



## How to Use Tools Well, Part 1

(an excerpt from my upcoming book on marketing)

Anything can be a marketing tool. Anything. In our business we are most familiar with the usual suspects of:

- postcards (or other printed mailers)
- emails
- websites
- portfolio (book)

but the reality is that every time you make contact or put your business out there where potential contact (direct or indirect) can be made, you have a marketing opportunity. Thus, the list of potential tools is, essentially, endless.

But we cling to the usual suspects, mostly, and for good reason. They do work. If someone held a gun to my head and said “What, at bare minimum, must I do to market my photo business?” I would give the four usual suspects listed above as my answer. They are the canon, the essentials, and they are understood and expected by the targets so they don’t offend and are therefore (generally) solid choices.

As long as they are done well, that is. Make a crappy portfolio or have a bad site or send mailers that are poorly printed or email promos that take too long to load (or heavens forbid a combination of those) and you’d be better off doing nothing. But as long as they are image-centric and fit certain basic levels of quality, these four tools work.

Of course, we have to look at what we mean by “work” too. Photographers often have unreasonable expectations from their marketing tools--they think if they send a couple of postcards or emails and have a site, they should be getting calls, but it just doesn’t work that way. Marketing is a slow, continual process (for the most part) and it is rare that you send out something and get, boom, a strong response--especially in the form of actual jobs. Marketing is for the long-term and you can’t gauge its results (generally) in the short-term<sup>1</sup>. What usually happens is that, through consistent marketing, the targets get familiar with your work and put you into the “when the right project comes along, I’ll call this photographer” file. You don’t know they are interested and waiting for the right photographer--you only know the phone still is not ringing. But in this case, the tools are working--you just don’t know it.

So, to get your name out there and build awareness, at the bare minimum, you need to have a comprehensive plan that includes a good website and portfolio (multiple copies) and email and printed promos. Without getting into details, I want to talk about tools and choices in general.

---

<sup>1</sup> By contrast, selling is a short-term activity. Think of it this way: Mini Cooper markets to its targets by its ads and website and other activities--driving you, over months or years of marketing efforts, to the dealership. Once you step into the Mini dealership, then the dealer uses its tools to sell you the Mini.

### *Planning your tools*

Let's take as given that you will use the four core tools I've already mentioned. How can you use them to your best advantage?

I think you should be making some sort of "reaching out" contact with your targets at least every other month and preferably every 4-6 weeks. By "reaching out" I mean something where you are *actively* contacting your clients--like via mailers or emails or calls or lunches or something; not passive like doing a photoblog or updating your website (though those can be important too).

That means that you could, depending on your budget, send email promos in February, April, June, August, October, and December and mail postcards the other six months. Or maybe you can't afford so many mailers so you send the postcards in February, May, and September, and fill in the other months with emails. Or you drop sending to the locals one month and throw a party instead. Or you take a trip to NYC in March to show your book to photo editors there, sending emails and making calls before the trip, then following up with a targeted print mailer to those targets afterwards and your usual postcard to everyone else and then emails for the rest of the year.

Get the idea? The actual breakdown of how you split up these tools is entirely variable. You just want it to be consistently regular contact throughout the year.

Whatever tools you choose, you need, very importantly, to plan them as a cohesive campaign. You can't decide to send a mailer or a series of mailers about, say, baseball and then have nothing on your site that connects (beyond, perhaps, your logo) and then send a bunch of emails that have a different look and feel and are about your recent (non-baseball) shoots. You're sending mixed messages.

Mixed messages dilute your marketing. As Stephen Webster used to say<sup>2</sup>: one concept to a customer. In other words, you want each of your pieces, your tools, to build on the others to say one thing and one thing only.

Here's a great example. A couple of days before I wrote this chapter I read on one of the pro photographer forums about a guy who asked about sending a recipe on his email promos. He asked if the others thought this would improve their open and click-through rates. I assumed he shot food and thought that was a great idea. Turns out, he shoots kids. His thought process was that kids leads to families which leads to cooking and since so many of his potential buyers are women with families (as many Art Buyers are), they would appreciate the recipes.

This guy gets high marks for thinking creatively (and that is **really** important). Unfortunately, if he went with this idea, he's be sending a very mixed message. By sending stuff about food, he is implying that he shoots food, but when the targets find out that he shoots kids (if they go

---

<sup>2</sup> He used this saying in a different context: as a photo-illustrator he meant that his clients needed to give him one message to express in his work, not a bunch of messages; but I always think of it when explaining how to avoid mixed marketing messages for photographers.

through the step to figure it out at all), they will unconsciously (and maybe consciously) do the mental equivalent of the confused dog head-tilt.<sup>3</sup> Ruh-roh. Not good.

A better idea would be for him to shoot, no surprise here, kids for his promos. They could be doing a series of crafts (one craft per promo) and the instructions for the craft could be in the email (“Here’s Johnny making an origami bunny--and here’s how you can too”). He could even have the kids cooking something very kid-friendly for one of the promos and then include the recipe, but I wouldn’t do more than one of those, I think. The series would be about kids doing, kids in action, and him capturing the kids in action. The message would be clearly “I shoot kids.”

Taking this guy’s situation further, he could send a series of mailers that show more than one image of the kids doing the crafts--like a z-fold of one kid making the origami bunny, for one of them. This would flesh-out the emails (where one image, rarely two, is preferred).

He could also make his website reflective of the promo series. Instead of having just random shots of kids that he thinks are great shots, he could make a new section called “kids and crafts” where the images from the promos, and related others, could be grouped together. The intro/loading page of his site could be the image he just sent, be it in print or email, so that when the target goes to the site, they get the same message reinforced.

All of these pieces would, of course, use the same colors and design treatment (including logo, naturally) so that there is no question that they are all from the same photographer. This will result in the targets getting, even perhaps subliminally, the connection that this guy shoots kids--he’s the kids-in-(crafty, in this campaign)-action guy. The next time they need a kid shot, a kid in action, he’s going to pop in their brains. Bingo. Successful marketing.

---

<sup>3</sup> Worse yet, without meaning to, his actions could be interpreted by some to mean that women are only interested in cooking, etc., and, by extension, that they are less than fully committed professionals--as if he implied that women belong in the kitchen. Yikes!