as a hobby than those who have it as a profession. There are many people who happen to be excellent photographers, but have no intent, desire, or motivation to make a career out of it. These people are tickled pink when someone wants to publish one of their pictures, and I place no fault on publishers for seeking them out. The nature of a free economy is that everyone seeks the best financial opportunity they can for the product or service they want. If both sides are happy, business is done.
 - b. Some photographers may have different objectives than you, which may mean they use different methods than you in accomplishing them. If a photographer is willing to work for less (or even for FREE) because it gives him or her access to photos, experience, or some other benefit that makes this assignment personally worthwhile, then that will happen. It's not anyone else's responsibility to look out for your interests. (See Truism #5.)
2. **Making assumptions about your clients' business, and setting expectations of your business terms based on those assumptions, is faulty.** The predominate assumption is that a publisher is a mega-corporation with deep pockets that "can" pay photographers a living wage as a day-rate, but they don't because they're out to screw the photographer. This is counter-productive, even in the cases where it's true (but especially in the cases where it isn't), because you assume the worst first, which puts you in a bad negotiating posture.

This is about negotiation, not ethics. Recognition of this reality will help optimize your contractual relationship. You may be able to use facts to your advantage in negotiation, but you cannot expect better terms from your client simply because you know they can afford to pay you more. You need to focus on compelling business reasons to support your negotiating position.

3. **If you get emotional and show it, it will only compromise your negotiating position.** It is NOT the responsibility of the client to do right by you, and you can't get "upset" when they don't offer you favorable terms. If a client presents you with a contract that's in their favor, you're supposed to reply with a counter-proposal in your favor. Eventually, as the game goes, you compromise and meet in the middle. Don't be insulted because a contract may appear blatantly unfair—just make the appropriate changes and send it back. If business is going to happen, then you'll both work it out. And don't expect business to always happen.
4. **You must diversify your business.** Consider an assignment because of its long-term opportunities, not just the short

term pay (if any). One cannot earn a living from a single client, on single assignments, or on day rates. It is your responsibility to evolve, to broaden your business model to go where the money is, to do things in ways you wouldn't or couldn't before. The old days of livable day rates are gone, and complaining about it is like the old horse-carriage drivers complaining that the new automobiles with engines are taking their jobs away.

5. **Not all photographers are equal.** This is not an assembly line, unskilled labor force, where you can join a union, get a standard rate of pay out of the gate, and be given guarantees about how "the man" treats you. (In other words, stop thinking like a unionist.) If someone offers you a job to shoot something that you feel isn't worth it to you, you aren't going to change their minds by adopting the mantra "just say no" and expecting people to fall in line behind you. The client is just going to find someone else, as per Truism #1.

When you see other, more experienced photographers doing better than you, it's because of WHO they are, not because it's fair or reasonable. If two photographers are equal in talent, experience and all other things related to the job, and they are paid differently, it's the PHOTOGRAPHER's fault, not the business's. I'll admit the most frustrating thing in the world is seeing a photographer who's WORSE than you getting assignments ahead of you, or being paid more than you. Sadly, this is the way of the world. **If you are better, it's your job to find the opportunities, in whatever form necessary, to prove this to your potential client.**

Lastly, you are NOT screwing other photographers, and they are not screwing you if someone accepts terms that you consider to be "bad for the industry." Photographers cannot and should not necessarily look out for each other. Sure, it's nice when we can all do something that helps the "collective," but this is rare, and expecting it to continue (or even happen) is naive. This is not about solidarity. The reality is that photographers compete with each other, either on the same terms, or simply due to the fact that objectives may differ. I had one photographer yell at me, saying, "You are preventing someone from feeding his family," because this person heard that I shot an event pro-bono for a non-profit company. It's not my responsibility to make sure someone else can't make a success out of his or her business.

Reality Checks

The business world is harsh, and it's part of the package when you choose to become an independent working photographer. Recognition of these realities will not only help you consider your business objectives more realistically, but should help you think about how you should react to any given situation.

Application of these truisms should help you think more carefully about an assignment that comes your way. Before "just saying no," I advise you to ask these questions first:

1. Are there "resale" opportunities?
2. Is there sellable "art"?
3. Is there great credibility or other marketing aspects I can exploit because of the nature of the customer?
4. Is there experience I can gain that I don't yet have?

I consider ALL possible ways I can make this favorable to me before I let it go. If I can't make a good business opportunity out of this in some direct or indirect way, I turn it down. In short, "I just say no."

If you're a good photographer, you can get higher rates because you've established a working relationship with people. You have convinced them through your working relationship that they know they're going to get good results, and the risk factor is low. That's worth something. People who pay for cheaper photographers are taking a risk . . . let them do that and possibly fail. Or, let them win, and find out they can get good work for less money. That's how a free market works.

If you are being asked to take a worse contract, lower rates, or give up rights, this is a very clear sign that you should have moved up and out long ago. You are overqualified for your job if you aren't getting paid adequately for your services. It may be that you can convince someone of your worth—perhaps by adding new ideas to how they can benefit from your services, or by reinforcing the lower-risk they have by working with you—but the writing is on the wall, and regardless of the outcome, it does show that it's time to move on.



Dan Heller is a freelance travel photographer who runs his stock photo business strictly from his website at www.danheller.com. He is most known for his books and articles on the photography business and his analysis of the photo industry. For upcoming workshop information on the business of travel and stock photography, go to www.danheller.com/cgi/orderform.pl?action=may3.

Feel free to send your comments on this article to the [editors](#) at NatureScapes.Net.