



## Do What You Love, Dammit!

I had a recent consultation with someone who came to me saying, essentially, "I shoot this kind of work and I hate it. I've been doing it forever. I have to drag myself out of bed to do it, but it's what I do, it pays the bills, so I do it." He sighed a lot as he spoke and his expression was one of deep sadness. He went on to say that his business had been flat-to-falling in the recent past and he hoped I could give him ideas on how to better market this work to the same clients he's been marketing to for years, or maybe I could find a new market for the work.

I looked at his professional work and it was technically fine and creatively "good enough" for the kinds of clients he had been working for. However, there was nothing sparking in it--nothing that made it any different from any other technically proficient photographer's work with the same subjects and there was nothing really consistent about the images as a body of work. It was blah and generic. "Safe" one could say. Certainly, it could have been shot by just about any decent photographer out there and I couldn't imagine he was getting any creative satisfaction from the work. I started to wonder, just a bit, why he chose photography for his career.

Then, reluctant as he was to show it, I saw his personal work. This stuff was infinitely better than his "professional" work. In fact, it blew me away. There was life and joy and passion in this work. Each image was strong and sang with a consistent voice. There was no question that one person with a unique vision had shot all this stuff. I was excited just to see it. I asked him (knowing the answer) if he loved doing that work. "Yes!" he said, sounding almost in pain, "but I **can't** sell that kind of work--no one would want it." Deep sigh, total resignation.

This meeting just broke my heart--situations like this always do and I see them far more often than I wish were the case. Here was a photographer who had spent his entire career (and he'd been at it for many years) turning what was a passionate vocational calling into the creative equivalent of ditch-digging.

He was, of course, afraid. His personal work was different--certainly different from what he had been doing professionally that had paid his bills for so many years. But it wasn't porn and it was very good. It would be, in his mind, a huge risk to offer that personal work--what if people didn't like it? What if his usual clients saw it? They wouldn't understand! And besides, in his words, "no one would want it."

Well, he was wrong about a lot of things; that last part, for sure. You can find a market for **any** kind of work--some are larger and some are smaller, but any kind of photography will have its buyers. In his case, there are actually many people who would be interested in that kind of work--higher-end clients to boot. But they are never seeing it even though some of it lurks on his site. All his marketing is geared towards that other kind of work--the stuff he hates doing but kind of fell into and on which he has built most of his business--and all his targets are the same kind of clients he's always targeted; cheap(ish), uncreative, pushy, and afraid of their own creativity.

I told him the steps he'd need to make to shift his business from what he has been doing to what he really wants to be doing--work much more like his personal work. Yes, making this change might alienate some past clients, but wouldn't it be better to do work he loved rather than loathed? He didn't seem to believe that what I said would be at all possible. He kept looking for the *can't* and the *fugetaboutit* answers--confirmation that the personal kind of work would never sell. He'd been doing the *wrong* work for many years--it would be very difficult for him to start believing he can do what he loves and make a living at it.

We talked for the rest of our time together about it and I did my best to convince him he and his business were worth taking the risk. Some people wouldn't understand the "new" work, but that just meant they weren't the right clients for him. If he spent some time thinking about who would be good potential clients, and marketed the new work to them, I was sure he'd replace the "dead wood" in short order. I even started talking about clients I could think of, off the top of my head, who might be interested. He kept looking at me with his head cocked, like a part of his brain would not accept this hopeful possibility. But, he *was* listening.

In fact, I'm not sure I was successful. He seemed a bit brighter when we parted, but he didn't seem completely convinced. Still, I hope he follows my advice and finds the love of his work he has lost.

Whenever I look at someone's body of work and I see a radical shift between his/her commercial and personal work, I know there's something wrong. There's a disconnect between the authentic creative desire of the artist and the expected desire of "the" market--one which results in the artist doing what s/he thinks is the right work for "the" market rather than the best work for her/himself.

The opposite is actually the truth in today's business world--the more you love what it is you do, the more passionate you are about the work, the more clients (good clients!) will be drawn to you and your work. The best things you can do for your creative business are to be **honest** to your own creative voice and to **target** the most appropriate potential clients for that work. Don't be afraid of scaring off the wimps, go out there with gumption! You've got one life, one chance at doing what you really love--you've already come so far as to reject getting a "real" job and have created a business for yourself! Why throw all that away doing something other than what you really love? Passion and authenticity connect buyers to sellers in stronger bonds than any other strategy or tactic out there. There are buyers for your work, whatever that is, but they'll never find you or your work unless you offer it, your authentic creativity, to them repeatedly, consistently, and honestly.

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