



WORKING IT

WHAT IT TAKES TO GROW A BUSINESS PORTRAIT NICHE

by Jeff Kent

► Business portraits can be a tough nut to crack. Many clients just want a quick, easy, inexpensive headshot, and while others are willing to pay for a more substantial portrait experience, they're a rare find outside of major corporate capitals. For photographers in smaller towns who lack the resources to be a high-volume player, business portraits can be a difficult field.

For these reasons, the success of Michael Gowin in the business portrait field is particularly intriguing. Gowin's studio sits in Lincoln, Illinois, a town of about 15,000 people without a substantial big-business presence. He runs a small studio and favors a relatively detailed portrait process that demands higher rates to justify it. Yet the business portrait side of his studio is

booming, with clients traveling significant distances and paying relatively high prices for his services.

MARKETING MATTERS

Gowin is also a marketing educator and puts that expertise to use in his business. He teaches marketing at Lincoln Christian University and keeps up with the trends in small business marketing and online communication. He's well aware of the value of producing good, consistent content as part of an online marketing strategy. He blogs regularly, produces informational videos, and is active on social media. He's optimized his website by following best practices for on-page search engine optimization, and he's carefully targeted the busi-

ness portrait market in his keyword strategy. These efforts have helped his website rank highly in business portrait searches conducted in his geographic target, which includes three nearby larger towns with more substantial corporate presences (Peoria, Springfield, and Bloomington). In fact, he shows up No. 1 or two for Google searches targeting business portraits in nearby Peoria and Springfield.

When he decided to zero in more acutely on business portraits, Gowin revamped his website, putting special attention into his business portraits page (gowinphotography.com/business). He used to have a more basic page with simple info about his one business portrait package. Now, the page includes everything he thinks a prospective portrait client would need to know: background info, pricing, testimonials, image examples, and even a video that shows his process. "The big goal with the page is to provide as much education as I can for the portrait customer," he explains. "So I



put a lot of information on the page to make people's decisions as easy as possible. If the client has to call me to ask a bunch of questions, then the page hasn't done its job. I'm following the idea that a website should function as a 24-hour sales tool."

With that in mind, Gowin seeks to answer the fundamental questions asked by every prospective customer: Why? How? What? Why is a business portrait important? Why use Michael Gowin Photography? How do we do it? What do you get? What are the costs?

By answering these questions on his site, Gowin has changed the conversation he has with prospective clients. Instead of fielding calls from price shoppers or answering questions about basic details, most of Gowin's conversations with prospective clients start with one simple question: What do I need to do to book?

APPROPRIATELY PACKAGED

In addition to revamping his website, Gowin restructured his business portrait packages. Specifically, he went from offering a single basic package to four different options with

bundled services. "Before, my simple business portrait plan was just a session and one image with some add-ons," he says. "Unfortunately, it wasn't generating the kind of revenues I wanted, so I started bundling

services and image groups together to offer more choices. I also included some social media and graphic design work for things like optimized LinkedIn images or Twitter banner images. This graphic design element



is something that has helped set me apart and attract more media-savvy clients.”

Gowin concedes that package pricing doesn't work for all types of photography, but for business portraits he's found it to be a natural fit. When you are providing a service, it's sometimes hard for people to conceptualize and quantify. However, creating a package that offers everything a client needs helps to make those services more quantifiable. Suddenly, it's not a vague service with a seemingly arbitrary price tag; it's a tangible set of products to which someone can assign a value. "By packaging these items, it helps people to understand better what they are getting," he says. "That makes it a lot easier to sell."

The packages and the higher prices associated with them have helped Gowin slow down and spend more time producing high-quality images for his clients. Compared to many headshot mills that churn and burn standardized business portraits at a breakneck pace, Gowin works at a much more relaxed cadence. He lets the client get comfortable. He takes his time to get the right feel and to make sure the client is having a pleasant experience. Then he creates images that, ideally, look unique for each client.

This process has resonated in particular with women, which works great for Gowin because that was the target market he had in mind when he restructured this part of his business. "When I was putting this new focus together, I figured that my target clientele would be professional women," he says. "So far, that has been the case. I think most of these women like being presented with more information so they can make a well-informed decision. They also appreciate the extra efforts to make the experience comfortable from beginning to end."

The gamble on restructuring the portrait offerings and refocusing primarily on professional women has paid off. Gowin has seen a marked jump in business portrait bookings and revenues since implementing the changes, and business portraits now represent the majority of his studio's sales. "It's been very encouraging so far, and I'm excited to see where it goes from here," he says. •

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