



SUCCESS OR FAILURE, IT'S ALL ABOUT VALUE

The success or failure of a creative business in today's market is often tied to the value that clients equate with the company. Clients only perceive value when it exists. When it hits them in the face over and over. I have written about value before and am writing on the topic again, as more and more clients are asking for value, during a time when some photographers seem to want to provide less.

First, let me be clear. This article and my theories have absolutely nothing to do with negotiating and pricing. I strongly believe that appropriate fees (including fees for usage) are key to developing a successful professional operation. The value that I am referring to has to do with vision and service, the two main components that signal value to your clients. The type of value those clients will pay large fees for.

Your company's value is built over time. It is developed. But this can only be accomplished if you initially step out of your shoes and look at your business from a buyer's perspective. What are the attractive qualities that a new prospective supplier offers an ad firm, editorial publication, design studio or corporation? If you responded good images cheaply, think again. Those can be had from royalty free discs. Clients purchasing assignment photography are still looking for

vision and service. Although it sounds like a no brainer to provide this type of value to clients, many photographers are still not hearing the call. Here's what you can do to begin to develop a business that has true value.

#1 Take Internal Inventory:

Understand who you are as a creative, what you want to accomplish as a business person, and where photography fits into your life spiritually, financially and creatively. These are not easy questions but they are necessary. For those of you who shutter at the thought, of delving into your being, I urge you to (in the immortal words of Cher, in the movie, Moonstruck) "Get over it!"

#2 Become a Client for a Day

After taking internal inventory begin to look at the main components that clients see when they recognize your company's value or notice that it is lacking. Simply put, they are your vision and your service. Within these two categories there are many opportunities to increase or decrease the value that clients see. Become a client and view all of your visual and service components through their eyes. Are you offering value? Do you have a solid body of work, images that represent your visual approach to your chosen topic?

As you play client be sure to look at the following areas as they are what a client looks to when looking for value:

Vision

It is critical for you to develop your vision. Your end product does not need to be unique but it must be well developed, commercially appropriate and yours. Does this take time? Yes. Does it take effort? A considerable amount. Does it take money? Most definitely. Will you treat each of these as an opportunity or a block? That's up to you. I suggest that you invest the time, make the commitment to truly develop real visual value and express it in your portfolio. After all, how can you ask your clients to invest in you, when you, choose not to invest in yourself?

If need be, commit first to working on the vision in your portfolio. The messages that your book needs to deliver are: WHAT YOU DO, AND

HOW YOU DO IT. A clear message combined with a developed vision starts to build value with contacts yet to be clients, as you are showing them which category to place you in. You are filling their visual filing cabinet with the information that they seek. Don't be put off by this, and don't be fooled! Most photographers still do not do this.

When you are 3/4 of the way through with the visual build of your portfolio, begin to look at your portfolios housing. This is a key step. Make sure that the outside reflects the inside. Check out all suppliers, pre-made and handmade books. Look to Scott Mullenberg of Mullenbergd designs in Portland, Maine who is my top book builder for handmade books covered in a variety of materials.

A well-defined vision that was in addition, beautifully and professionally housed speaks volumes.

The format for your book should not overwhelm or underwhelm the work inside. It needs to compliment the imagery. I am concerned for photographers, who during a portfolio review are more interested in creating wonderful packaging when their images need their attention. I am equally concerned when little or no attention is paid to the housing of spectacular images. There are tremendous opportunities today, find out what's out there and then consciously choose a look for your book. In doing so you are focusing attention on your company's visual value.

Once your vision is evident in your portfolio, make sure that it comes across in your mailers, your source book page and your web site. Choose signature images that can be repeated during the year on all materials. Yes, I said repeated. Photographers seem to feel that repeating images is wrong. They are always eager to show their latest work. However buyers need to be reminded of your vision. Advertising is all about repeat, repeat, and repeat. Your visual message needs to be clear.

Now I am not suggesting that you have three images that you use for everything. What I am suggesting is that you select key images from your portfolio that can be used on your website home page, and on mailers along with other non-repeat images. I call these images "signature" visuals.

Advertising slogans stay in people's minds... "this Bud's for you", "We love to see you smile" and of course the immortal "Just do it". You are looking for your signature images to become visual slogans. Identifiers. They can only be that if they have an opportunity to be seen.

Service is another component that builds value. Huge value. As you play client for a day, look at every aspect of your business from phone call reception to serving clients during an assignment and beyond to the invoicing stage. How does your business handle each step? Do you handle all calls or do you have staff?

Look at your estimating procedures. Are they timely? Are your estimates clear and do you follow up with a phone call being careful not to hound? When clients come for a shoot, how do you keep them happy? If you work long distance via email and over the internet do you have a secure site? Is it a smooth and easy process for the client? Look at every area and make sure that all of your employees, full time and freelance clearly understand how you service your clients, and what your expectations of them are.

If you find that your company needs internal structure in regards to service, consider creating a list of service goals. I often work with design firms who are looking to develop value from the inside out. We create, positioning statements, mission statements, and a list of service goals. Your small business is no different... This can be your first step in developing real service value.

As I write all of this I keep hearing a little voice that says: without a commitment to building a business of value, none of this matters. And it's so true. You need to have a burning drive and desire to succeed at delivering value to your clients. The end product of your efforts, will look and feel different in each business. Develop your own set service goals. Be committed to having a company that offers a clear visual style and great service to all clients, thus allowing you to be the best creative supplier that clients have ever worked with.