

APPENDIX B

THE BUSINESS OF IMAGEMAKING

Some people work with images for the pure love and enrichment it brings to their lives, while others work with images because it is their business. Being successful in the imagemaking business requires talent, tenacity, and business acumen—a combination that is often hard to achieve. The following information addresses general business considerations I use when bidding on a job: budget, time, and talent.

BUDGET CONSIDERATIONS

Bidding on a job successfully requires that both you and the client feel they are being treated fairly, which often involves compromise. Being underpaid results in feelings of resentment and may cause you to do shoddy work. On the other hand, there are other benefits besides a paycheck. Does the job give you access to interesting people or an interesting environment where you can do your own work? Do credibility or marketing advantages exist for you to work for less than your standard fee? I've bent over backward to do jobs if they involve causes I believe in or are located in interesting places. Business isn't all cut and dry, and negotiation needs to take place in good faith.



To estimate a job, determine the following factors:

1. **Studio overhead.** How much do rent, insurance, equipment depreciation, staff salary, retirement funds, taxes, your own salary, and so on add up to? Determine the total of your costs to determine the base hourly rate. Working in a studio or on location, fees will vary. Keep in mind that you will not be shooting and compositing five days a week every month. You'll need time for the business side of the business, which includes negotiations, finances, marketing, and professional development.
2. **Consumables.** Media, shipping, proof sheets, Web file preparation, image backup, and archiving are all services you need to track and bill.

In the days of film, photographers would keep track of Polaroid film, regular film, and film processing, adding a markup for these consumables. Now that we are shooting digitally, some clients assume that a digital photo is free: "But you don't use film and there isn't any processing." Right, but the digital camera and computer equipment certainly aren't free. It is important to be very clear as to what the client will receive.

For example, you can shoot incredibly quickly with digital, and the client may expect that all the photography will be done in an hour. I suggest you develop a definition—for example, that a photo shoot includes 12 images (burned onto one CD and with one proof sheet), after which a per shot fee will be added to the total. Additional CDs, proof sheets, FPO (for position only) or Web files, and file conversions cost extra to produce, and you need to bill for those services.

3. **Your Fee.** Is the client coming to you for your vision, style, reliability, and reputation? Don't forget the years of learning it took you to be the imagemaker you are today.

The total of the fees determines the final price. I do not spell out how I arrived at my per hourly

rate, as my clients don't care how I got to the total—all they want to know is what the total will be. Many studios do this, but they use a staggered per-hour fee. For example, they will charge \$250 per hour for photography and design services, \$150 per hour for digital retouching, and \$75 for layout and file management— plus materials (media, shipping, location fees, etc.).

Rush jobs cost extra, starting with a 150-percent markup during the week and a 200-percent markup over the weekend and holidays. It always surprises me how quickly a client realizes he or she doesn't really need a rush job that seemingly was so urgent only moments before. Rush markup is a good way to keep requests within reason, and if it really is a rush job, then you should be compensated. As Tom Zimmeroff says on www.photoworkshop.com, "You're not in the business to be a photographer—you're in the business to make a money."

Prices also vary by geographic region. What a photographer charges in New York City or Los Angeles will most likely be higher than what a comparable photographer would charge in a smaller city. Before setting a price, research what the local talent in your region would charge. Do not undercut the local businesses just to get a job, but be aware of what your colleagues charge nonetheless.

Caution

Traditional film camera equipment will remain fully functional for 10 to 20 years. Digital camera, computer, and software stays relevant for two to five years and needs to be upgraded much more frequently and is more expensive than film equipment. Those costs need to be included in your budget calculations.

Another way to approach bidding on a job is to ask the client what his or her budget is, and then determine how and if you can work within that budget. For additional information on pricing, image usage, and the business practices of photography, consider joining professional organizations, some of which are listed on this book's Web site.

 **Starting Out in Business**

The issue of marketing and pricing is a constantly challenging and changing one. If you are considering starting a digital retouching or compositing business, consider these suggestions:

- Set goals—3 months, 1 year, 3 years, and 5 years. What do you want to do and where do you want to be in terms of your business in that time? Is this a full time endeavor, a way to enrich your free time, or a way to give back to the community?
- Join a local photo group or business association that offers workshops and support. Developing a local support circle by learning from and giving to your peers is a great way to address business issues.
- Let as many people as you can know what it is you are trying to do.
- Make business cards and a Web site (it can be small). Make an effort to hand out your card as often as possible. Contact local photo stores and studios and offer your services. Many times stores want to offer digital services but don't have the staff.
- Start with small jobs so you can learn. Often doing something for the learning experience is worth more than the money.
- Be creative—have fun with it! Be enthusiastic—your enthusiasm will be contagious.

Even for fine-art projects, budget constraints can rear their ugly head. Especially when the custom media on which you would like to print just went up in price or the gallery is taking 50 percent to 60 percent of the sale price, while you're expected to pay for matting, framing, and shipping. The cost of working creatively can be offset through trade of services, teaching, and internships to gain access to facilities, sharing studio space, collaboration, and artist in residence programs.

TIME CONSIDERATIONS

On commercial jobs, if the time constraints are unrealistic or if my schedule doesn't allow it, I can't accept the job in good conscience. In situations like this, I ask the client if they would like me to recommend someone that may be able to do it. For fine art, time is often less of a constraint, although it has been an issue when an exhibit is looming; access to space and equipment is involved; or if a grant proposal, juried show, or teaching application requires examples of recent work.

Working digitally brings with it the self-propagating myth that digital is fast. Granted, there are many aspects of shooting and working digitally that are fast—you can more quickly review the images and make changes. But this capability often leads to more requested changes from your client, and working digitally also requires a lot of trial and error, time to maintain equipment, and the added time and responsibility of image backup, proofing, and Web posting.

When I estimate the time a job will take, I calculate how long it will take me to complete the job and add 25 percent. That 25 percent is my insurance for the time I spend troubleshooting equipment, talking to an art director about opening a file without ripping out the color profile, and the inevitable files that were more trouble than I ever expected. This 25-percent buffer lets me balance out the jobs that I complete quickly with the ones that seem to eat up my time like a puppy chews a bone. The 25 percent also gives me a buffer to evaluate the work I've just completed, rather than rush it out the door to make a tight deadline.

Always define what the deadline is and how you will be delivering the work. My preferred method is online FTP (file transfer protocol) because it gives me a few more hours to work than a courier service allows.

Don't forget to keep your other responsibilities in mind—family shouldn't always be relegated to the side whenever a job rings. Make the time to take care of yourself in regard to sleep, exercise, and spiritual needs, and make time for your personal, professional, and creative development. I know one successful photographer who takes one workshop per year to charge his creative batteries. One year he takes a film or photography workshop, and the alternate year he participates in a workshop that is not related to his profession, such as a painting, creative writing, or an Outward Bound class.

My husband and I both enjoy our work, and we do it with a dedication that very often goes into the late evening and weekends. To offset the frustration and burnout that this can cause, we sit down at the beginning of each school year and cross out “our” weeks where we are not available. We schedule our vacation just as strictly as we schedule our work, and those weeks keep us going all year. Treat yourself with professional respect—working isn't the only thing that defines us—we all need to take the time to experience life.

CLOSING THOUGHTS

While I may be a good imagemaker, I am not as accomplished a bookkeeper. Recognizing your weaknesses and working with a bookkeeper or tax advisor makes a lot of sense in the long run. Remember to keep the passion in your work and allow yourself the self respect to be well paid for what you do.