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BUSINESS MATTERS

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VALUING YOUR BUSINESS



worth good money, and to get to this point you need to forgo the modesty for a bit and to become adept at not only taking the time to develop the skills that you need to be a cut above the rest but then making sure that you put that information out there so that no one could possibly miss the fact that you really do know what you're doing.

Gain your Distinctions

One of the best ways to demonstrate to the world at large that you are a cut above the average is by becoming a member of a professional body, and the photographic world is well served by a number of well-respected organisations that dedicate themselves to the development and support of professional photographers. Notable amongst them are the Master Photographers Association (MPA), the British Institute of Professional Photographers (BIPP), the Societies, the Guild of Photographers and the Association of Photographers (AOP).

Join any of these organisations and you can point out to your clients that you are a member of a professional body, but you

can shout even louder if you go ahead and take on the Distinctions that are on offer, and which can take a lot of effort to achieve. Achieve a Distinction and it's a sign that your peers have independently tested you and have considered you to have reached a particular standard of excellence, and if you can convey that message across to your clients then they will be able to have confidence in your ability to offer them a good standard of work.

The MPA, BIPP and The Societies all

offer Licentiateship, Associateship and Fellowship levels, and these are universally recognised qualifications that will not only give you something to shout about but will also encourage you to improve your skills and will give you targets to aim for. Each body sets its own standards, but essentially the photographer works their way through the grades over a few years and is ultimately judged on a panel of images that independent expert photographers consider are good enough to have reached the required level. Content and presentation both have a part to play, and often courses and mentors are provided to guide the

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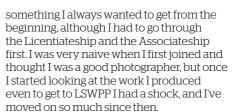
photographer towards the level of quality that's required to be successful.

One of the highest decorated professional photographers in the country today, and someone who also puts a lot back into the profession by being a judge on many of the Distinction panels, is Dorset-based Kevin Wilson, who holds Fellowships with the MPA and the Royal Photographic Society and has just been awarded a record third Fellowship from the BIPP, becoming the only member ever to hold three Fellowships in the Institute's 111-year history.

His first Fellowship, for Portraiture, was achieved in 1996 and he then went on to achieve a second Fellowship in Weddings in 2009, becoming the first member to hold Fellowships in both areas. The latest Fellowship is in Documentary Portraiture.

"I always felt that it was not good enough to rest on my laurels," says Kevin, "and gaining a Fellowship is a difficult task and, once gained, it's important to push on forward. I am involved with assessing other photographers' work and feel you have to talk the talk and walk the walk; you must prove you are current in different genres."

Another photographer to put great store by Distinctions is south Wales-based Richard P Walton, who recently achieved his Fellowship with the SWPP. "Tve been a member of the SWPP for around six years," he says. "The Fellowship was



"The Fellowship wasn't easy. I was lucky in the sense that I had 20 shots in my portfolio and didn't have to shoot specifically for it. However the hardest thing was image choice; it's so difficult looking at your own work and knowing what your best images are from a judges' point of view. I had some help with my choice from Gordon McGowan, and this was invaluable. He talked me out of a few images and advised me to add a few to the panel that I didn't originally plan to include. Although Gordon is a master wedding photographer he can judge anything and has a lot of knowledge in all areas of photography, so I was confident his help would be good for my portrait fellowship panel.

"I would say that if you love photography and strive to be the best you can, then the Fellowship will come naturally to you. After getting my L, I was awarded the A two years later and then the Fellowship two years after that. It's been hard work, but the qualifications have helped me to push myself forward."

It's one thing achieving the award, but then you have to do something with it. Richard has made sure clients are aware that he's achieved a recognised level of excellence, and it's a reassurance to those looking for a photographer that they are in safe hands. "I use the Fellowship to my advantage," says Richard. "Clients might not initially know what the initials FSWPP stand for, but they'll often ask when they come to the studio. They see my certificate and I think it just helps with the whole image that they have of my studio and me. I'm not one for bragging, but it does sound nice when you explain to somebody what it is.

"Getting the qualification didn't lead me on to becoming a millionaire overnight, but I think the most important thing about getting the Fellowship, or any other Distinction for that matter, is self-development. It gives you so much confidence in yourself. The journey on the way to achieving these qualifications is also a great experience."

Keep your prices up

John and Sandra Parris set up their studio in Hawick in the Scottish borders back in 1999, and one of John's goals was always to achieve the MPA Fellowship by the time he reached 40. "I looked at what other Fellows had put forward to gain their Fellowship to get some idea of what the judging panel would be looking at," he says. "In the end I

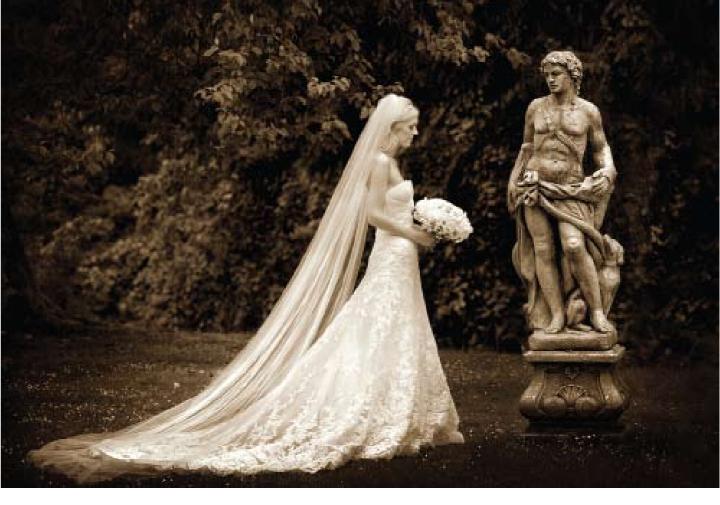
LEFT Richard P Walton feels that once you've received an award, it's important that you do something with it and make clients aware of the recognition ABOVE John Parris and partner Sandra publicise their achievements on their website which helps to convince clients of their expertise in the field

put together a panel that was based around the work I did with Hawick High School's popular Creative Fashion course."

Having worked hard to gain his
Distinction John makes a point of
publicising his achievements on his website,
and it's something that helps the couple
to convince clients they are very much
experts in their field, and worth their fee.

"We want to show that the trophy cabinets in our studio are full," says John.
"It's a good talking point when our clients come to visit, and they can instantly see that we must be doing something right. We are very proud of our achievements and think it's silly not to show them, and it's not a case of being arrogant! We also contact our local newspaper when we have wins, and they will often publish a small article, which is good for marketing Parris Photography."

What about the competition from the unskilled photographers out there offering cheaper rates? Have John and Sandra ever been tempted to try to compete on price? Not a bit of it: "We have been shocked at the amount of established →



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"I went along to a couple of Society Conventions and enjoyed them but I did find them full on and a little bewildering"

photographers dropping their prices," says John. "We have set our aims high; very high quality photography showing not only our technical skills and vision but also our ability to give guidance to couples, families and very large groups of people at weddings, and moving them from A to B in a manner they all appreciate, to avoid running late with the reception. We always get praised for our added effort. We have a nice comfortable studio, a very friendly service and great finished product.

"Having said that, we still see a few people who love our work but don't want to spend. Our advice to them is to be careful and we always take the time to explain to them the pitfalls of choosing to go with a cheap service and the things we have to do in terms of insurance and after service that make us a more reliable place to go to.

"Nine times out of ten, the clients that do make the effort to come and see us in our studio have already made their minds up that they want quality over quantity. Our prices stay the same, and we charge for our additional products as always, rather than give them away to get the business. We are trying our hardest to keep the standards high and gain back the respect from the general public that's so crucial for those working in this profession."

Ron Young, who runs a studio in Troon, South Ayrshire, has a sense of things from both sides of the professional fence, having offered wedding coverage during his time as an amateur photographer, and then moving into the professional world when he was given the chance to take voluntary redundancy.

"I've always tried to offer a professional service," he says, "but when I took the step to move across and to set up a full-time business I decided that I needed to become a member of a professional organisation to demonstrate that I was serious about what I was doing and to get the feedback I needed to help me to make what I considered to be a big step up. I went along to a couple of Society Conventions and really enjoyed these although I found them incredibly full on and a little bewildering! I then took the decision to join the MPA because it seemed to have everything I needed and you had to be a full-time professional to be a member and so that automatically said something about my status."

Those wishing to join the MPA need to provide two references before they are accepted and given a probationary status and they are only allowed to become full



ABOVE Ron Young decided that to be taken seriously within the industry, when moving from amateur to professional photography, he should become a member of a professional organisation

members once qualifications have been achieved in the form of Licentiateship and the MPA's Diploma in Photographic Practice, at which point they can use the designatory letters after their names and MPA logos on their websites. These qualifications need to be gained within six months and Professional Indemnity insurance is also required once qualified with the MPA to gain all benefits.

"I started off by taking my Diploma and then moved on the Licentiateship," says Ron. "I had been a long standing member of the Scottish Photographic Circle during my amateur days and so I wasn't new to the idea of presenting a panel of pictures, and that helped me. I also had a mentor provided in the form of MPA Fellow Hamish Scott Brown, and he was really helpful in

terms of pointing me in the right direction. I eventually submitted a panel of 20 images, that consisted of ten from one wedding and ten gathered together from a further eight weddings, and that was enough to gain me my full membership. It's not a given that you get in though; on the day my work was assessed there were four of us who were successful, but another three failed."

Become an expert

Along with qualifications and prizes, another way to convince the world that you know what you are talking about is to set your website or blog up to be an authoritative place where people can go to get information, and it's important to present this so that you're not just talking to other photographers but to potential clients as →

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"One really good way of establishing your credentials is to run features that speak from a position of authority"

well. One really good way of establishing your credentials is to run features that speak from a position of authority, and if you sound convincing when you talk about the industry then you'll find that others will accept that you really do know what you're talking about.

David White, who runs a business based at the foothills of the Snowdonia National Park that specialises in landscape and food photography, found particular success with a blog entry that gave his opinion on the people he felt were probably the ten best food photographers in the world. Immediately the post aroused massive interest and debate and to this day it's still driving visitors to his website.

"Before a food photo shoot for a respected restaurant in North Wales I wanted to build a storyboard of ideas for myself," he says, "so that in the heat of the kitchen I was prepared to turn over several food scenes in a single day shoot. I used the Internet and my extensive collection of cookbooks to research common threads and best practice across food photographers, and was surprised to find there was a quite a range in the standard of food photography work online, with perhaps only one in ten photographer's galleries offering anything thoughtful or original.

"As I complied a growing list of reference



work, it soon became apparent there was an opportunity to contribute a useful 'best-of-class' article about the industry online. I also realised that spotting a gap in published online articles would mean the piece could help attract visitors to my website.

"Since being published on my website, the article has steadily attracted more and more online traffic, as other blogs, colleges and food writers have linked to the resource. This single article attracts on average 200 unique visitors to my website each day. This added quality traffic helps raise my businesses overall website profile with Google, and also helps potential food photography clients find my business online. The quality and highly focused nature of this article traffic

also allows me the opportunity to create tailored campaigns for my own food photography services. The article has also been used as research for students doing food photography modules as part of their photography degree.

"Based on reading the article, people often email me suggestions for other respected food photographers around the world who might be contenders for a Top 10. With this wider input, I intend to publish a refined list this year and expand the article further to include example food photographs and comments from the actual photographers in question, many of whom have emailed me to thank me for the article."

Another example of someone who has used websites and blogs to great effect is our columnist Julia Boggio, who publishes a number of different sites to highlight different parts of her business. When she was pregnant she set up a new site, www. icarriedawatermelon.couk, to talk about her experience and to talk directly to other expectant mothers who, naturally, might also be interested in the fact that she could take pictures of their babies.

"Websites are so important," she says.
"They are your shop window and many people will make a decision on whether or not to work with you based solely on what they see there.

"When I first started Julia Boggio Photography in 2005, my website was the first thing I developed. I spent a lot of time working on the branding with my design agency. Two years later, I created a whole new website and brand to better represent where my business and style had gone.

"I went on to create different websites for different parts of the business but I'm now about to amalgamate the weddings website (www.juliaboggiophotography.com) into the studio website (www.juliaboggiostudios.com) to make things simpler.

"Originally, I was of the opinion that →



Getting your face on TV

Given there are so many more channels these days, and so much airtime to fill, there are all kinds of opportunities to get involved in a TV production. It still remains one of the best ways there is to reach a large audience, while the endorsement of an appearance on the small screen can work wonders in terms of establishing your credibility. However, you do have to take care that you choose the right programmes to be involved with.

Lancashire-based photographer Wes Simpson found himself with the chance to take part in the Channel Five series Celebrity Wedding Planner, the premise for which was Kerry Katona making all the arrangements for a couple's nuptials, including booking the reception, choosing the dress and hiring the photographer. It was reality TV at its finest, and the first Wes heard about it was when he was called up to see if he could come and show his portfolio alongside several other local photographers to see who would get the chance to be involved.

"I just talked to them about how I would approach the day," he says, "and luckily I already had some TV and media experience and so I knew what they were looking for. It was still a nice pat on the back to be chosen however. I ended up doing two of the weddings, one in London and then, on the back of that one, another one in the North West. It was great fun to be involved with, and the TV crew was looking for a few hiccups to make it all the more interesting, so that made it an experience as well!

"I ended up being featured in the programme and the credits, and I also had my name listed alongside the other wedding suppliers on the Channel Five website. Channel Five also phoned my local newspaper to tell them that I was involved and they came out and did a story on me that was picked up by several other newspapers in the area, so that was all good publicity. I also mentioned it on my blog so that prospective clients outside the region were aware of the connection.

"I'm not sure whether the exposure got me any extra bookings because I get so much business through word of mouth, but it certainly didn't hurt me. I think you do have to be careful, though, regarding what programmes you might choose to



be involved with, because a poor quality reality show could have the potential to harm your business rather than help you. The celebrity connection put my mind at ease in this case, however, and overall it was a good experience."



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the weddings business should be kept separate from the portrait business, but as the company has grown these areas have become increasingly interlinked, especially as our wedding clients come to us for other products, like boudoir and babies.

"That being said, we also have plans to spin off two more websites in the future to focus on other parts of our product offering. It will allow us to 'speak' to our customers in a more targeted way than we could do through our studio website, which is more general. We also keep our training website, www.juliaboggiohigh.com, separate from our client-facing websites as it's targeted towards professional photographers. In summary, we have different websites to appeal to different target markets."

The decision to create a specific website at the time of her pregnancy was designed to address yet another market that might not be interested in the other areas covered by the studio. "The mummy market is obviously very pertinent to what we do here," says Julia.

"Having ICAW has allowed me to join powerful networking sites for mummy bloggers, like BritMums, for whom I am also the resident 'photography expert' on the site. I find that in our markets, which straddle both middle and high-end, expertise is a definite bonus and our clients like knowing that we are well respected by other photographers. However, there are always clients who value price above other deliverables, so there are customers out there for everyone."

Build through a blog

Based in Washington DC, photographer Terra Dawn operates one of the slickest and most informative blogs out there, even inviting other photographers to make contributions to her site. With separate client and photographer faces it's also set up to promote the fact that Terra is at the centre of her profession and is a place to come for those who are looking for content, and it all helps to promote the idea that here is an expert in her field who most definitely knows what she is doing.

"I started blogging about five years ago when I first started my photography business," she says. "I was really bad at it. It was on the blogger platform, had very little SEO behind it, the images were badly sized and, worst of all, I was trying to write in a voice that I thought my readers wanted to hear. As my business grew I found that my potential clients reacted more to my bad jokes and snarky humor than they did to my 'we had just a lovely time!' posts. They were more interested in who I was as a person, not as a professional.

"I love to write, but I've discovered that



 $ABOVE\ Terra\ Dawn\ began\ blogging\ when\ she\ started\ her\ business\ five\ years\ ago\ but\ it\ has\ been\ a\ steep\ learning\ curve.$ The most important thing, she feels, is to keep the blogs\ fresh\ and\ rich\ in\ content

loving to write and learning to be a writer are two different things. They take patience and practice. So the intention was always to make the blogs rich in content, but I just didn't know how to do that until recently."

It may sound obvious, but regular updating of a blog is one of the most crucial things you can do, and Terra makes sure that her site gets fresh material on a regular basis. "I do try to keep the blog posts fresh, and I like to give my brides inspiration for their big days, but also give them a peek into our industry. I've found that the majority of my clients have a huge interest in the photography side of things. They love to read the how-to articles just as much as the photographers who find their way to my blog. In the end, this makes our relationship much smoother, and my brides are just as excited about their photography as they are about their first kiss!

"Ultimately I'm Googled more by brides than by photographers. Photographers end up on my site through social media and word of mouth, whereas brides end up on the blog by looking for images of their particular venue. When I blog, I usually focus on linking well to local venues and vendors and I make sure my posts are heavily edited for them to use on their own Facebook and social media pages. Before I hit post, I have to know that the venue's owner will say: 'Wow! Those are gorgeous! Where can we plaster these?'

"When a bride comes across a post of their venue and they love it, they will be more likely to click through and see what else this photographer has to offer. When they see that I dedicate my time equally to helping other photographers, they see me not only as being an expert, but being passionate about what I do. It's not necessarily the expertise that will get them to ask for more information, so much as the passion. When a bride sees that their photographer has a passion for what they do, they feel a ton more comfortable when they sign that contract."

Terra might work in the US, but the debate about the impact on the market being made by non-professionals offering cut price wedding deals is just as relevant over there. However, the photographer is bullish about the threat and insistent that it shouldn't \rightarrow

"There are always clients who value price above other deliverables, so there are customers out there for everyone "



"When a client goes to my website and decides to hit the 'contact' button, it's because she's into smiley faces and exclamation marks! "

worry the serious professional.

"If there is one thing I've learned in this industry, it's that there is no competition," she says. "There are more brides than any photographer could ever hope to fill their books with, so why fight for the brides that might not be the perfect fit for you? I focus on making sure a potential client knows who I am the second they get on to my site. If they get there and immediately decide to look somewhere else I couldn't be more elated! I don't want to work with clients who are going to give me fits or want changes to the work that I do for them. I know my perfect client and I've pretty much booked them every time, and luck didn't have much to do with it

"When a client goes to my website and decides to hit the 'contact' button, it's because she's into smiley faces and exclamation marks! She's a little edgy and not worried to speak her mind. She has a sense of humor. She's adventurous. And she is not price shopping."

Build your blog

The approach that your website takes can have a big influence on the way you are perceived by your potential clients as well.

Wes Simpson is just coming to the end of a comprehensive redesign of his site that's taken six months to come to fruition, and he got his inspiration for his new approach after seeing the great American photographer Joe Buissink deliver a talk about his work.

"My website has been very picture driven," says Wes, "but I've decided to make the new site more blog based and to adopt a more editorial style and to include the stories behind the pictures. This was because Joe Buissink was showing his work, and he started off just screening the images with no explanation about what the pictures were about. It was a series of grainy black & whites, including a picture of Stephen Spielberg clasping his hand to his chest, and none of them really jumped out. Then Joe ran them again and told the stories behind the shots, and it turned out that the picture of Spielberg was taken as he watched his daughter singing, and he clasped his hands to his heart with the emotion of the moment. Joe then emailed the image over to him and Spielberg came straight back and said that was exactly how he felt at the time and he loved the shot.

"I took that onboard and later on posted

up a blog entry about a wedding I'd covered in Italy where the roads were so narrow that the cars carrying the guests couldn't get through the streets and the bride had had to get out and walk to the church. Shortly after I'd posted it up a bride came into my studio and she saw the picture and she'd obviously read the story because she started telling the groom about everything that had happened. She went into great detail and it was almost like she'd been a guest at the wedding: the picture just meant so much more to her, and I just sat there and didn't have to do a thing.

"With this kind of response the potential is there for pictures and stories to be picked up and shared through social media, and in the process it will spread the word about the professional job the studio is doing."

Make training DVDs and books

Photographers who are on top of their game are in a position where they can take the next step up and can set out to become an acknowledged media expert, by producing such things as books and training DVDs and also by offering bespoke training.

One of those who has steadily built up a reputation as someone with a wide skill base who is accomplished at passing information on in a clear and easy-to-understand way is Manchester-based Brett Harkness, and he now holds a series of well-regarded training courses every year and is also the author of the 'Real Life Wedding \(\rightarrow \)



Training' DVD and the book *Organising* and *Styling Professional Photo Shoots*. On top of that he's also uploaded dozens of well-crafted training films to YouTube, establishing himself as a photographer who can not only produce great pictures but can teach others to do the same.

"I started offering training back in 2005, when I helped out on the Annabel Williams Bespoke course in the Lake District," he says. "In 2008 I went in my own direction and started up my own courses, specialising in off-camera flash, wedding and lifestyle shooting. We often run our courses from the studio in Manchester but we also hire amazing venues around the UK and beyond to keep things interesting. Photographers come to us because they want to know how we do what we do, and that's exactly what we tell them: there are no smoke screens."

The YouTube videos have proved to be highly successful, and although they don't bring in any income in their own right they do help to establish the credibility of the studio and they also drive traffic to the training facility. "We try and put out snippets of info, or just video showing what goes on at BHP Training," says Brett. "We've also put out snippets of 'Real Life Wedding Training' to give people a taste of the content. We are looking to push the training video side of our business a lot more over the next 12 months, and will be integrating our existing

blog with a new and dedicated video page.

"The business case for the wedding training DVD was easy; I really couldn't see anything else quite like it out there in the market. Other videos featured set-up weddings that had been shot in beautiful places all around the world, but we focused on a great couple on their real wedding day at a location that was similar to the ones that hundreds of photographers turn up at every Saturday. Shooting at a venue like this made it a lot easier for photographers to relate to what we were putting across in the film."

Since the book and DVD came out last year Brett has noticed an uplift in the credibility of the studio, which was already high, and it's helped to establish the business firmly in a position where both clients and fellow photographers know that it's a place where they will encounter a high level of professionalism. "What we're doing shows that we're not scared to share our knowledge with others," says Brett, "and we don't feel threatened by others knowing what we do. It just makes us work harder to do things we haven't tried before.

"If we can better the industry as a whole then we can allow photographers to increase their prices and charge what

"Take time to better your service and to increase your skill levels and, above all, have the nerve to hold your prices at a realistic level "

they're worth, and this can only be a positive in the very tough social market."

In a business where there is more competition than ever before, it's crucial for photographers to establish who they are in the eyes of their clientele, to be seen as a bastion of excellence and expertise and to be able to demonstrate clearly and unequivocally that they can deliver great results, every time. Believe in yourself, take time to better your service and to increase your skill levels and, above all, have the nerve to hold your prices at a realistic level and you can be seen as an expert whose services are well worth paying for. **PP**

MORE INFORMATION

The Master Photographers Association:

www.thempa.com

The BIPP: www.bipp.com
The Societies: www.swpp.co.uk
The Guild of Photographers:

www.photoguild.co.uk **The AOP:** www.the-aop.org

Kevin Wilson: www.kevinwilson.co.uk **Richard P Walton:** www.richardpwalton.co.uk

John and Sandra Parris:

www.parrisphotography.co.uk

 $\textbf{Ron Young:} \ www.ronyoungphotography.co.uk$

Wes Simpson:

www.wessimpsonphotography.com

David White: www.davidwhitestudio.co.uk

Julia Boggio:

www.juliaboggiophotography.com **Terra Dawn:** www.terradawn.com