

WORTH EVERY PENNY *joycast*TM

Episode 1: How A Mom With Newborns Left Her 9-5 & Built A Profitable Photography Business

with Sarah Petty

Today's episode is the farthest thing from a highlight reel. I'm going to share how I accidentally became a professional photographer and why I am so passionate about helping anyone out there whose dream is to have a career that provides you an income for doing something you'd probably do anyway for free.

You might see my cool studio now and think my life and journey were so easy, but that's the farthest thing from the truth. I started this journey as a mom with 3 kids under 3 with a very badly broken business. I want you to know that no matter how bad things are in your photography business today, there is hope. You can fix it.

How My Journey Into the Portrait Photography Business Started

Here's the thing, I never planned to have a professional photography business. (It just happened, but I have been loving every minute of it!) I get to be a hands-on mom AND make a living doing something I jump out of bed to do.

But before all of this, I was working at an advertising agency, and I was doing photography as a hobby on the side. I was taking photos for friends, and they were referring me to their friends. I thought, "Well, okay, as long as I'm just charging more than I'm paying, I'm maybe making money. I'm not losing money, and it's just a hobby anyway." Little did I know how much more money I could have been making as a photographer.

I got married during this time, and my husband started his own business. We were both working all the time thinking, "Okay, when we have kids, we'll have our career started, and we can cut back and be really awesome parents." We got pregnant pretty quickly. We got a heartbeat right away, and everything was amazing. I went back for that 13-week checkup and they told us that we didn't have that heartbeat anymore. It was devastating. All of a sudden it felt like everything was gone, and nothing mattered anymore — my career didn't matter, my dreams didn't matter, my photography business didn't matter.

After a second miscarriage, we went to a specialist, and we got pregnant again. But this time, it was twins. During that pregnancy, and when I was on bedrest, I had friends of friend's referrals, calling me and saying, "Hey, would you take pictures?" When I explained I'm on bedrest, they would all say, "Oh, we'll wait, we'll wait." I literally had a legal notepad, of names of people who wanted my services. I thought, "Hey, Sarah, this would be cool. You could go start your photography business, or really get dedicated to it, and you could stay home. You could stay home with your kids. If your business could pay for two or three days of childcare, you would have the best of both worlds." I thought, "Okay, this is what I can do. I can start a photography business and be a hands-on mom."

What Went Wrong In My Photography Business

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I started just going forward. The problem was my business was a hot mess. I was under-priced because I was guessing. I had no system. I thought I was serving clients by giving them all the proofs, because this was in the days of film. I overshot. I was giving my photography away without selling anything other than digital files. My clients were referring me and talking me up, but I wasn't making any money.

So that's when I rented a super inexpensive studio. I spent all summer fixing it up, painting it, planting flowers, trying to do it as inexpensively as possible. I had this huge grand opening on August 30th, 2001- 2 weeks before 9/11. I started this whole adventure in a hot mess of an economy with a lot of panic and uncertainty.

When I got home from work one day, I got out my babies wrapped in their little blankets, and I had this moment where it occurred to me, "I am not working the next 15 years of their lives away. I'm not going to be sitting in this same dirty chair, wearing these same clothes, with no money for a vacation, let alone college." That's when I had the epiphany, "Somebody somewhere is making money with photography. I'm going to go find them. If they can do it, I can do it too."

I did what every good entrepreneur must get good at doing. I dug the pennies out of the proverbial sofa and went to a convention. I invested in myself. It was a trip to a conference in Chicago, and when I got there, I just jumped right in. I started going from speaker to speaker to speaker. What I found really quickly was that they were all giving conflicting advice. One would say, "Oh, you've got to offer packages to your clients." The next one would say, "Oh, no, only do a la carte." Many were saying, "Discount to lure clients and then raise your prices." The thing is, most of them were admitting they had no idea about marketing. I left a job as a marketing director at an advertising agency, which meant I could easily tell that they were guessing and making things up. I felt like I was collecting random pieces of completely different puzzles.

How I Made My Photography Business Profitable

So, I dug in, I invested, I implemented, I failed, I fixed, I repeated. I implemented, I failed, I fixed, I repeated. Every time something happened, I would look at, "Okay, why did that part of my system fail my clients? How can I fix it?" I would add it to the system. Within five years, I started getting really good traction, and my studio was named one of the most profitable in the United States by the Professional Photographers of America. I share that not to brag, but I share that because when you're taking business advice, my filter is that I want to take business advice from people who are running a successful business. I want to listen to people who are where I want to be, and people who are still doing it. I'm still shooting. I have a studio. I plan to always be shooting. I'm in a cornfield in central Illinois, so if I can do this in a cornfield, you can do this where you are.

As I was passionate about photography, my first love and my first passion was marketing and business, that's how the Joy of Marketing was really born. Now I'm able to split my time between both my photography studio and coaching photographers on how to do what I do.

Here's what I do that's different. I teach a model called Boutique, which is what the joycast is dedicated to. Boutique is where you serve your clients at a high level to create beautiful wall portraits for their home, and you're holding their hands the entire way, like you would for a best friend. Your products are simple, they're books and albums and beautiful things to display on walls. You give clients an experience. It's not quick, it's custom. It's relationship-based. You market differently, so you can attract better clients who love you, refer you and gush on you. And under no circumstances do you sell digital files. The only digital files I give to my clients are the files of everything they purchased in print, so that they can share the images to social media. I don't send them home with any high-res principal digital files, because I want to make sure that it's printed correctly and that the

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color match is perfect. It's my brand, and I need to make sure everything is up to that super high standard. And I want to serve my clients with the highest quality.

In our industry, selling digital files is known as shoot and burn, and it's probably what you see most other photographers doing. They charge maybe a couple hundred bucks to shoot for clients and give them all the digital files on a CD or a jump drive or in Dropbox.

The Shoot and Burn model doesn't serve the client. In fact, even if you succeed at that model, you've traded all of your time, and your life stinks. If you can make money being a shoot and burn photographer, you're trading your life and selling your time for money. You only have so much time to sell, and when it's gone, it's gone, and your income is maxed out.

You Don't Have to Compete On Price

Enter the Boutique business model. Boutique isn't a get rich quick model, but it's a solid, proven model. Boutique is the model where you can put your family first and still make a profit. If you want to start adding to your Boutique puzzle box, you're in the right place. I teach what works for kids, babies, families, pets, boudoir, even high school seniors who are really struggling right now.

After I had started my photography business, I created an e-book for boutique photographers and put it up online. I had photographers emailing me saying, "Sarah, oh my gosh, I think this is what I am. I'm Boutique, but I always thought I had to compete on price." They were trying to compete with the cheap photographers, but also to deliver a service at a really high level. That was the inspiration of our book, which is also the inspiration for this joycast, and it's called *Worth Every Penny: Build a Business that Thrills Your Customers and Still Charge what You're Worth*. It shares about the Boutique business model, so you can start to create the picture on your puzzle box as you start collecting the right pieces to your puzzle.

As a listener to this very first joycast, I would love for you to have a free copy of my hardback New York Times bestselling book. I just need you to pick up the shipping and handling, but [here's where you can grab that book for free](#). Instead of simply pushing harder and grinding with a broken model and beating yourself up because it isn't working, push the pause button on your business and pick up the picture on a puzzle box that works for you, and then start adding the pieces.

That's why I'm here, to show you there's a better way, to be a voice that you hear clearly through all of the clutter that's out there, to combat the people who say, "You can't charge that much." To silence the fears that make you doubt yourself and to show you that no matter where you live, no matter how many competitors you have, no matter how long you've been a photographer, there are clients out there who will pay you what you're worth and believe you are worth every penny.

Resources

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