

**Photo Marketing Isn't About Pushing; it's About Pulling**  
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Marketing is easily the most befuddling aspect of the photography business that people just can't seem to get. Whether art directors who might hire you, ad agencies who license your photos, or art buyers who buy your prints, how to get noticed by clients is the holy grail to building a successful photo business. There are copious books on the subject espousing the best ways for photographers to promote themselves, whether it's through their websites, or creating photo portfolios, and all of them give very similar (if not identical) advice: push yourself out to the market by trying to establish direct contact with clients.

The fundamental problem with this marketing method is that it assumes that selling photography is only about just putting together a collection of good-looking images and getting them to clients. If that were the case, then we would have essentially a lottery, where the winner is the one who buys the most lottery tickets (by way of sending out portfolios and trying to blindly establish contacts with as many buyers as possible), and has enough luck that the odds eventually go in his or her favor.

But playing the lottery isn't really the best way to build a career. To properly build a photo business, you need to establish your business's foundation before implementing a marketing plan. These books discuss marketing as if the business foundation is simply "photography," and from there, you start to market it. And here is where the books - and this entire strategy - have it wrong. Your business foundation is not photography, it's the business behind the subject of your photography.

"Push Marketing" is where you initiate contact with a client directly. "Pull Marketing" is where you promote yourself through publishing in a way that gets the attention of those who share the same interests (personal or business). The perpetuation of your ideas (and presumably, your photography) earns credibility, which invariably results in clients initiating first contact. They were "pulled in."

Devising the proper approach to marketing is not comprised of a series of sequential steps or "to do" list items. Start by having a good handle on the fundamental businesses behind the photos you shoot. For example, one of the people who emailed me shoots kid pictures, mostly in the fashion area. She has a website that shows a portfolio of pictures and a blog where entries consist mostly of her personal relationship with photography and some other insights to her personal life. Needless to say, nothing of what I saw shows any insight at all about children's fashion.

"Whatever it is you know," I said, "it's not apparent to me. You write a blog, but I see nothing that talks about fashion or the industry itself. You're just throwing out random thoughts and ideas about random subjects. Tell the reader what are the latest children's clothing trends for the age groups you know. Who are the companies and designers that are setting these trends? What's going out and why? What should we be on the lookout for in the next line up?"

In general, whatever your target industry is for photography, you have to know the answers to similar questions. If you can't answer those questions, don't have any expectations of being a photographer in this field. If you can answer those questions, then the first obvious thing to do is write about it. You don't have to be right, just informed. Make your blog and/or website worth reading by people in the industry. Keep an eye on who your target audience is. An art director should see that you know something about the business that she's about to hire you for.

Of course, you also want your photos to reflect what you write. Your web site isn't there just to prove that you're a good photographer. We all assume that's the case, but oddly, even that plays second fiddle to knowledge. Over time, your blog contributions and engagements in other discussion forums on the subject will, if your ideas and analysis are sound, generate interest, which lead to links to your site, which boosts your search rankings, which brings traffic, which turns into sales.

One thing needs to be made very clear: it isn't that easy (or fast) to gain that kind of credibility. And just because you may engage in pull marketing practices doesn't itself guarantee success. You have to have good ideas that people like and perpetuate to others. It takes time to know an industry well enough to attract a critical mass of readers or followers. So, what does your marketing plan look like in the interim? Unless and until you have knowledge about the industry that is the subject of your photography, your marketing efforts will have little success. So, rather than asking, "How should I market myself," the better question is to ask is, "What's the best use of my time?"

All your activities during your ramp-up to being known will not be thought of as "marketing" now, but will be used as a platform from which to launch future marketing activities. That is, by reading about and engaging with people in the industry, you get to

know people, and these people will either be your contacts, or your ushers, or your cohorts in future marketing. Go to conferences, shows, conventions, workshops, and so on. Don't just focus on the photography, but on the subject of your photography.

Photography is a commodity with infinite supply, so 99% of photographers who try to make a career out of it will fail, simply because there isn't enough business to support them all. (This is truism #1 of the photo business, as discussed [here](#)). So, even fantastic photographers with no background business knowledge of their target market are going to fail, regardless of their attempts at "push marketing" using techniques.

If you are, in fact, knowledgeable about your industry, it's likely the result of either having worked in it already, or you are very well read on the subject. In other words, most successful photographers are those who have migrated from some other industry or job function in their industry. This is what has given them a huge advantage over other photographers who don't have that background. In addition, it will have already exposed you to important people. (That is, you'll recognize names, companies, agencies, etc., so you don't really need a directory of such people.)

Whether it's children's fashion or beer or nature photography, the photo business approach is the same: know the industry, know the people in it, and be someone worth talking to about it. Forget the push; it's all about pull.



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