

Why are Professional Photographers so expensive?

By: Shawn & Pamela Richter – Caught on Film Photography – www.cofphoto.com

This article has been very well received by the photography community, and is published in the December 2009 edition of Professional Photographer Magazine.

In this digital age where everyone has cameras, scanners, and home "photo printers," we hear this all the time: How do professional (or personal) photographers charge \$X for an 8x10 when they cost just \$1.50 at the drugstore? Simply put, the customer is not just paying for the actual photograph; they're paying for time and expertise.

The average one-hour portrait session

First, let's look at the actual work involved:

- Travel to the session
- Setup, preparation, talking to the client, etc.
- Shoot the photos
- Travel from the session
- Load images onto a computer
- Back up the files on an external drive
- 2 - 4 hours of Adobe® Photoshop® time, including cropping, contrast, color, sharpening, and backing up edited photographs. Proof photos are also ordered.
- 2 - 3 hours to talk to the client, answer questions, receive order and payment, order their prints, receive and verify prints, package prints, schedule shipment, and ship.
- Possibly meet clients at the studio to review photos and place order. Meeting and travel time average 2 hours.

You can see how a one-hour session easily turns into an eight-hour day or more from start to finish. So when you see a personal photographer charging a \$200 session fee for a one-hour photo shoot, the client is NOT paying them \$200 per hour.

The eight-hour wedding

A wedding photographer typically meets with the bride and groom several times before and after the wedding. And it's not uncommon to end up with 1,000 - 2,000 photos, much more than a portrait session. Many photographers spend 40-60 hours working on one eight-hour wedding if you look at the time that is truly involved. Again, when a wedding photographer charges \$4,000 for eight hours of coverage, clients are NOT paying them \$500 an hour!

(Don't forget that the photographer runs the wedding day to some extent. A comfortable, confident wedding photographer can make a wedding day go more smoothly.)

The expertise and cost of doing business

Shooting professional photography is a skill acquired through years of experience. Even though a DSLR now costs under \$1,000, taking professional portraits involves much more than a nice camera.

Most personal photographers take years to go from buying their first camera to making money with photography. In addition to learning how to use the camera, there is a mountain of other equipment and software programs used to edit and print photographs, run a website, etc. And don't forget backdrops, props, rent, utilities, insurance, etc!

In addition to the financial investment, photographers actually have to have people skills to make subjects comfortable in front of the camera. Posing people to look their best is a skill by itself. You could argue that posing is a more important skill than actually knowing how to use the camera. A poorly exposed photo can be saved, but a badly posed photo cannot.

The chain store photo studio

Chain stores do have their place. For a very cheap price you can run in, shoot some quick photos, and be done with it. But you get what you pay for.

Consider the time and effort that a personal photographer puts into photographs, compared to a chain store. Store sessions last just a few minutes, while a personal photographer takes the time to get to know the people, makes them comfortable, makes them laugh. If a baby is crying at a chain store, they often don't have the time (or the patience) to wait because everyone is in a hurry.

The truth is that many chain store studios lose money. In fact, Wal-Mart closed 500 of their portrait studios in 2007 because of the financial drain. What the chain stores bank on is a client coming in for quick, cheap photos...and while there, spending \$200 on other items. They are there to get you in the door.

The real deal

Professional, personal photographers are just that—professionals. No different than a mechanic, dentist, doctor, or electrician. But a personal photographer often becomes a friend, someone who documents a family for generations with professional, *personal* photographs of cherished memories.

Maybe we need to help clients look at it this way: A pair of scissors costs \$1.50 at the drugstore. Still, most people will gladly pay a lot more to hire a professional hair dresser to cut their hair.

The added attention and quality that a personal photographer gives is worth every penny.