

# The Ultimate Guide to Starting a Portrait Photography Business

Includes Step-by-Step  
Business Plan Template



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## The Ultimate Guide to Starting a Portrait Photography Business

Running a successful business has changed rapidly—a totally new approach is needed to keep up.

Are you ready to take the ‘next step’ to start your photography business? Do you want to take it to the next level?

Have you been working ridiculous hours 6-7 days a week for some time now, and still haven’t built a photography studio that is continually growing.

It is a well-known business premise that “If a business isn’t growing then it is probably dying.” Put simply, you should have your business act together now. And if that’s not happening, then something is radically wrong and you need to fix it.

When I started my photography business many years ago from a small shop in an outer suburb of Melbourne, I quickly learned one thing.

I found out that being self-employed wasn’t easy. But because I loved business, and loved a challenge, I committed to doing whatever it would take to create a successful business in doing what I loved.

I Chased The Dream .....No Excuses!

I knew that I had to think and act bigger than the mentality that I was born with. So I learned to get myself out of my own way and keep going forward to make my new business succeed.

I know how it feels to be under pressure, to push yourself, and to know how it feels when you actually do it.

When I share a Marketing strategy or an idea I can not only say, “this worked for me” but also “ this is working now for other photographers.”

Everything in this guide is based on my own personal experience of owning a successful wedding/portrait business for over 40 years, and now as a Photography Business Coach, continually working with photographers around the world who are currently achieving great success.

Working for yourself and going down the path to self-employment is only as possible as you make it. Learn how you can make the leap to running your very own portrait photography business.

Maybe you've dreamed of starting your own business, but you've hesitated to dive in because you don't know how to work for yourself. Having been self-employed owning a photography studio for over four decades, I can say it's not as intimidating or improbable as it seems.

### **Benefits of working for yourself**

It's not difficult to imagine the benefits of working for yourself. A few advantages easily spring to mind, but here are a few of the factors that usually drive people to start on their dream of owning their very own photography studio.

#### **Freedom**

Choosing to start a business is about seeking freedom. The freedom to pursue your passions while earning a living from them. The freedom to set a schedule that works with your life. The freedom to grow and evolve as a human being on your terms, not based on the needs of a corporation. The freedom to know that there is no limit on the amount of money you could earn.

Your business is your baby, so having a solid proven business model and pouring time into it, pays you dividends directly, unlike a traditional employer relationship. It also provides a flexible schedule — one of the great allures of working for yourself.

If you work at home, you can take a day off to be with a sick child without the risk of raising the ire of your boss. Or you can structure and plan your days to optimize towards a balance between your business and commitments to family and yourself.

#### **Decision-making power**

It's your business. You call the shots. You make the final decisions. No more spending hours making a case for your ideas to the boss. If you want to try a concept, go for it. Test and measure.

This is also one of the great benefits of being self-employed. You work in the way you see fit. You evolve and grow the business in the direction you want it to go. It's all yours to create and shape.

## Income

In the beginning when you're trying to capture your first clients, it may seem like the income you generate is a downside. In reality, over time, you can exceed the income you made at a traditional job.

That's because there's no ceiling to what you can make. As long as you keep growing your business, your income potential is unlimited. You're not at the mercy of an employer deciding how much, or even if, a pay raise is warranted.

## What to consider if you're deciding to work for yourself

When considering how to work for yourself, dwelling only on the benefits of entrepreneurship can paint a picture that's a little too rosy.

In reality, there are plenty of downsides in addition to the upsides, and that's why many choose to work for someone else. Reflect on these factors before deciding to work for yourself.

## Motivation for working from home

Examine why you want to start a business. Is it because you're frustrated with your job? Are you looking at self-employment as a means to make lots of money? If negative emotions like anger or greed are your catalyst, then you're not ready to launch your own business.

You should be passionate about the work you'll do and the business you'll build. Otherwise, you won't possess the motivation to deliver a great experience to your customers. Without that, it's a tough road to build up clientele and generate the revenue to stay afloat.

## Uncertainty when working for yourself

Predictable income comprises one of the key benefits of a job. You know how much to expect with each paycheck. You lose that predictability when working for yourself.

The natural ebb and flow of business means income fluctuation becomes the norm, especially in the beginning as you build up clientele. Also, your business is susceptible to macroeconomic factors like a recession. Your business may do well when the economy is booming, but you have to plan for any downturn.

If a predictable income is paramount, avoid starting your own business. If you can adjust to income uncertainty, then be sure to save up enough funds to cover personal and business expenses for several months that you can fall back on if necessary.

### **Multiple roles when you become your own boss**

An often-underappreciated consideration of working for yourself is that you need to wear many hats. With an employer, you have support in the form of an accounting department, a marketing team, human resources, customer service reps, and so forth. As an entrepreneur, all those roles fall onto you.

Imagine you're a freelance photographer who has no idea how to build a website. You'll need to earn enough money to hire a web designer or grit your teeth, grab some CMS software, and do it yourself. The same goes for generating sales.

If taking on these additional roles is anathema to you, stick with your day job. Otherwise, be prepared to take on more than just the product or service you're selling when you start looking into how to work for yourself.

### **How to know if you're ready to start working for yourself**

The biggest fears that photographers have are self-doubt, and lack of confidence. By far, those two are probably the big ones, so overcoming those is one of your first big challenges.

There's an array of books and articles that explain how to work for yourself and make money. In reality, the ways to work for yourself can't be summarized in a succinct step-by-step guide.

Starting a portrait photography business is an ongoing process, not a one-time event. Here's how to tell if you're ready for that journey.

### **You're focused and committed**

When considering how to work for yourself, first you must possess the mental focus to establish and grow a business, and with that, have a strong commitment to yourself and your customers. Both must be in place to succeed.

This is why many people start with a side hustle while maintaining full-time employment. They prove to themselves that they have the mental dedication required to run their own business and the ability to earn income from it. After that, they drop the job to concentrate on their company because, like any relationship, your business withers without attention.

Once you've launched your business, it takes willpower to stay focused on work tasks. With no one to answer to but yourself, it's easy to fall behind or

bite off more than you can chew. This is particularly true for freelance workers who usually run a business alone; if they get sick or injured, the work piles up since no one has their backs.

To grow your business past the early stages, focus and commitment again come into play. It's tempting to grab every income opportunity that comes along even if it's not related to your business mission or long-term goals. Don't relent to the temptation. If you do, you end up using precious time and resources on a money grab, and it pulls you away from the direction you're trying to go with your company.

### **You have a viable product-to-market fit**

Having passion for your pursuit is only part of what's required. You also need to have a product or service that fulfills a market need. Otherwise, you won't find customers.

What sets your business apart from competitors? Establish how you want to convey your unique business brand and proposition by formulating a positioning strategy. This also plays into how to market yourself.

Who are your ideal customers? What characteristics do they exhibit? How can you reach them to raise awareness of your business offerings? Define your customers through buyer personas (a profile of the customer characteristics that fit your offerings), then implement customer segmentation to align your product or service as well as your marketing strategies to the right groups of clients.

Is your product or service fully fleshed out? You must have at least a minimum viable product (an MVP, one that meets the most basic needs of a client) to put in front of customers. Otherwise, your idea may still require more time to build up to the MVP stage before you have an offering to sell.

Test Facebook marketing and evaluate which ad is generating your best customers. Also interview any clients, even those who rejected your offerings previously, to gain insight into what to improve. These learnings allow you to determine if you're at the MVP level, and if so, to zero in on the aspects of your offerings that are the best fit for a particular set of clients.

### **You're ready to put an end to autopilot**

With traditional employment, not only do you gain a predictable income, but part of your earnings are diverted to a retirement plan, and health insurance may be provided. You work a predetermined schedule. You get vacation time.

And a boss tells you what you need to do. It's a very comfortable scenario. Starting your own business means an end to this existence.

If you're ready to turn off the autopilot and begin defining the details of your life, such as what retirement looks like, then starting your own business makes sense. Yes, predictability goes out the window. In exchange, you make the choices for your life that support the goals you want to achieve.

To get to a point where you've outlined decisions for your business, start with a plan.

A traditional small business plan is a good idea to run through even if you don't intend to seek funding, and mandatory if you do. It requires you to include components such as financial projections, and this provides an opportunity to reflect on the elements of a successful business. Most countries have a Government Small Business Department that offers business plan examples to help you get started.

In addition to the business plan, perform planning for items such as health insurance, retirement, amounts to set aside for your quarterly tax filings, and the minimum income you require to pay your own expenses, like rent and groceries, in addition to those of your business.

A third type of plan is also required to drive customers to your business: the marketing plan. This strategy outlines the best methods to reach customers, such as making a newsletter. Fortunately, once you've determined a product-to-market fit, many elements of the marketing plan will naturally fall into place.

### **You understand failure is not an option**

This doesn't mean you cannot make mistakes; quite the opposite. It meant launch your offering, collect real-world performance data, evaluate what's working and what's failing, then address the failure until it's resolved. In short, keep tackling the problem until a solution is found.

This same mindset applies to launching a portrait photography business. You may think you have the greatest ideas in the world, but when you evaluate your identified market, you may discover the idea isn't ideal. So be prepared to adjust or even pivot to a different business model, if necessary. Staying flexible and open-minded to change is what being a business owner is all about.

To determine what may be going wrong with a struggling business, try these steps:

Collect as much data as possible — through customer interviews, surveys, and analyzing your local competitors to see how you can improve what they are doing.

Change one aspect of your existing products or services that can have a material impact on your business, such as the pricing, then collect more data. Changing more than one facet at a time can make it difficult to determine the impact of the change, so don't make too many adjustments at once.

Continue tweaking and collecting data about the change until results improve. This means you're on to a solution.

When results improve, continue this pattern of testing until your offering is performing well. And to be honest, this approach really never ends, because you'll want to continually look for ways to evolve your business.

You must be willing to adjust a product or service that isn't working for your customers. Have an open mind to change. Being your own boss doesn't mean you have no one to answer to; you always have to address customer needs, which change over time.

### **You're excited about continuing self-education**

Speaking of change, the one constant for a business is continuous evolution. Acquiring new skills and knowledge is a big part of that.

Perhaps your passion for photography doesn't translate to the spreadsheets or other record-keeping required to prepare for taxes. Or maybe you have no clue how to market yourself with tactics like email marketing, an effective but complex marketing channel necessitating the help of email marketing software.

Being proactive and educating yourself is a big part of learning how to work for yourself. Some sources where you can find help include the following.

The internet serves as a natural resource for information, but check small business information with your local library, local government small business departments, or even consider an online course.

This learning also extends to your inner workings, such as getting out of your comfort zone. For instance, if you're not keen on selling yourself or your work, you've got to break out of that mindset to capture customers. If you don't attend networking or industry events, you'll have to change that behaviour. You can gain contacts who can help further your business. Learning how to work for yourself means you must be open to constantly evolving your business and your own thought processes.

## 20 Things To Have In Place When You Opening a Photography Business

Register a Business name.

A Legal Entity...Business structure...Sole Trader, Company, Partnership etc

A Website.

An Accountant to advise on tax, funding for retirement etc.

A Professional email address eg not gmail.

A simple Business Plan containing your financial goals.

A structured Price List with suitable products.

Photography equipment Insurance, depending on total value of equipment.

A Logo to give your business a professional look and trust.

A Business Facebook page to allow you to do Facebook advertising.

Public Liability to protect yourself and your business from accident or injury to clients.

Electronic Point of Sale facility, like Square, to take credit and debit card payments, live and over the phone.

A Calendar set up like Calendly.

Landing page Software like Jotform.

Invest in a CRM like Tave, Light Blue, Studio Ninja, or Sprout Studio.

Email marketing software like Mailchimp for email campaigns.

A business Credit Card to pay business expenses.

Accounting Software like MYOB, Xero, Quickbooks.

A Marketing Plan and Strategy.

A Coach or Mentor to guide you into building a solid Business Foundation

### **The 4 Biggest Marketing Mistakes Photography Business Owners Make and How to Avoid Them**

Marketing is one of the most important topics when it comes to starting any business success and growth, and I'd even go so far as to say that a business owner needs to focus at least 60 to 70% of their time on marketing and even more for a start-up business.

What is marketing? Marketing is all the activities you do that create exposure for your brand and bring prospects to your business. Even walking down to the shops and talking to people or taking the kids to the playground, chatting to other parents is marketing. Even if you are not specifically talking about your business, you are still marketing your personal brand.

Most photographers don't know how to market their business well and instead of having a stable and predictable income, they go through low tides and high tides, except that they don't know when the tides are coming. A lot of photographers end up wasting a lot of money, time and energy without really getting any results.

But don't worry, there are many smart, low cost and innovative marketing strategies you can use to grow your business.

Let's look at the 4 biggest marketing mistakes business owners make and how you can avoid them. If you take on board and implement only half of these solutions, there is no doubt you'll be a success in your business.

#### **Don't Market to everyone**

Most businesses tell me that their target market is everybody. Big mistake!! For most small businesses it is extremely ineffective to advertise to everyone because no one will listen. It's like yelling 'everyone!' in a crowd, no one would turn around.

## Do

In order to save money and to be more effective, you must select a niche market. Think about who would really benefit from your photography and target them specifically. Once you've defined your niche you will be able to target them much easier. If for example your target market is Newborns, it is much easier to target pregnant women and those who have just had a baby.

## Don't Focus on you

If you take a look at your website, brochures, and other marketing materials, where is the focus? Are you mainly talking about you, your products or services and how good they are? Or are you talking about your prospects and the benefits to them?

You are very important, but the first thing your prospect cares about is themselves.

## Do Focus on your customer needs

Look at your marketing materials and change them if they are all about you rather than the benefits to your client. Turn the spot light onto them and focusing on their needs and wants, positioning you as the expert and someone who really understands them.

## Don't be like all your competitors

Don't be vanilla , but rather be an exotic flavour. There is a lot of competition out there, so your photography business has to stand out to be noticed and remembered. A lot of photographers choose to be vanilla because it's less scary and easier to blend in nicely.

## Do stand out

If you want to be seen, remembered and chosen by your specific target market, you need to do something to stand out! Be unique, take a stance in your industry and stand by it. You can do this by positioning yourself as different to your competitors, a different style business name, the colours you use or your marketing materials. Don't just copy your competitors, be different and do it better! Be courageous and stand out.

## Don't market and hope

Most photography businesses I come across don't know if their marketing strategies are working. Why? Because they don't **test and measure** their success. Lots of photographers run expensive Facebook ads without knowing

whether that ad is giving them a positive return. They are just wasting a lot of money.

### **Do Test and measure**

You have to test and measure everything when it comes to marketing. I know, it doesn't sound very sexy, but it really isn't that hard.

A few things you can measure are: your client acquisition costs, how many leads you get with each ad, email opening rates with your email marketing, website traffic and where your leads generally come from. Don't forget to always ask your new clients where they found you. That way you know which marketing strategies are working and which ones aren't.

### **Learn, learn, learn about Business**

I know that if you avoid these four mistakes, you will be well ahead of your competitors and on the way to growing a healthy and sustainable business. Always look for any professional support or advice. Remember, you don't have to be alone! Educate yourself by reading books on business, listen to educational material, join a marketing program and/or get a mentor.

I am also a huge believer in outsourcing, but you do need to understand marketing even if you outsource, because there are way too many cowboys out there and you will avoid getting ripped off by understanding at least the basics!

### **Let's get down to business**

If you're thinking of buying or starting a new photography business, it's important to have a plan. But not just any plan. You'll need one that acts as your roadmap to follow, your benchmark to look back on, and your key document to use as a base to start from.

This Business Plan Template allows you to create just that – a comprehensive solution suited to your business.

### **Ready to plan?**

To get started, simply answer the questions and fill in the fields where needed. Don't worry if you are unsure about the answers, just fill in what you think.

Keep in mind that the structure of the template is a starting guide only. You can always rewrite a more detailed plan once you have more experience.

This is the simplest business photography business plan ever, so print it, grab a pen and start filling it out.

Business Plan for \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_ Month: \_\_\_\_\_ Year: 20 \_\_\_\_\_

**Current position**

Outline your business's current position, such as where it is in its life cycle.

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**Business ownership structure**

Will you be a sole trader, partnership, company?

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**Growth plan**

Explain how you plan to increase your photography business's capabilities and capacity. Why are you confident your business will keep growing?

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**Short term goals**

Outline your business's short-term goals and their target dates.

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**Long term goals**

Outline your business's long-term goals and their target dates.

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**Products or services**

What products and services your business will offer?

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**Marketing Tactics**

How you are going to market your business?

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**Stand out from your competition**

What separates you from other photographers?

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**Mentors and business support**

What support resources can your business can rely on?

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**Critical success factors**

What are the critical factors for your business to achieve success?

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**Market research**

What surveys, questionnaires, interviews, are you going to do?

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**Target market**

Your target market description

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**How your business will meet the market's requirements**

How will your products and services respond to the market?

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Financial plan

Summarise the start-up costs of your business.

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How many photography sessions can you do in a week?

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Estimate your average sale per photography session

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Marketing budget

What will spend per week on Marketing?

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Profit and loss forecast	First year	Second year	Third year
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Estimated sales

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Estimated costs	First year	Second year	Third year
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Estimated profit/loss	First year	Second year	Third year
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### **Final advice about working for yourself**

Because transitioning from a job to self-employment is a big life change, know that it takes a few months for the transition to fully sink in. Give yourself the breathing room to make it a successful transition by maintaining your health and balancing other life commitments with your business.

Doing so makes the challenge of learning how to work for yourself less stressful, particularly if you've done some of that financial and business planning I mentioned. It also gives you the space to enjoy what you're doing.

Taking back your life is one of the key reasons to become your own boss, so be sure to leave time to bask in your newfound joy.

*For more info on creating and growing a photography business.....*

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