

# WORTH EVERY PENNY *joycast*<sup>TM</sup>

## ***Episode 2: I Stopped Selling Digital Files. Here's What Happened***

with Sarah Petty

I was just a mom of newborn twins who wanted to add a little income from photography so that things weren't so tight, but it felt impossible until I figured out how to save myself and save my dream of being a photographer who could put my family first. In this episode, I'll share how I saved my business and what to do to save yours too.

### **Feeling the Pressure to Lower Photography Prices**

Those first few years in business when I was totally broken, I felt tremendous pressure to compete on price. Even though I had an MBA and I thought I should have known better, I told myself the lie that so many business owners tell themselves... I told myself that all customers make their buying decisions based on PRICE. So, I felt that the only way I could level up to my competitors was to be the photographer with the lowest price.

But the thing is, clients loved me. They were gushing. They were telling me they would order. They were referring to me. I was busy, I was working all the time. But I felt like I was trading my babies' futures.

The shoot and burn model is killing families. That's what I was doing. I was giving proofs. I wasn't giving digital files, but I was charging I think \$75 and they got 35 hand printed black and white proofs and it was terrible. Do the math. I had to buy film and processing. I was making no money. Some of you may be even telling yourself, "Well, we're artists. We aren't supposed to make money." That is not true. I want you to add up your hourly rate, maybe track it for the next week or two and see how much you're making, because it's probably less than minimum wage.

### **Why You're Not Getting Big Photography Orders**

Even though I was an experienced marketer, I was very nervous as a new business owner. Which led to attracting the wrong clients. Because I was cheap, they were referring me to friends who just wanted cheap, too. I would do a super low-touch session, meet clients in the park, and then drop off their proofs later. Then, I would wait by the phone, hoping for some kind of magical big order... which never happened.

Clients were coming to me for photos, but they were leaving with nothing. They were saying, "Oh, I want this over my sofa," but it wasn't happening. For those of you who are putting your images online for people to order, it's the same thing. They're not going to make a purchase for any big artwork, and you just become an order taker.

### **How I Stopped Failing My Clients**

# WORTH EVERY PENNY *joycast*<sup>TM</sup>

Being a shoot and burn photographer, I felt like I was really failing my clients, and I wanted them to have that artwork. For me, I wanted everyone to have artwork on their walls because while I have been so fortunate to have amazing parents, they were not into photography. So I didn't exist as a child in photos when I was growing up.

I just have one photo of me from my childhood, and my whole body is cut off. When my clients come into my studio, I show them the one tiny photo I was left with from my childhood, and explain why I'm so passionate about creating artwork that lasts forever. I want clients to be able to put giant artwork of their kids in their rooms, even in the gawky years when they're teenagers and they don't feel good about themselves, because I never had that growing up.

I realized that photographers who create artwork can help blended families feel amazing when they put an image of everybody in the family in one portrait, together. Or we can help teenagers not feel so awkward in front of the camera and appreciate their youth. Or we can help a parent celebrate their newborn in a piece of artwork that will last beyond just the toddler years.

As photographers, we have a moral obligation to put our awesomeness into the world because we help people. After people pass on, we are the ones who have created the legacy for the family members to remember them by. That's really where my passion comes from, and what got me to pivot from the shoot and burn model that wasn't serving my clients.

## **How to Serve Your Clients and Your Family at the Same Time**

I started creating a system for photographers that actually allows us to serve and thrill clients, while still being able to buy groceries to serve our own family dinner. I knew, I needed to attract clients who really value photography, and I needed to serve them better.

But then the voices in my head started to talk me down. I worried about people laughing at my photography skills. About my clients getting mad at me for changing my model. About losing clients that I loved. About becoming a failure.

Then I remember thinking about my new babies and I'm thinking, "Why should I leave my own babies to go photograph someone else's baby, and barely be able to pay someone to take care of my kids?" It was either that that motivated me, or the thought of getting a job and putting pantyhose on every day. I don't know about the rest of you, but that is not the kind of job that I ever want again.

## **The Massive Portrait Photography Change That's More Than Just Pricing**

I was attracting the wrong clients. Clients that were price sensitive. So it was time to make a massive change. But it had to be more than just pricing. I couldn't just give the same thing and just charge more. So this is when I went from shoot and burn to boutique. And if you're

# WORTH EVERY PENNY *joycast*<sup>™</sup>

thinking, “What does that mean?” It’s like you’re switching from a fast food restaurant to a sit down restaurant.

Okay, think about it. If you're a fast food restaurant, on one single street there's a, McDonald's, a Wendy's, a Hardee's and Arby's, a Burger King, a Panera, a Long John Silver's, a McAlister's Deli. They're all within a two mile radius, just like that's how many shoot and burn photographers are within a two mile radius of you. But think about the sit down restaurants in your market. There aren't many, and those are the businesses that really *serve* their clients. So think about it, the price driven fast food restaurants, AKA shoot and burners, are duking it out to attract the cheapest consumer. They have a sale on burgers in the drive through lane, and attract only the people who are making their decision based on the lowest price.

I'm sure you've found yourself traveling or running errands, or maybe you skipped lunch and you didn't care what you ate because you were hangry. You drove through the nearest drive through and ordered something quick and cheap. It satisfied the need. You were hungry, you got food, and yeah, it wasn't really healthy food and maybe your body wasn't very happy with you, but it solved the need.

But then there are times when you want a high quality meal, cooked exactly how you want it, like a medium well New York strip steak. You want to be served each course one at a time. You want to sit in that beautiful environment in the restaurant with dim lights and a linen tablecloth. Maybe there's a fireplace, and you have a server who is so friendly and educated on the menu and really wants to make sure you have a fabulous experience. It’s the place you go for special birthdays. You love the server, you know their name, and that server recommends the best food, wine, and dessert on the menu. At the end of the meal, are you expecting the price to be the same as the fast food that came in a paper bag and you scarf down in your car in 3.5 minutes? Of course not.

That's the difference between shoot and burn: the photographer who gives a gallery of images for \$200 or a fee, and the boutique photographer, the one who holds their client's hands through the entire process-- shooting, ordering, framing, everything-- to ensure that the client has beautiful artwork of the people they love displayed forever in their home. And if you attract the right clients, they love you, they understand it's going to be a larger investment. They invest, and they gush on you to their friends, and they refer you and so on.

## **When Everyone in Your Market is a Photographer**

Now I get it. It's easy to get distracted by the constant presence of the shoot and burn photographer. They're loud and they're everywhere. Every street I drive down has a car with a giant wrap on it saying they're a photographer.

So believe me, even in my market, everyone is a photographer. But remember, most of them are like fast food like McDonald's. And I'm not saying their quality isn't good, because there are some great shoot and burn photographers. Just like McDonald's french fries... I mean, come on, those have got to be ranked up there in the top foods ever or at least the top French fries. So it's not about the quality of the food. It's about how cheap they are and how available they are. It's the same thing with shoot and burn photographers. They just like

# WORTH EVERY PENNY *joycast*<sup>TM</sup>

taking pictures and making a few extra bucks. They don't want to do the work it takes to be boutique and do the learning that it takes. It's so much easier.

## **Why We Create Finished Artwork for Our Clients**

When it comes to building a business that gives you income and lets you put family first, boutique is the only way. For those of you who insist that everyone just wants digital files, ask yourself, at that nice sit down restaurant would a customer say, "Hey, could I just get the meat and the veggies and the potatoes raw so I can go home and cook it myself?" No. We want someone who is passionate about food to prepare it for us and make an experience out of it. Again, a lot of photographers are making the assumption that everybody loves photography, everybody loves framing, everybody knows how to hang the artwork in their homes and that's just not true.

There are clients out there in your market who would love to have gorgeous photography displayed in their home in a beautiful album or book on their coffee table. They would love for you, the artist, to create beautiful portrait artwork for them. They want the experience of being brought together as a family or being able to celebrate different milestones of their lives of their children. They want to look up every day at their walls and get goosebumps. That's why we create finished art for our clients. It's ready to hang on their walls. I know, framing is not the most fun part at all of being a boutique photographer, but would the fabulous restaurant send you home with your cake unfrosted, leaving you to find the right frosting, or worse, buying a can of frosting at the grocery store? No. They present it the way they want it presented, and the client is thrilled. Same thing for us as boutique photographers, we have to finish the job for them.

## **What To Do If Your Client Only Wants Digitals**

If they only want digital files, you're not the right photographer for them. But here's the thing, often clients don't know what else to ask for, and they actually would love portrait art, but nobody's ever educated them before. It's like if you only had fast food restaurants in your town and a sit down restaurant opened. You wouldn't even know a sit down restaurant is an option. This is why you have to have the conversation right up front about what you do and what you serve, so that you can know if it's a good fit.

You have to explain that you can't put your best self into the world if you're working all the time, hustling as a shoot and burn photographer. I know this is true, because I can't do what I've done for charities or be the mom that I am if I was working all the time, selling digital files. I would be an exhausted, crabby mommy.

## **Why You Can't Scale with Shoot and Burn**

With the shoot and burn model, a photographer sells a CD of high res images to their clients for a few hundred bucks. They're selling time for money, and they find that there is only so much time they can sell. Let me give you an example.

# WORTH EVERY PENNY *joycast*<sup>™</sup>

If you have five clients a week paying you \$200, that's a \$52,000 a year job. When your 40 hours or more are gone, that's it, you're capped. What if you want more than that? What if you want more time with your kids, more freedom? With this shoot and burn model, you're working all the time. You're up all night, your relationships suffer, your health suffers, your self worth suffers. You could be crabby mommy, crabby daddy, exhausted, clinging to a dream and trying to accomplish it by just grinding, working harder and harder. But the real issue is, you have a broken model and you can't see that "just working harder" isn't going to make it happen.

## **The Truth About Discounts and an \$1,800 Portrait Photography Client**

Now think about this. If you're using low price or discounts to attract clients, which kind of clients will you be attracting? The ones who are hungry and just need to satisfy their hunger with the cheapest happy meal. When you discount your photography, you are telling the world that your photography isn't worth full price. And we both know that's not true.

The very first right client that came in, her name was Julie. She came in wanting everything, but I still had a lot of head trash. I found myself trying to sabotage the sale and keep her from buying a lot. But she invested \$1,800, even after I tried to ruin that sale. That's when everything changed for me because I realized, "If one person is this happy and excited about what I do, I know I can do this again and again, and I can find all of these clients." So in my community, everybody calls that first right client a "Julie."

So I did the math after my Julie, this first right client and I thought, "Oh my gosh, if I even had \$1,000 average and I got 100 clients, about two per week, that's a six figure business. Or what if I got 50 clients at \$2,000, that's a \$100,000 business and that's one client a week." This is when it all clicked that I had to get rid of digital clients and start finding the clients who love photography. I could serve them at a higher level and make a great living and be a great mom and get my life back.

## **How to Find the Best Portrait Photography Clients in the World**

As I started working with clients who genuinely wanted custom portrait artwork, I realized I had found the best clients in the world. They didn't whine. They didn't complain. They didn't want more for less. They loved everything. Just like the customers who go to these really nice restaurants, they tip well. They love their server. They know the owner by name. They're giddy about new items when they come out on the menu. Those are the people who we're looking for. They don't bicker over cheap prints or beg for free stuff or guilt me about my prices. And if you have clients that still do that to you, it's okay to let them go. They're not right for you.

Letting go of clients that aren't right for you doesn't mean you're depriving them of photos. Everyone has a smartphone camera and plenty of people have Canon cameras, so everyone still has access to photography. The bottom line is everybody values different things.

# WORTH EVERY PENNY *joycast*<sup>™</sup>

Boutique photographers can't serve everyone, but there are enough clients in that market to make a great living so that you can put your family first. I love helping photographers successfully transition from shoot and burn to boutique so they too can stop living as the under-priced commodity photographer. Just like McDonald's is not in direct competition with your favorite sit-down restaurant, you're not in competition with the shoot and burn photographer. Write that down. Read it every single day.

You're not in competition with the shoot and burn photographer when you're boutique. Learn it. Live it. Breathe it.

## **Resources**

[Grab your free book here.](#)