



## Fear

The culture of the USA has, arguably, become one based heavily on fear in the recent past. While 9/11 obviously contributed to this, I think it started before then. We've seen aspects of it creeping into our society for years, from the removal of "dangerous" (yet fun) playground toys (fear of kids getting hurt) to the elimination of "and the winner is" from the Oscar awards (fear of hurting feelings). Now, we all have to deal with über-PC obsessions like the "perfect" group of models (black, white, asian, hispanic, male, female) in an ad shoot so that any potential consumer isn't left out, and we all complain about it, but what does it really mean for our businesses?

Fear is the biggest obstacle we all face in business. We're not special just because we run creative businesses--all businesspeople have fear as their biggest foe. However, as creatives, we may be more susceptible to its effects because we are, generally speaking, more sensitive as people than other industries--which is a very good thing in many ways, but not always in business.

Photographers, like other creatives, rely heavily on external approval. On the most basic level, they need for clients to approve polaroids (digital or not) before shooting finals. They also need for clients to hire them to shoot a project--approving their work in a more general sense. When a photographer doesn't get awarded (note the word there, "awarded" like it's a prize) a project, s/he often will spend days trying to figure out what s/he did wrong or obsessing on not having been "good enough" somehow.

Unfortunately, this reliance on external approval is not a healthy thing, especially when it comes to business. When any business person relies on external opinion in the development and/or production of his/her product, s/he will constantly be playing a game of "catch the market" rather than leading the market. And that happens often with photographers.

I am so often asked, "What should I be shooting? What does the market want now?" that it boggles my mind. The questions show that people aren't believing in their own product--they're afraid their work isn't "right" for "the" market (as if there is only one market). Fear.

Here's an open secret: for every possible photographic vision, there is a market. I don't care if you shoot cross-processed insect porn--somewhere, there's a market for it. Therefore, it's not a question of tailoring your vision to what you think the most people want, but rather finding the best market for your vision, your particular way of seeing. Yes, that may mean a smaller market, but if you are the only person who can make a particular image in a particular way, you will command a higher fee for that vision and, thus, will make more money (overall) from that smaller market.

Now, we've all heard stories from photographers who changed their way of shooting to fit a large market and who are now making good money. Sure, that is absolutely possible. But, in doing that, I have a hard time believing that those photographers are really creatively satisfied.

I'm not disparaging their choice, but I don't advocate it for truly passionate creatives. I advocate doing what you are most passionate about and finding the right market to use your particular, individual work.

Of course, making the choice to do YOUR work rather than what "everyone" says you "should" do could be seen as very scary. But instead of using that word, pick a different one. It's not "scary," it's "challenging" or "exciting" or "a chance to do what you love." After all, I'm betting you didn't become a photographer with the first thought being "I want to get rich." I bet it was more like "I love making images and can't really imagine doing something else." Now is your chance to do that, to do what you love. The trick is to find the right market and to market effectively to it.

You can do it. It won't all happen overnight, but you can change your business from one that chases "the" market to one that leads its market.

Take the time today to start a list of your dream/ideal clients. Make a file to keep tearsheets of ads/whatever you wish you had shot. Don't make it a list of everyone who you could shoot for (not "I can shoot people--I could do that"), but rather a list of people who use images like yours, who appreciate good photography and who might be able to use your vision in their work. Think of people you'd like to collaborate with. Read magazines like Communication Arts and Creativity to see who is doing what. Don't think "Apple will never hire me because I'm just some photographer in Michigan," but rather "I'd love to work with Apple and I shoot product in a very clean style" and add 'em to your list. These will be your A-list targets. These people are your future, your goals. Big companies, small companies, local, international, it doesn't matter--just as long as your vision could help them.

Start that list today and you'll be taking your first step to break out of a fear-based business and into one where you are in control and making money doing what you love.

