

## 2. PHOTOGRAPHIC ABILITY AND CREATIVITY

**N**othing is more important than creative development. The best way to market yourself is to produce work that other people talk about. If you've got a great creative product, sooner or later you're going to be able to market it. No matter how badly you go about it." So says New York photographer Jay Maisel. And he should know, because he is one of the most creative and successful photographers of our time. Maisel produces rich, creative images that meet both the high standards he sets for himself and the equally demanding commercial needs of major business organizations. This in itself is an art. Anyone who meets Jay Maisel finds him to be every bit the creative artist.

**If you expect to be successful in selling photography, you must first have the technical and creative ability to produce that photography.**

But there is another Jay Maisel many photographers sometimes fail to immediately see. This is the shrewd businessperson. Despite being an artist with a camera, Jay doesn't rely on his art to sell itself. The fact is, his success also comes from good solid business practices. The combination of art and business makes Jay Maisel someone you should watch and imitate from both perspectives.

### CREATIVE ABILITY

**Creative ability to produce images is the foundation of a successful and profitable photography business.**

Simply put, adequate images will provide adequate income, and great images have the potential to produce great income. There's a lot of ground to be covered in the process of making your images.

**Your Creativity.** Though some photographers were born creative, it is a capability that, to a great extent, can be learned and constantly improved upon. Several factors can be brought into play to learn creativity, but the primary method is to follow the work of successful shooters, attend workshops, and shoot, shoot, shoot.

I constantly review the best photography being made in the world. It's a simple matter of reading several quality publications each month. For example, *National Geographic*,

*Communication Arts*, *Islands*, and *Nikon World* are magazines that specialize in publishing a wide range of creative photos. Professional publications like *The Stock Workbook*, *Photo Media*, and Fuji's *Professional Profiles* showcase the work of today's best commercial photographers. There are also a host of coffee-table pictorial books published every year. And, lastly, I constantly surf the web sites of the photographers who made the images I admire.

I clip the best images from these national and international publications and make printouts from web sites, keeping them in a working idea file. These clipped images are selected for a variety of reasons such as interesting subjects, unusual lighting, new thoughts in composition, hot color and contrast, and outstanding photography, no matter the subject or photo specialty. By reviewing this file from time to time, I am able to improve my own approach to creative thinking. I frequently ask myself why each image was selected for my file in the first place. I also ask myself if my own work belongs in my idea file.

Start your own clip file by selecting images that reflect the type of images you wish to produce. Use this file to develop your own self-generated assignments. This means creating something new, something beyond the present range of your work. It hinges on developing something that challenges your imagination, using the clipping as a reference or starting point only.

**Warning.** In reviewing and clipping the work of other photographers, *do not* copy their images when you shoot. This will cause legal consequences. Instead, use their images to stimulate your own shooting ideas, lighting, and composition of different subjects.

### WHAT IS A CREATIVE PHOTOGRAPH?

**Viewer impact is what makes a photograph creative to potential buyers.**

I know there are a hundred things that may play into a potential client's view of your creativity and the purchase of your images. It is, however, the image impact, or viewer stopping power, that will generally determine the difference between making Big Bucks or small bucks (or *any* bucks, for that matter).

After completing a shoot, I always view the images as a whole if possible. Or, when there are hundreds of images and dozens of subjects, I view them by subject. I am looking to see if any single image stands out. This is often how clients make their initial selection from proof sheets, discs, or web postings of similar images.

One of my all-time best-selling stock shots, a young Hawaiian hula dancer, has immediate impact. It draws the viewer's eye, even among dozens of other images. This initial impact keeps making sales over and over again—and that should be your goal in editing as well as shooting.

Impact can mean a lot of things to you and your potential buyers. It can be subjects of unusual interest, exotic beauty, or simply the shock of a tragedy. It should be something the potential buyer needs. Impact is also created through composition, color, contrast, or a combination of these and other graphic elements. Some photographers confuse images of sensational events, spectacular locations, or bizarre subjects with creativity. Jimmy Bedford, the late University of Alaska journalism professor, said it best: "A creative photographer has the ability to make uncommonly good images of common subjects."

Being in the right place at the right time with the ability to use a camera allows you the opportunity to use your skill and training. Hotshots like David Burnett and the late Pulitzer Prize-winning photojournalist Eddie Adams make it their business to be creative no matter who, what, when, or where they photograph. Such photographers may be shouted at, shot at, and totally ignored by every subject imaginable—but they always come home with quality photography—images with impact. They make these images happen, tell a story, or illustrate something rather than simply recording the event or location. This is the goal we should all strive to meet.

**Garbage In, Garbage Out.** We live in a visual society, and the mass media inundates us with thousands upon thousands of images every day. Many of these images are limited to the recording of events, or snapshots of a moment in time. Many of these images are way more than the average person needs to know about a given story or subject, often shown over and over. We are blasted with this visual garbage until nothing seems to have much value or impact on our senses. In many cases, the emphasis seems to be on quantity rather than quality. Do not let all of this visual garbage turn off your own creative vision. As photographers, we must learn to ignore all but the most significant or creative of these images, the ones with impact.

**Warning.** If you spend too much time trying to digest the bulk of today's mass media garbage, it will dilute your ability to see properly in your own image-making. Spend more

time shooting and reviewing quality images, no matter where they may be found, rather than sitting in front of a television or computer all evening.

## MAKING QUALITY PHOTOGRAPHY

The difference between a good, creative image and a very bad one is, or should be, immediately apparent. After evaluating why a certain image you made has failed, erase it forever. If you save a poor shot, sooner or later a client will see it, usually at the wrong time, and make the wrong assumption about all of your work. Also, don't spend hours behind a computer trying to save an image. Shoot it right in the first place, or shoot it over.

How does an art buyer decide between two good, perhaps equal, images? The answer is usually in the form of a sale. In fact, the decision may be reached for two separate reasons: your style and your ability to make an image, and your ability to sell that image to that particular client. Both must be creative.

Developing your own style, one that results in photography with impact and quality, is something that requires lots of thought and practice. I call it thinking and seeing in images. Study, experimentation, self-generated assignments, and constant shooting will eventually lead you toward your individual look or style. Your own personal likes or dislikes, experiences, and environments will also influence this development.

Great photographic images are made when everything comes together in one perfect moment. Believe me, you'll know when this happens. For me it usually means being in the right place at the right time, with a plan in mind, seeing images develop, and having creative freedom to work around the subjects and assignment.

I did a photo shoot in Cancun, Mexico, for Hyatt International some time ago. Their Cancun Caribe Resort is an outstanding property on one of the most beautiful white beaches on the turquoise Caribbean Sea. Hyatt provided a smart corporate location production manager, a very cooperative and understanding resort manager, the best models in the business and, most important, the freedom to be creative in shooting the subjects they needed. The results were some very nice images, which satisfied both my standards and the client's commercial needs. Many of these images are being used today, several years later. It's wonderful to have this type of client support and confidence. It's also profitable.

**Keep Shooting.** Make the best images you can in every situation and of every subject. Ask yourself, "Is this picture going to be worth my effort?" If the answer is yes, shoot a few extra frames (which are referred to as similars, not duplicates) for the stock files. Of course, if shooting for a client,

you will need their cooperation to make and use such images. The same goes for working with models. Now the question becomes, is this subject worth spending a lot of time and shooting and looking for different angles and compositions? It should be noted that a seasoned and successful professional will rarely shoot a single frame of anything. If it's worth their creative time, it's valuable enough to want additional backup shots, angles, and different compositions.

When the shooting is completed, edit your work for quality. Good image editing demands the ability to separate yourself from the shooting. Consequently, the best photographers are not always the best editors. The ability to separate yourself from the shooting comes with lots of editing practice. It means spending hours sitting before a computer screen, or over the light table if the job requires film.

***Sometimes there is a great picture right in front of you, but you can't see it for all the images.***

Eventually you will be able to quickly view a selection of images with little or no magnification and immediately determine if they have any impact. This is exactly what the photo buyers will be doing, so use this as your own editing guide. Always provide only your best images to the clients for their consideration. It's always better to say a photo opportunity was missed than to show a bad shot. Always.

Provide your images in a format that is easy to view. I generally send Photoshop-generated contact sheets, usually on a disc or as an e-mail attachment, for easy viewing and difficult "borrowing" without compensation. I make sure the images on the proof sheets are large enough so that several shots can be viewed at once.

Never take a buyer's critical comments personally. Their job, which is similar to yours, is selecting the best images to sell a product, not stroking your ego. Pay close attention to a buyer's comments about photo needs, ideas, and things that can improve your ability to make, sell, and edit images. Make notes if possible, and incorporate these suggestions in your next shoot—especially if it's for the same client.

## **TECHNICAL ABILITY**

***Your images must be of the highest technical quality to sell for Big Bucks.***

The highest technical quality means properly exposed, sharp, well lit, and in focus. I know there is a lot of "moody" photography being created and shown in a few "with it" publications and advertisements. Most of the better paying clients, and the people who buy their products, do not want to spend a lot of time trying to figure out what the heck is

wrong with an image promoting their product. Use motion, soft focus, very low natural light, and unusual compositions only if and after you are able to make clean and sharp images—or when that's what the client has specifically requested.

You must be able to operate the equipment that is necessary to make images within your specialty. You must be able to do it in your sleep and in the dark. There is no excuse for not knowing how a particular camera, lens, computer, hard drive, light system, or other piece of equipment works—if you have that equipment with you on a job. When making images, you need to think about making images, not how to set the camera or focus the lens.

That said, there are photographers who confuse their exceptional ability to use equipment properly with the ability to make great photography. These people spend most of their time playing with equipment, shopping at camera stores, buying the latest gadgets, and talking to other photographers about such equipment. This time should instead be put to work shooting and experimenting with new equipment, and learning to use your current equipment as an extension of yourself under any conditions. Fumbling with equipment will eventually result in missed opportunities and lost images.

***You must have the right equipment to do the job at hand and the ability to use that equipment both efficiently and creatively.***

**The Right Stuff.** Never say something like, "I could make a great picture with a different lens, a different camera, or another piece of special equipment." It is not smart, let alone professional, to let a client know that you don't have the right equipment for the job or don't know how some of your equipment works. If you need a special piece of equipment for a particular job, rent it and test it before shooting the job. You must have the right equipment for the job.

**Capability.** Pretend that your livelihood, which includes those little extras like food and rent, depends on your extensive ability and knowledge to operate all of your equipment correctly. Because it does. You can gain this capability through lots of practice and, when everything else fails, by reading the manual. Another idea is to take a shooting seminar provided by an equipment manufacturer or a top working pro. They will share the latest tricks and modifications available, which can improve your shooting edge in making and selling images.

It's easy, and fun, to bluff amateurs, lovers, and people on the beach with a fancy Nikon with a long lens hanging around your neck. You can't, however, bluff photo buyers about technical ignorance or poor-quality images. Your im-

ages must be technically correct, sharp, and properly exposed, or they won't sell. Photo buyers can spot a poor technician quickly, which is why such photographers leave the buyer's office without a sale.

**Specialization.** If you have a burning desire to create great pictures of bananas, then you've got to be the best-possible banana photographer there is and find a market that needs banana photos. This is called specialization. If you want to make pictures of anything and everything, think about being a generalist. Later, you may find a more specific type of work that is both appealing and profitable.

Don't waste your time and energy making pictures of things that you don't approve of or downright hate. If you dislike alcohol, tobacco, corporate America, cars, politics, religion, or whatever, then don't shoot those things. However, if you plan on turning down an assignment to photograph the *Sports Illustrated* swimsuit issue, please give me a call.

I specialize in travel-related subjects—resorts, destinations, cultures, location fashion, countries, airlines, cruise lines, and other travel-related subjects. My stock images reflect the fact that I have a burning desire to see the world and photograph these kinds of subjects. I also appreciate beautiful suites in the world's greatest resorts and destinations, and traveling first class to get there as well. Making images that reflect this passion is my specialty. It is my business product.

**While you must have the technical ability to make good images, few clients really give a rip how or where that knowledge was acquired.**

**Education vs. Experience.** Which is more important technically, education or experience? Your clients don't care; they just want to see the images. For you, however, the two are equally important.

I have worked with assistants who were graduates of serious photography schools. Technically, they were very good. Many were better than I am, as a matter of fact. What they didn't have was experience dealing with the hodgepodge of people, modified equipment, crazy logistics, even crazier hours, and general screwups photographers face on many jobs—especially when you're halfway around the world, the temperature is through the roof, and no one speaks English. An ability to deal with these dilemmas can only come through experience on the job.

I have also worked with assistants who learned everything by trial and error—that is, by doing the job on the job. They were very good all around. The one thing these people didn't always have was that finely honed ability to make a technically perfect image. Most professionals, it should be pointed out, are constantly striving to meet this goal as well.

**A little education mixed with a little experience always wins out as the best formula to become a successful photographer.**



**Where to Learn.** Learn professional commercial photography by attending classes, seminars, and workshops, and by assisting—not by seeking and accepting a job that you may not be ready to handle. If you attempt to learn any profession solely on the job, such as in your own new business, the profession as a whole suffers a loss of credibility. Learning only by experience can also become so complicated and costly that you lose your business and career in the process.

**Schools and Programs.** Photography schools and programs that are part of higher-education systems are good places to learn and practice the technical aspects of photography. This is the most direct, and probably the most expensive, way to learn photography. Knowing and working with a number of these graduates led me to believe that there are some very good instructors on the scene.

**Workshops and Seminars.** Attending workshops and seminars conducted by working professionals is the way to build on your basic business knowledge and photographic ability. The best place to listen to experiences, see work done, and ask direct questions of the top professionals is a *PDN* photo conference. Presented in major cities throughout the year, these conferences draw top equipment and material manufacturers who show and offer instruction on their wares. The conferences present comprehensive seminars that are worth a thousand times their minimal fees. You can read about the best of these conferences and other professional workshops by subscribing to *PDN*.

**Assisting Working Pros.** Assisting a successful professional, it seems to me, is the best way to expand your basic knowledge of the business of photography. This is the place to see what it really takes to make salable photos and administrate a complicated creative business. If you get the opportunity to participate in both planning and shooting, you and the pro will benefit. If you watch and listen to what is happening around the shooting (general administration, client participation, marketing, logistics, and general attitude), you may learn what it takes to become successful.

Many of today's leading professionals once assisted leading professionals themselves. Stephen Wilkes, who assisted with Jay Maisel, is an excellent example of an assistant who became one of the best in the business. This is an ideal way to get acquainted with commercial photography without the risks and expenses associated with starting a new business.

I started my professional photographic career in Alaska, which is an experience in itself, during a time when few professionals resided in that great state. As a result, I learned

many lessons the hard way. (I still do, for that matter.) *Life* magazine's man on the scene, Joe Rychetnick, University of Alaska Professor Jimmy Bedford, and *Alaska* magazine editor Dick Montague all helped me in much the way a professional would help an assistant. They candidly shared their knowledge, experience, and suggestions. They took the time to examine my work and push me in the right directions. I couldn't have had better mentors, and I thank them here again.

Such relationships are more difficult today. For starters, people in these positions are constantly under the gun to produce materials for their employers. Few have the time to cultivate a young photographer's goals and desires. However, all is not lost. Many of these people, including me, participate in group seminars and workshops aimed at helping younger people get started. We don't get rich off these programs; rather, it is a way to share some of the experiences that have helped shape our own careers. These programs also help ensure that the next generation of professionals are just that, *professional*.

## **ASSISTING**

Assisting working professional photographers is an excellent way to learn the business. There are three general types of assistant: full-time, freelance, and professional.

The full-time assistant is a house employee, much the same as a corporate executive's assistant. (By the way, the IRS is firm on this employee relationship, so make sure your taxes reflect this relationship.) Getting one of these rare jobs means selling yourself to the professional. Start looking among photographers you admire. Check with the ASMP (American Society of Media Photographers) and PPA (Professional Photographers of America) for the specialties in which you are interested and get the photographers' addresses. Write a simple letter, make a follow-up call, and try to schedule an interview. If you do get an interview, look the part, sell yourself, and show a few of your very best images related to the type of work you wish to do in the future. It might be easier to catch the pros at seminars or conferences where you can gauge their personality and interest in assistants. While an assistant hopes to someday have their own business, the professional for whom they work hopes for a long-term employee. You must sell the photographer on your desire and ability to do things that will enhance their work, not replace them as a shooter or steal their clients.

The freelance assistant is hired on a job-by-job basis as an independent contractor. They operate as their own established business, much like the photographers for whom they work. In addition to the business licenses, tax registrations, stationery, and other business trappings, freelance assistants

must market themselves to photographers. This requires the same marketing and business skills that a full-time photographer must possess. Ultimately, they hope to learn from the professionals they assist and eventually establish their own business as a working professional. Both the assistant and professional who hires them know this is their goal.

Working with a variety of photographers as a freelance assistant is both demanding and rewarding. First, you must have a wide range of experience and knowledge just to get hired. Second, it's a great way to see how several different photographers approach business and shooting. This is an excellent way to eventually become a successful commercial photographer. These people are my choice as assistants.

The professional assistant is in business to be an assistant, not to be a commercial photographer, though that may occasionally happen. It's been my experience that these independent businesspeople are very good at assisting and are in high demand. Of course, they must also meet all of the requirements of being in a freelance business.

Overall, assisting is the ideal way to learn on the job, assuming you work with quality professionals. Some of the professional photography associations have assistant membership categories and help these people get employment.

If you are seeking employment as an assistant, or to work as a commercial photographer for that matter, it makes sense to look in the area where you eventually hope to be established. Don't look for work in Los Angeles if New York is where you hope to make the Big Bucks. Don't head for any big city if your heart's in the countryside. However, you can assist anywhere as a temporary educational endeavor.

If you are interested in becoming that famous banana photographer, there isn't much sense in assisting in fashion, travel, or architecture. In all of your interviews, remember that you ultimately want to be a photographer, whereas the professional wants someone to be an employee. You'll be showing a portfolio, while the photographer is looking at you and your abilities beyond photography. Approach them with organization, intelligence, and a willingness to work. As an assistant, you will get to do everything in the office or studio. That means everything the boss doesn't want to do. You won't get to be the photographer very often.

As an assistant, you may work for photographers who aren't as skilled as you are, and there are times when you could have made a better shot. How you handle these situations determines your future role in photography, certainly as an assistant. Be too pushy or cocky, and you might be looking for another job with a very poor performance report following you around. Keep in mind that being successful has a lot of requirements beyond your photographic skill. That's what this book is all about.

Personally, I want assistants to participate in my shoots. This means working with me to make good shots, as well as doing the heavy lifting. It means thinking about the shot and offering ideas that may improve what's being done. It also means making a shot, on occasion, with me assisting. However, it doesn't include making me look bad, especially in front of the client! Working with an assistant allows me to utilize another set of creative eyes on the job. It also means someone could take over if I am unable to work for any reason. I still call the shots and control the overall production. I also have the client contact, the contract, and the responsibility to deliver.

When seeking work as an assistant, or working as one, you're asking a professional to open up and share a lifetime of work, not to mention client confidences, with someone who ultimately wants to be a competitor. Some professionals can deal with this thought, and many can't.

## **\$ PROPER EQUIPMENT**

*Think of your work as a parachute jump. The last thing you want to worry about is having the wrong equipment.*

Use the best equipment you can afford for the job at hand. What is the best equipment? It's not always the latest high-tech digital camera system, although that's exactly what I use. The best equipment is dependable, easy to use, made for the job at hand, and within your budget. There's no sense in spending the entire family inheritance on equipment, unless you've got plenty of shooting jobs scheduled. Rent what you can't afford to buy until you can afford to buy.

In considering an equipment purchase, the best gauge is your experience and need. Few amateur retail camera store salespeople have any serious professional experience. If you want to talk with someone who knows the latest equipment, and how it works, shop at a professional store. You can tell the difference in these stores by the prices. Professional stores do not discount Nikon or Canon equipment. You pay for their knowledge and the opportunity to compare the best in professional equipment available. See your local yellow pages, check the web, or call any pro and they will recommend a good local store.

Never test newly purchased equipment or use an untested piece of equipment on any job. I don't even recommend buying equipment you haven't tested extensively. So what's the answer? Test equipment on a simulated job by first visiting the rental department of those professional camera stores. You'll have to secure rentals with a credit card or first-born child, but it will allow you to shoot with the equipment you hope to buy. Some of these stores will apply some of

your rental fee toward the purchase of the same new equipment. Rental equipment gets well used, so if it holds up under those conditions it will probably work for you as well. Ask the rental people for their opinion on the new cameras. Test the rentals and test your new cameras.

I replace my camera bodies and lenses every two or three years. This means I have new equipment and the latest technology at all times. When something goes wrong with any piece of equipment, which is rare considering my turnover rate, I have it fixed and trade it in for a new item. I also have backups for every piece of equipment. I do not want to have any problems with my equipment when I'm working in the middle of nowhere.

## **PRACTICAL DIGITAL**

The digital revolution has dramatically changed the way photographers create, administer, and deliver images to clients. At no time in the history of photography has the average individual photographer had greater control over so much of the process of creating and delivering images.

Photographers who can keep up with the ever-changing realm of digital technology have an advantage. If you have a limited aptitude for working with digital devices, spend some time doing your homework and building your skills. Remember, shooting digitally requires more than just learning how to use a new camera system; you must also learn how to operate a computer, popular software programs, and the Internet to share your images.

With digital, as with film capture, you must create images your clients need and are willing to purchase. You must also deliver a high-resolution image in a format your clients can use, whether this image originated in a digital camera or is a scanned photograph.

**Digital Camera Systems.** There are dozens of excellent digital camera systems on the market. Your photo retailer can help you select a model that suits your needs. However, some basics are outlined below.

*Megapixels and Resolution.* Digital SLRs currently offer 10–25-megapixel image sensors, and the megapixel rating can be even higher for digital backs. The higher the megapixel rating, the more detail the camera can capture in each image, and the larger your images can be printed.

*Focal Length Factors.* Some digital cameras feature full-frame image sensors (i.e., a sensor the size of a 35mm film frame). This means that a 14mm super-wide-angle lens sees and records just as it would were it used on a 35mm camera. Many digital cameras have smaller image sensors, however. In such a case, a focal length factor is employed to determine the effective focal length of the lens. (This number is provided in the user's manual.) For example, if you were using

a 14mm super-wide-angle lens on a camera with a focal length factor of 1.5, the lens would have an effective focal length of 21mm. If you shoot sports, news, fashion, or portraits, the 1.5x magnification will probably do the job very well and will cost you less.

*RAW vs. Other Formats.* Most professional cameras record images in a proprietary RAW format, which must be converted into JPEG, TIFF, or some other format for use by your clients. The RAW format allows you to bypass the automatic image corrections applied in the camera, thereby allowing greater control over the artistic rendition of your images.

As with any equipment you intend to use in a business, I suggest a little research of what's currently being used, and lots of testing, before spending any serious money. The digital revolution hasn't come cheap, so you will benefit from these efforts. Because digital cameras are really computerized cameras, I recommend taking a lot of time to learn how they work and the many things they will do for you. That means reading the encyclopedia-sized manuals. Many cam-

era manufacturers offer workshops and professional classes for their equipment, which are also a wise investment.

### **PROFESSIONAL ABILITY**

***Creative and technical ability must go hand-in-hand with professional ability.***



You are in business to provide a service, create a product, and administrate an ongoing business. The better you are at all of these things, the more clients and the greater the income that will result. That's what this book is all about.

Your professional ability means acting like a professional and taking care of business just as the client desires—in all respects. You can be an artist, perhaps a creative genius, but just make sure to show up on time and deliver what was promised, for the negotiated price, when it was promised. Businesspeople will consider you a professional when you show them you are indeed a professional. It's like being a great lover—a lot of talk will never replace a superlative performance.