

Assignment 1: Creative Practitioner Interview

Introduction

For this assignment I chose to base it off the photography industry, which is one of my main interests as a creativity student with a passion for digital media. I initially reached out to Deidra Sullivan (one of the tutors at Te Auaha) who suggested I contact Jo Mohi, a Wellington-based photographer. I emailed Jo and while she was happy to take part in the interview, I was running out of time and needed a backup option.

I contacted Photo Warehouse, the place where I get my photographic equipment from. There was a misunderstanding over the phone about them being able to take part in the interview, but they recommended an individual studio portrait photographer further down Victoria St by the name of Steve Montgomery. Steve owns ProfilePhotos and was eager to chat, so the following is a transcript of the recorded interview.

Steve's LinkedIn:

<https://nz.linkedin.com/in/steve-montgomery>

ProfilePhotos:

<https://profilephotos.nz/>

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Interview Transcript

Who are you?

My name's Steve, I'm a photographer, I own ProfilePhotos which is a studio in Wellington where I specialize in portraiture.

How long have you been in practice?

With studio portraits I've been working for the last probably 4 years running profile photos, but I've been taking portraits for the last 15. So in the last four I've really pushed it as a viable business. But apart from that I do other photography as well. But mainly portraits.

Is studio portrait photography your sole source of income?

No, it's not. I also do video production as well, where I'm an editor and a producer, but studio photography I find is a better turnaround for money because with video you have to spend a lot more time editing and going back and forth with clients which just takes up a lot of time, whereas with photos they book, you shoot, they pick, you edit, you deliver. It can be done within a day.

Are you a sole trader or do you employ others?

Generally I'm a sole trader. Occasionally I hire people or contract people to do work for me. In video production I definitely do – I hire cinematographers, editors etc. but with photography it's generally just myself because it can be done by myself.

Do you out-source parts of your workflow to others?

I thought about out-sourcing part of my workflow, but again part of my work, part of who I am and what I do is my creative process. I also don't want to have to pay someone else to do the work I can do. If I give it to someone else I start to lose control of the end product, because it is my name that's going on it, not this other person's. Occasionally I might use a retoucher, but again that's for higher-end products.

What are your tools, materials and processes for creating your work?

How it starts is people book online through my website, then they turn up and I shoot using my lighting, backdrops and camera. I shoot tethered to my computer, using Capture One to edit, then I'll deliver the final product. If I have to use Photoshop I'll do it for retouching, but I try to limit the amount I have to for that, so I just try to capture it all on camera.

What overheads are involved?

Well if you lease a space, you got lease, you got power, internet, online storage, backups, archiving. Because with digital you got to have a local copy, a backup copy, then a backup of that backup. That's digital, that's just the way it is. You've also got your subscriptions if you use subscription-based software such as Adobe products.

Describe the income stream, is it good or services related?

When it comes to costs, you've got to decide how much you're worth – the quality of your work. Look at other photographers, what they're charging, how they go about their process.

Is there a standard pricing structure or is there a variance? How are pricing structures arrived at?

There's no standard pricing structure for anything. What is the standard? Who makes it? There's no one out there that says "this is how much you should charge". Again, you've got to decide how much you're worth. You set the prices, but you've also got to consider the overheads, your costs, your materials, consumables. You've got to factor those in, then your time on top.

Describe the life of the photography industry, how have things changed?

I don't really know how it's changed. Maybe over the last 10 years it's become a lot more streamlined. You've been able to tether capture for years. Personally, I just base it on what I see happening, which is I see a studio pop up, then I see it go down. In Wellington, I don't know how many studios there are. It's a hard question.

In terms of creativity are you self-driven or market-driven? How are these things balanced in the enterprise?

In terms of my creative processes I am both self-driven and market-driven. With self-driven I look at what I consider the best photos out there and try to replicate their look. Anything below that just becomes easy. But there are a lot of market-driven options out there. LinkedIn's a big one, online dating too.

Anything you want to say to aspiring photographers?

If you're going to be a photographer, be confident. Project. If you're taking photos of a client, they want to see confidence in their photographer. That you can talk to them, propose ideas, tell them to do things. They want to hear those things; they pay you for a service. Photography can be a hard game, depending on which area you're involved in. You could sell your soul and just shoot real estate, but where's the creativity in that?

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Personal Reflection

Steve and I talked for a while longer after the recording ended, where he demonstrated his work, equipment and process, as well as a few small tricks for extra effects, like the use of a diffusion filter to soften the edges of lights, and his “bar light” setup involving a cardboard cutout in front of a light panel. I was already familiar with parts of Steve’s workflow, having taken studio portraits briefly in 2019, as well as the shooting and editing processes, like tethered capture.

Overall, I found this assignment fun. It was my first time properly sitting down and interviewing a business of some sort, and I learnt a lot about Steve’s work. As an aspiring photographer, it was cool being able to find common ground between us in some areas while learning new stuff about the photography industry that I probably wouldn’t have thought of otherwise.

Assignment 2: Business Planning

Introduction

I'm Calvin, and I'm 21 years old. I am currently a student at WelTec, studying the Bachelor of Creativity: Level 6.

I have been interested in various types of digital media since around 2017, including things like photography, cinematography, animation (both 2D and 3D) and game-making, as well as a bit of programming with the C#, Java and HTML languages, which I started learning in 2015. I've made a few Android apps over the years, mostly "assistant" apps for my classes that frankly are more designed for showing off than actually reminding me of my schedule.

My design language for photography tends to focus on photo-realism and I suppose to some extent minimalism, although I plan to incorporate some form of surrealism into my work at some point in the near future.

I plan to create a business that revolves around profile photography in both studio and off-site environments. Photography has been a strong passion of mine since 2018, which is when I started learning it at WelTec and bought my first DSLR, the Nikon D5600. I feel like when it comes to profile photography, you're able to work with clients and really create a personal aesthetic for everyone, both when shooting and in post-production. Although most of my photos so far have been taken with the kit lens that came with the camera, that never stopped me from making great masterpieces.

Assignment 2: Business Planning Planning

What parts of my skill set could I sell as a good or service?

I was thinking of planning a business around photography. My work so far hasn't been restricted to portraiture, so I figured I would provide a variety of subjects in my business, such as portraiture, landscapes, macros, weddings and other stuff.

Generic photos will be sold online either as digital images, canvas photos or framed works, which would count as a good.

Personalized photos of clients would count more as a service, considering there's more of a process involved with that, at least from the perspective of the client.

What could be unique about what I could do or how I could do it?

Cultural aesthetic in editing process

I recommended to a classmate with Pacific ancestry that if he's familiar with his culture, he could connect more with Pacific clients, adding a unique aesthetic to their work for a more personalized look.

Affordable

By limiting my purchases and focusing more on the skills needed to create an equally impressive photo, I could keep costs down for my clients, ergo attracting more business.

I don't know much about making a business, but I was thinking a key selling point to promote my business could be making my work affordable. Think about it. If I keep my expenses minimal, I could keep prices down while still making a profit. Additionally, people are drawn to affordability, and while this goes against what Steve said for the first assignment about deciding how much you're worth, it might be interesting to try.

What sort of business do I want to be? Sole trader? Partnership?

Probably a sole trader. I was thinking of having someone manage sales, web stuff and marketing etc. while I do the hands-on stuff with clients like taking photos and editing them, but I think a sole trader business would be easier to manage.

What is the state of the market in my area of interest?

Doing a quick search on Google Maps for "portrait photographers wellington" there seem

to be quite a few around (maybe about 30) in the central Wellington suburbs. There don't seem to be many in the eastern suburbs (Miramar area). This is probably related to limited convenience.

I noticed that a lot of photographers in Wellington have someone's name and photography as their business name. I decided this was probably to make them seem more approachable and unique when it comes to search results and word of mouth.

Who are the main players?

In Wellington the top 3 players in the market (according to a Google search for "portrait photographers wellington") seem to be Woolf Photography, Tabitha Arthur Photography, and Profile Photos.

Search engine optimization is important for promoting your business as it increases the chance people will see it when they search up people that do the same stuff as you.

What are the operating expenses likely to be?

I guess the main ones would probably be renting a studio to keep my work and serve as the face of my business, and a subscription for the photo editing software.

If I were only shooting off-site then I could keep my equipment at home, which would mean I wouldn't have to lease a space for a studio, therefore saving money either for better equipment or just general savings.

What financial capital do I have behind me?

I guess not much. Of course, my business wouldn't exactly rely on many regular expenses except for maybe software subscriptions and website hosting, the latter of which is typically available as a one-off payment over a long-term period. For instance, the platform Hostinger offers a 24-month premium plan for \$300 USD.

How long could I last without capital coming in?

I'd imagine probably quite a while if I have another job. Photography might be more of a casual business that I would do as needed as opposed to a structured 9-5 type workday.

What is my projected income and expenditure for the first year/two years?

Maybe about \$400 weekly on average for my income, then \$200 weekly for renting a studio if I'm sharing one with a separate photographer. That creates a profit of \$200 per week.

What are my business responsibilities?

I guess the main ones would be keeping the studio up and running, and getting the work done on time.

How do I intend to approach marketing my business?

The methods I can think of are Google search results, Google Maps, social media and maybe Google Ads. I think that considering no-one clicks on ads but everyone uses social media, the latter would be a better choice. And it's free! Having a well-known social media presence is great for getting word out in this day and age.

How could I diversify my business plan?

Possibly by offering different services at different prices. This could depend on photos provided, time shooting, and effort put into editing.

Plan B, C what am I going to do if things don't go to plan?

I'd most likely have a backup job to cover me in the event I don't get enough customers.

Brain dump / planning

I'm going to start off assuming that I'll have my business ready to open by December 31st, 2021. This means I can work with what resources I currently have.

Assignment 2: Business Planning Extra Stuff (added 2021-05-20)

Once the initial setup has been sorted (like studio space and equipment), I would put together a website for my business featuring a booking form, gallery, about page and store.

As mentioned earlier, I would sell 2 types of photos. One would be “generic” ones of stuff like nature that would be available for purchase as framed prints or canvases. The other type would be “personalized” photos of clients that want their photos taken. These would only be available to them, although a preview might be added to my online gallery. These photos would be available as high-resolution digital images in addition to the physical forms.

When a client wants their photo taken, they would book a session online. I would then discuss with them what exactly they’re after through email or phone call. On the day, I would then shoot them. Once that’s done, I would take their photos into Adobe Lightroom and Photoshop to edit them. The amount of effort and fine-tuning put into that would depend on the pricing plan.

I haven’t planned out personal printing just yet, but sending digital files would be a piece of cake.

Assignment 2: Business Planning

Current Resources

Microsoft Surface Laptop 3

This is a great 13" laptop with a brilliant screen for color accuracy, which is crucial for getting great photos in the editing process.

Nikon D5600

A mid-range crop sensor DSLR that I've used since 2018. Definitely not the best out there of course, but I've found that lenses are more important.

NIKKOR AF-P DX 18-55mm f/3.5-5.6G VR lens

This is the kit lens that came with my camera. It's a great all-rounder that seems to work well in a variety of situations. For portrait photographer however, I'll probably want to get a lens with a wider aperture and possibly a fixed focal length (something like 30 or 50mm).

2 TB hard disk drive (HDD) and 256 GB solid state drive (SSD)

This will be important for storing photos. It's always good to keep a backup on multiple drives instead of just one. HDDs offer more storage both a lower price, but SSDs are more durable in the sense that they don't contain moving parts so if I were to drop it on a hard surface it wouldn't matter. SSDs are also faster, so I'd probably do my main work on them, then make regular backups to my HDD which would be located in a safe place at my studio.

Wacom graphics tablet

I've found this to be a valuable asset when it comes to digital media, photography included. Often in Photoshop and Lightroom there will be times when I need to make fine adjustments using some type of brush tool, and being able to "paint" in a natural way makes it much better to use than a mouse or touchpad.

Assignment 2: Business Planning

Stuff I'd Need To Buy

Lenses

I'll need a wider range of lenses than the one I've currently got if I am to meet clients' expectations.

\$395 - Nikon AF-P DX 70-300mm f4-5.6.3G ED VR

\$669 - Samyang 50mm f/1.4 ED AS UMC Nikon AE

\$300 - MeFoto Roadtrip Air tripod

Tripod

I thought that this might be a staple for a photography studio, but then when I realized that part of getting sharp portraits is by using a fast shutter speed, I wondered if it was really as necessary as I originally thought. There might be some situations where you would want a certain level of consistency between photos, so having a camera on a tripod would be good for this.

Backdrops

Probably a bunch of different solid colors for different moods/personalities. For instance, a dull background would probably suit an elderly person better than a bright, bold one.

Studio lighting

Sticking with the basics, I'd probably try to get 2 with variable colour temperatures, plus a few RGB ones.

Assignment 2: Business Planning

Recurring Expenses

Adobe photography plan (1TB)

This plan is one of 3 offered by Adobe that's targeted at photographers. To maximize my creative edits, I'll need to make use of not just Lightroom, but also Photoshop. At the same time, I want to have enough space to back up my work to Adobe's cloud storage in the event my local storage drives are corrupted, lost or stolen.

Assignment 2: Business Planning Links

<https://www.digitalcameraworld.com/au/tutorials/the-best-portrait-lens-three-lenses-every-portrait-photographer-needs-to-consider>

<https://www.business.govt.nz/getting-started/taking-the-first-steps/questions-to-ask-yourself-before-you-start>