

How to Find and Keep Commercial Photography Clients

Part Three: Get Personal

Our Four Point Plan



Introduction: Our Work
Knowing what we do best is critically important

The Portfolio
What We Do



Building a List of "Channels"
Who Needs What We Do

Getting Personal
From Channels to Specifics... the Nitty Gritty



Staying Connected
Build trust and credibility

Get in touch
We want to hear from you





Getting Personal

Finding the real people who hire
photographers

Getting Personal is where we find the contacts for our client list.

I hope you have your channel list made. It is the roadmap for finding the people who actually hire us to do the work.

Usually in the commercial photography business there are 4 entries into the hiring process:

Direct Client

In-House Marketing and Communications (Sometimes referred to as MarCom)

Graphic Designers

Advertising Agencies

We will leave magazines for a separate discussion because they are more editorial in the work they assign.

While there may be many possibilities in your channel list, one of these four ways in to the gig are necessary.



Direct Clients

Manufacturing, Artists, Services, Tech and more can become a strong base for you

Finding Direct Clients

These are usually smaller companies

Direct to Client is NOT the same thing as working with a large companies Marketing and Communications department. Direct clients are usually smaller companies needing product shots, trade ads, product sheets, product guides, and web materials.

Their budgets may not be as high as ad agencies and designers, but they are reasonably accessible and can be found in any city or town.

Perhaps they are small boutiques, or manufacturing, or service based companies. (One of my clients is a home organizer and I make over \$6k a year from small gigs we do every quarter for her website.)

The way into this work is usually by the owner or someone there that handles their promotion, marketing, or advertising. Direct mail, personal contact, and email / web work well with these clients.

Finding Direct Clients

Research what they do, and be ready

When looking for work with direct clients, it is very important to understand what they do, and how they do it. You may be able to find out the name of the photographer they are currently using to judge the appropriateness of your work.

Researching what they do means knowing that your work will be appropriate for them.

If they are a service business with a lifestyle product, show that kind of work in your portfolio. Let them see that you understand what they need and can deliver it. If they are a manufacturing company, show the kind of work that may appeal to them. Do not imagine that they will be swayed by your concept work if they are not doing much concept oriented advertising.

Simply stated, showing this group of clients something way outside of their comfort zone may not gel with them. They are makers, not marketers – and in many cases your understanding of what they do and what they need may allow you to interject some creative input. And that is a great way to get more interesting shots.

Finding Direct Clients

Being sure of what they do helps you

When you do your research into these small businesses, and that can include simply walking in and asking the secretary for a brochure or checking out their website, you can see what and how they do what they do, and you can also see who they do it for. Who is THEIR target audience.

You should also see if you can find out who does the photography that they are currently using. Call them – ask them – you will be surprised at how happy people are to share who they use.

When you are able to speak to them about what they do in a confident manner, they will be more receptive to working with you. No, you don't have to know all the nuances, but if they build ship parts you should know THAT.

The confidence you can build while doing the research cannot be underestimated... not by a longshot. This is an important part of what being a commercial photographer is all about, and beginning to build the confidence needed is powerful.



In-House Marketing / Communications

Sometimes referred to as Marcom, these are like the companies own design/ad agency

In-House Marketing and Communications

Larger Companies and Organizations

These groups are located within the body of the corporation or big business. They can be staffed by one person or have an entire team of designers, writers, artists, art directors and creative directors. Working with them is very similar to working with a graphics design or ad agency, and some of these groups are as powerful and well known as any of the larger agencies.

From pharmaceuticals to health care to insurance to manufacturing... there are In-House agencies looking for creative work. Their focus is very linear... their own product/service, and they can sometimes have need for a large quantity of images. Imagine how many pieces of communication a regional hospital creates... from in-house training manuals to consumer ads and promotions.

The ways into these organizations is similar to graphic designers and ad agencies. Direct mail, web, email and direct communication (that camera thing you carry around all the time also lets you talk to other people with similar camera things... ingenious!!!)

In-House Marketing and Communications

Again, do the research

Find out what kind of materials the organization uses. Ask the secretary. Drop by the offices and see if they have any brochures that they have recently done. Don't be duplicitous or try to be cagey... remember, the goal is to come back WITH your portfolio and get a gig.

Review all the work you see in the organization. Note the quality of technique, as well as the creativity on display. Keep in mind that even the most creative photographer many times must dial the creativity back to do the job the way the client wants it done.

Make notes of everywhere you see the material from the organization. Check out trade and consumer magazines for ads or "advertorials" – those clever pieces that look like it is an editorial by the magazine, but is really something that was sent to them and paid for.

Notes, notes, notes.



**There is no substitute for a clean
set of notes...**

Try “Field Notes” for a very cool little book to
carry around and make entries



Graphic Designers and Design Agencies

From one person shops to large organizations, Graphic Design is a solid start

Graphic Designers and Graphic Design Agencies

A great place to start

Graphic designers are artistic people, engaged in an artistic endeavor. They make stuff... from brochures and business cards to websites and annual reports. Big jobs, small jobs... nuts and bolts product brochures and national ads to be placed in consumer magazines.

You want to make them your friend.

Graphic designers are more inclined than ad agencies to give you a shot. The budgets are usually not as big, the client involvement is usually not so intense. Don't be surprised if the first gig you get from graphic designers is something rather mundane, or commercial. That is a way of finding out if you can meet deadlines, shoot to spec, be as creative – or not – as you need to be for the shots you will be doing and more.

Working with graphic designers will run the gamut from “pick this up and shoot it when you can” to full on shoots with client representatives and other stakeholders on set.

Graphic Designers and Graphic Design Agencies

Understanding the designer

Designers have varying budgets, and varying intensity to their work. Some gigs are highly visible and call for the highest level of creativity and execution, and others are more 'work-a-day' and call for less. They carefully balance this need when they are looking for creative.

A designer can use an [iStock](#) image on one brochure and hire a commercial shooter to make something wonderful for another. It is the nature of their business, and you must know this in order to work with them on an ongoing basis.

And sometimes turnaround is the issue. Can you shoot it and process it in a very short time frame? Can you deliver a tough shot on budget and on time? Will the technical quality of the work remain at the highest level, no matter what the challenges?

And they also want to know if you are an interesting person, fun to work with and hang with for extended periods of time. Shoots that take more than a few hours can be unbearable if the personalities are not in sync.

Graphic Designers and Graphic Design Agencies

Meshing with a designer or agency

Designers can understand a diverse set of images more than ad agencies. A designer may need to have a portrait shot on Tuesday, and a still life product brochure cover shot on Friday. And while there is a great emphasis on being a creative photographer, sometimes you simply must be a “working photographer” in order to keep that vision alive.

Working with a good designer can also increase the level of your work. I once worked with a guy who busted my butt every time we shot together. Every time. He nitpicked this and changed his mind ten times on that... made me crazy. I considered the ramifications of homicide... BUT... every time we worked together I learned more, and my images were better. Sometimes having your butt kicked by someone else – another excellent creative – is a great wake up call that you can improve.

We worked together for over ten years, and became good friends. And yes, he even kicked my butt on the last gig we did together before he retired. Designers are interesting people... get to know them. Email, web, direct contact all work well.



Advertising Agencies

The “Big Kahunas” of our business

Advertising Agencies

Bigger clients / Bigger budgets...

Bigger stress...

Working with Ad Agencies is one of the pinnacles of a commercial photographers career. The clients can be huge, the budgets huge and the paychecks lucrative. Ad agencies are the most difficult to break into, but the reward is very high.

Ad agencies can be found in any medium town or city, and they will be handling clients from the region to national inserts. They can have clients as disparate as the PR for the City to multi-million dollar tech clients. And they can be working with the In-house agencies and graphic designers we looked at previously.

In smaller agencies, there will still be a few layers of people that you will have to work with:

Account Executive: This is the agency liaison to the client.

Art Director: This person is in charge of the specific project to be done

Creative Director: This person is responsible for the entire creative direction of the project

Advertising Agencies

The “Art Buyer”

In larger ad agencies, there may be a position referred to as “art buyer”. This is the highest and first level for you to get through. These people help screen the potential artists for the creative directors (CD’s) and art directors (AD’s) that will be working with them.

Art buyers are looking for creativity, personality, credibility, and reliability. They can be tough to sell to because you aren’t really selling to them... they are there to screen the above. You may still have to “sell yourself” to the CD/AD on the project.

When it comes to presentation, art buyers can be extremely critical of the entire package (credibility) so having a top notch website, well crafted copy, and only the best imagery is imperative. They may also occasionally “call in your book” for a client review. They will never do this for a cheap gig, so if you are asked to send your book, the gig will be very much worth having it for.

Art buyers love to see personal work, projects and the kind of work that is not usually considered “commercial”. Showing products on white seamless may not be the best plan on getting an art buyer’s approval.

Advertising Agencies

Getting in the door

Are you ready to see an ad agency and pitch them for work?

A checklist:

- Have you shot to layout and specific specs before?
- Have you worked with budgets before?
- Are you confident that you can “get the shot” no matter what the challenge?
- Have you ever responded to an RFP (request for proposal)?
- Do you have a passport, and have you ever shot on location
- Do you know how to do a bid and not forget all the little things that are important?
- Can you hire a caterer, get rental equipment in Montana, find an assistant on a moment’s notice, book a model, find props and make sure it is all invoiced properly?
- Can you handle a shoot when it all goes to hell... impatient client team, agency liasons unhappy, art team in tears and the talent threatening to walk out? And still be creative when you once again have them smiling?

Advertising Agencies

What to do first...

Build a solid body of work with graphic designers, in-house agencies and direct client. Work with budgets, deliver on time, make mistakes that are not career enders, learn from the process – and add to your portfolio as often as possible. This is very very important.

Do personal projects, and let everyone know about them. Keep them up front in the creative communities awareness. Self assign assignments and get them done.

Slowly enter the ad agency market when you are ready to meet those challenges that can arise, and make sure you can do what you say you can do. Building credibility with art buyers and creative directors takes time.

Be consistent and persistent. Never slack off the creativity and the work that must be done. This is a long trail that one must climb one step at a time.

Working with ad agencies can be exhilarating and terrifying at the same time. So much is riding on the shot being perfect, and that is all on you. However, when you nail it, you know it. And the world feels right!!!



Magazines

Editorial: A great place to start

Magazines: editorial is a good starting point

Start local, then regional, then national

Magazines are everywhere. No matter what size town you live in, publications are designed to sell local products, services and advertising. While we hear about the demise of magazines, the reality is that there are many, many magazines that will give a beginning photographer a chance to shoot.

The pay sucks in most cases, but the experience is invaluable. In addition, there is access to people and places that may not be easy for a photographer to do on their own. Knowing how to turn an editorial assignment into something that can open the doors for ad clients is something that you will pick up along the way... hopefully.

When you shoot for magazines, more people will see your work than if you shoot a brochure for a small business. Knowing that, make sure that your magazine work shows your creativity and vision. (My advice is this... if they aren't going to pay you or pay you very little, then they have to let you do something that you love. If not – there is simply no point in you wasting your time. Let them know you would love to do it, but you are booked that week for a big client.)

Whenever you do shoot for a magazine, let everyone on your mailing list know.

Magazines: editorial is a good starting point

Editorial work builds your book

An editorial shoot is something that helps build not only your confidence, but also a body of work that was assigned to you by someone else. That adds credibility to not only your work, but to you as someone who can deliver something that someone somewhere thought was good enough to put in their magazine.

Another credibility builder are the 'tear sheets' – aptly named since that is how they started; a page ripped out of a magazine to show the photographers work. (Yeah, we would buy 10 or 15 issues just to get copies of the ads that ran. These days, they are usually provided as PDF's and we make JPEGs for the website. This is proof that you were hired, shot, and delivered the work.

Access. Using the contacts you make as a magazine shooter can help you leverage into the design/ad agencies that those you meet use. What better way to meet a designer than to show up with photographs you did of one of his clients. And of course, they would be killer shots too... right?

Right.



Now for the personal part

How do we find the people once we know
the business?

Finding the names you need...

Research is key... and necessary

All of these entities have people, real live human beings, doing the jobs we have talked about. Those people have names and contact information, and it is out there for you to find.

Don't think that buying a list is going to save you. It can, maybe, help you find clients, but the vast majority of the people you will work with directly are going to be people YOU meet doing your own research and digging.

I think this is a good thing. If you can't find any clients on your own, getting a list means you will just be sending out stuff without understanding that the process is its own filter. Why are some photographers successful while many are not? Well, there are probably many, many reasons, but the biggest reason is that the unsuccessful usually don't work as hard as the successful. Looking for the "easy button" takes you away from the hard work of researching who to send your marketing materials to.

Use Google, Yahoo, the library, the phone, local lists and the "Business Journal" to find the names of those you want to work with. Check out annuals like "The Workbook" for names of art directors and magazine editors. Dig, sift, dig some more. It is worth it.

Finding the names you need...

Find the method that works for you...

And do it relentlessly.

My friend David, an architectural photographer in Montreal, spent two and a half months researching client names in the field he wants to work in. He ended that time with a list of over 2300 names – and then began the tedious task of organizing them into editorial/ad agency/direct client channels for his various marketing tools.

David's choice is email, and he gets a big chunk of his business from his targeted mailings. He also has been very successful in leveraging the editorial assignments into higher paying ad and collateral shoots.

Perhaps a good system would be to spend an hour, or two hours per day looking for client names. Internet, library resources, lists... whatever. Build it slowly and test it out. Once you have reached a good number of names – say 50 – and you KNOW they are clients you want to work with, and clients that would want to work with you, begin your emails.

And remember... it's a journey, not a destination. There are always more ways to find those you are searching for.



Portfolio – Channels – Specifics

Plan your campaign for work...
